

SOME RELIGIOUS  
ELEMENTS IN ENGLISH  
LITERATURE

ROSE MACAULAY

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HOGARTH LECTURES ON LITERATURE

SOME RELIGIOUS ELEMENTS IN  
ENGLISH LITERATURE

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ELEMENTS IN ENGLISH  
LITERATURE

ROSE MACAULAY



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## NOTE

IT is unnecessary to say that this little book makes no attempt to do more than dip into its enormous subject here and there. Even were I in any way competent to handle it, it is not a theme that could possibly be handled with any pretence to adequacy in so small a compass. What I have tried to do is to select from out of the mass of material before me a few specimens, as who, randomly diving into an ocean, should return with a handful or two of seaweed or of pebbles, and proceed to make thereon a scattered kind of a commentary. All I will add is, that I started with a theory about English religious literature, but mislaid it on the way, which is likely to be the fate of theories when confronted with English literature.

My theory was that most religious literature was the outcome of some kind of a clash or conflict, and bore stamped on it the nature of this conflict, and the fusion, victory, or defeat which had been its outcome. The first period of our literature seemed to me to be (on its religious side) the age of the conflict between the English and the Latin spirit; the second, between the English and the Norman; the third, between Renaissance humanism and the Churches (whether Catholic or Protestant is irrelevant); the seventeenth-century, between Anglicanism and a harsher Puritanism; the eighteenth, between a growing rationality and strong religious passions—and so on. I have entitled my sections according to this theory; but I do not know that there is very much in it after all.



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# Some Religious Elements in English Literature

## CHAPTER I ENGLISH AND LATIN

WHAT is a religious element? And, if one comes to that, what is religion? It might be defined, perhaps, as belief in extra-natural agencies with whom the believer thinks he can establish some kind of personal relation. Man, as has been frequently pointed out, is a religious animal; probably, though on this we can only speculate, the most religious animal now or at any other time extant on this planet. He has ever delighted in ceremonious and ritual approach to the superhuman beings, the *turba deorum*, with whom he has peopled the mysterious and alarming universe about him. Myth, magic, and mystery—from the dimmest dawn of humanity's thoughts on anything, it would appear that it has thought favourably of these. And from the time that it first wrote of anything (or anyhow in any form that has survived) it appears that it wrote (also favourably) of these. Babylonians, Egyptians, Cretans, Greeks, Romans, Jews, Americans, Teutons, Celts, Slavs, and all the rest of the world's tribes, the moment they carved words on wood or stone, scribbled, directly or covertly, of their devils and their gods. There is scarcely a race that has not left a mass of religious literature.

Romans, Celts, and Teutons, races less god-obsessed than the Jews or Greeks, have nevertheless from the beginning of their self-expression all added their contributions to the sum of this literature. These contributions are an interesting blend of universal factors and of racial and period differentiations. Universal and common to humanity is the peopling of the universe with spirits, gods, and monsters of good or evil-will, and the blank misgivings of the creature moving about in worlds not realised; that dread sense of the dark and waste countries beyond the bounds, inhabited by fearful creatures, of which the earliest Teutonic literature we possess, and all Celtic literature, and all the earliest Greek stories, are full. "They inhabit the dark land," says Beowulf, describing the wilderness beyond the mark where dwelt Grendel, the ravening sea monster, and his fierce dam, and other monstrous creatures, serpents and dragons, all waging continuous war against the dwellings of

men. These creatures and dragons are common to all sections of the human race; so is the half-divine hero—Beowulf, Theseus, Hercules, Perseus, or another—who slays them in a personal duel.

But the Greek heroes got more help from their gods than ever did the early English from theirs—from Wyrð, the aloof, chilly, and discouraging fate-goddess, and the apparently even more detached Woden, Freia, Thor, and Tiw, bucolic beings whose interests seem to have been confined mainly to weather, agriculture, and the seasons. “Wyrð goes ever as it must,” remarks Beowulf, resigning himself thus to being slain and devoured by Grendel; and again, “Wyrð carried away all my kinsmen at the fated time.” A less helpful protector, obviously, than Apollo, Diana, Aphrodite, Jehovah, or the Christian saints proved in similar emergencies. As so little help was forthcoming from above, it is natural that a dominant note of the earliest English poetry is a depressed, though always courageous and never discouraged, fatalism.

Oddly side by side with this runs the theology of the scribe (or scribes) who wrote Beowulf down after the Christian conversion of England. Retaining Wyrð, he sometimes identifies her with, sometimes overrules her by, God the creator of man. “The truth is made known,” says Beowulf, “that the mighty God has always wielded the affairs of mankind.” “The holy God, the wise Lord, decided the war-victory; the ruler of the heavens easily decided it aright.” Wyrð, become a shadowy and subordinate power, becomes also of doubtful and uncertain character: now she is fighting against God, now for him. The idea of an inexorable destiny is loosened by an overruling Lord, and also by the belief, common to all primitive races of whatever creed, that misfortune is sent to punish sin. When the dragon wastes Beowulf’s land, he reflects that he must have sinned against the Lord, as Jews, Greeks, Egyptians, and all races have reflected in similar circumstances.

This is no place in which to enter, nor am I qualified to enter, on that vexed question of scholarship, the composition of Beowulf. We have to take it as it comes down to us, a typical and fascinating blend of the ancient northern mythology and the new Hebrew monotheism—a blend exemplified after one fashion or another in most Early English verse after the few fragments we have left of pure heathen mythology, such as the incantations to the Mother of earth for blessings on the fields. There is scarcely any pure heathen English literature remaining to us. Probably the English invaders did not spend much of the hundred and fifty years between their invasion and their change of faith in literary pursuits, or, if they did, they or their successors mislaid the results at an early stage.

It is, indeed, likely enough that the clergymen who were the scribes and arbiters of our literature between the eighth and thirteenth centuries would feel it unnecessary

that such portions of heathen poetry as could not be discreetly christianised, after the charmingly naïve and incongruous manner in which Beowulf, Widsith, and Deor were dealt with, should survive. What did survive of it were the incantations and hymns in common use, prayers to Erce the mother, and Thor the farmers' god, for fertility:

“Erce, Erce, Erce—Mother of Earth!  
May the All-Wielder, Ever-Lord grant thee  
Acres a-waxing, up wards a-growing . . .  
Let be guarded the grain against all the ills  
That are sown o'er the land by the sorcery-men,  
Nor let cunning woman change it nor a crafty man.”<sup>[1]</sup>

Like all primitive races, the island invaders loved music and singing; the justly exasperated Gildas complains bitterly of the disgusting noises made by this destructive people, as they advanced, no doubt shouting their tribal hymns, to ravage Britain. Probably they kept it up day and night, celebrating over the evening mead-cup the savageries of the day's conquests, and singing to their gods praises or the age-old type chanted by Deborah to the Lord of Hosts. Jehovah, Zeus, Mars, or Woden, it mattered little, as it matters little to the poetry of earth which is left us whether the deities propitiated are called Demeter, Ceres, Thor, Eostre, or the Christ and Mary who crept into the heathen charms after the Saxons' gradual and piecemeal Christian conversion had begun, and who alternate so pleasantly with the still unexpelled old gods.

They were, I suppose, a religious people, the early English and their Scandinavian cousins, for all primitive people seem to be religious.

It is, I believe, correct to see in Beowulf a form of the primeval and undying legend of the eternal fight between good and evil, darkness and light, winter and summer, of which the conflict between Christ and Satan was one of the types. But more fundamental than allegory, or than the references to Wyrð the fate-goddess, or the touchingly ingenuous interpolations to God the All-ruler, is the melancholy religious sense of the supernatural mystery of the waste-land with which the little life of man is so perilously set about. How far this melancholy poetic sense is peculiarly Teutonic, how far universal, is a question that might well be debated to the length of volumes. I am more inclined to believe in the universality of all those elements which sometimes we think of as racial. If, among Latins, serenity, cheerfulness, and materialism seem to prevail, on the whole, over primitive terror and blank misgiving, one must put it down largely to the Italian weather. Though as to weather, neither Italian, nor even African, could make cheerful, serene, or materialistic, Augustine, Dante, or most of the mediæval theologians. And as to the Greeks and Jews, whose

weather was even superior to the Italian, they were, perhaps, the two most tempestuously religious races (except possibly the Ethiopians) which the earth's vagaries have yet thrown up, the most haunted by the sense of sin and the terror of its consequences. Orestes pursued by furies, David confronted by conscience, Augustine writhing in the throes of postponed conversion, Theresa and Catherine communing with Christ, Cynewulf, Bunyan, and Cowper in penitential abasement before their god, Cardinal Newman distraught by his theological woes—there is little to choose here between racial experiences in religious crisis. Religion, like love, is an affair in which all races appear to meet. Nature-myth, ancestor-worship, sun-worship, the worship of the Father of heaven, the Mother of earth, the Son who minds human destinies, his human mother who bends to earth an even more attentive ear—all these cults seem to evoke much the same emotions in the different beings who practise them; they all tap that tremendous leaping spring in man, the religious sense.

It seems strangely all one stream—the goddess Eostre merging her spring festival into the new Christian Easter; the shrines of the virgin Diana being consecrated to the virgin Mary; the fires lit to the seasonal gods being lit to the seasonal saints; the demi-gods and heroes of heathen mythology changing their names to those of Christ's thegns, the apostles; the monsters who waged war on them becoming Satan and his legions; the old spirits who thronged earth and air still riding the wind as imps and witches of darkness. Particularly, perhaps, was this continuity of Christian and heathen mythology unbroken in England, where the Christian conversion was, on the whole, and compared with continental conversions (for the Continent is so sudden in its ways), a slow and gentle affair, a peaceful change with many setbacks and reactions.

“For nearly eighty years,” writes Mr. Stopford Brooke, “the heathen and Christian faiths were in close contact, and each preserved its freedom of development. The old battle songs were sung side by side with the Christian hymns, the saga of the English heroes with the saga of Christ; the Christian Church, on the hill or by the river, saw, during a varying term of years and without any fierce religious fury, the heathen temple in the neighbouring grove. There was a long mingling, then, in a peaceful fashion, of Christian and heathen thought; and through the mingling ran a special temper of tolerance and wisdom and good-breeding.”<sup>[2]</sup>

Whether or not this broad-minded and optimistic nineteenth-century clergyman exaggerated in his poetic reconstruction of a past probably more intolerant, unwise, and ill-bred than he cared to think, it is at least certain that there was in Early English literature a considerable and charming transference of heathen myths to Christian

forms.

“The minor gods and heroes which the various wants of men had created to preside over and to satisfy those wants were replaced by saints who did precisely the same work. The personages were different, but Polytheism, with all its romance, remained. Even the nature-myths were often continued in the legends of the saints. . . . The most widespread of the heathen myths was the war of Day and Night, the still greater war of Summer and Winter . . . become now, in various forms, the war between Christ and Satan, between eternal Light and eternal Darkness, between the Church and heathenism . . . whatever shape the changes took, the original myth is preserved.”<sup>[3]</sup>

You get the myth in its heathen form in Beowulf, Cædmon and Cynewulf, full of the Harrowing of Hell legend, which had by that time taken possession of the fancy of Christendom, gives it in its Christian rendering. For by the time Cædmon broke into his biblical singing, that tremendous religion from the East which was to transform English thought, had taken its firm hold, and thenceforth for many centuries poetry was so intertwined with references to Christian and Jewish pre-Christian beliefs as to have scarcely any separate existence. What kind of poet, one wonders, would Cædmon have become if, instead of being led, on his strange outbreak into articulateness, to an abbess, and bidden by her to go and put Genesis into verse, he had been taken to the court of an earl and told to sing songs of war? We cannot tell; and neither do we know whether poetry has lost or gained by the religious fervour of an age which used up its poetic genius in narratives of the fall of the rebel angels, the creation of the earth, the fall of man—romantic and exciting stories enough, but becoming monotonous through so frequent repetition. All we can say is that, with Cædmon (or whoever wrote Cædmon’s poems) the English language enters into its share of that great Satanic mythology which begins, in literature, with Avitus’ poem, *De Originali Peccato*, and culminates in John Milton. Beowulf may be said to share this mythology in spirit:

“So then the people’s men dwelt in prosperity,  
Blessed and happy, without one began  
Felony to fashion, a fiend out of hell;  
That grim guest Grendel hight  
A mighty march-stepper, who the moors held  
Fen and fastness. . . .  
Thence abominations all arose,  
Etins and elves, orcneys also,  
Likewise giants that with God strove  
For many days; that doom he dealt them.”<sup>[4]</sup>

The Christian scribes who set down Beowulf could not, with the best will in the world, purge it of its essential paganism. Its religion is a direct appeal to a vague if almighty deity for success, not the statement of a theology. The Teutonic and Scandinavian English had to wait for that until the more formal, inventive, elaborating, and less poetic genius of the Mediterranean peoples gave it to them. Then, in common with all the Christianised races of the world, they took it over. But they made of the story, long since to us so conventionalised that we may easily miss its romantic magnificence and the beauty and wonder with which it first broke on the so recently Christianised Europe, something new, something vital, English and mysterious, full of terror, darkness, and release, the roaring of the sea on the wild Yorkshire coast, the sweep of storm and winds.

“Nor was here as yet save a hollow shadow  
Anything created; but the wide abyss  
Deep and dim, outspread, all divided from the Lord,  
Idle and unuseful. . . .”<sup>[5]</sup>

Here is the northern melancholy and sense of the misty terrors of the beyond and the wrath of God, that adds edge to the sharp sense of release and joy in the green swards of paradise and the tender mercies of the redeemer. This terror of the wasteland, this sense of the melancholy dark, is the ancient heritage of a people who knew little but bad weather and cold and stormy sea-wastes; a people to whom the late-coming spring and brief and slight summer were as flying dreams of beauty, joy, and consolation, speeding by like the kingfisher, leaving the grey and melancholy world in sadness again. This quite horrible weather that we suffer in this island, and in the other northern lands, may account for much that has always differentiated us from races inhabiting happier climes; it probably made our Saxon forbears the world's heaviest drinkers; it has possibly, together with the advantages of a language unequalled in richness, grace, and heterogeneity, made the English the most poetical race that the world has yet known (except the Greeks, who had, however, no such reason: and so much for theories of genius), giving them that sharp and profound sense of joy and grief, that soul-searching melancholy, which are a reflection of nature's moods in a bad climate, and depriving them irrevocably of the content which sustains, one believes, more fortunate peoples. It has also, one may fancy, given an especial element to English religion, suffusing it with that vague and misty twilight which is sometimes called Celtic, but may be as accurately regarded as Saxon; anyhow, it is the atmosphere in which our blended English nation has its being. It is an elf-haunted atmosphere, entirely different from that more lucid climate inhabited

by the satyr and the faun.

It would be interesting, were there space, to discriminate in Cædmon and his school, and in Cynewulf and his, between the general Christian mythology in which all the Christian races had part, and which gave monotony to so much early mediæval literature, and the peculiarly English elements in the form in which it was cast. The story of Genesis and the gospel of Nicodemus were the store-houses of the great epic which was echoed round the Christian world. The Scôp and his songs disappeared; but some of his spirit remained, oddly breathing through the framework of the solemn Latin-Christian epic. It is apparent in the vigorous Cædmonic stories of the Hebrew patriarchs, who speak in the manner of sturdy English war-lords surrounded by their thegns. But, as Bede said, “no trivial or vain song came from his lips”; all were godly and Christian. No new element, as regards religion, was added by the English seventh and eighth-century poets to the general scheme. England was drawn into the river of the literature and language of Christendom; at that time a very weak and thin river, trickling through the barbarian wilderness.

With the coming of Augustine to England, laden with Bibles, psalters, and lives of the saints, the influence of the Latin mission began, and the stream of Christian literature began to flow in southern England. Imported by Italians, naturally it flowed in Latin; there was no English literature in the south until Alfred, nothing in the vernacular but a few codes of law, a fragment or two of history. Even the versatile Wessex scholar Ealdhelm devoted himself mainly to Latin prosody and the study of the Latin writers; the austere Gregory would have condemned him bitterly for his familiarity with the lighter pagan classics, for his habit of quoting from Horace, Persius, and Juvenal. He did also, it appears, write and sing songs in English in public thoroughfares to attract those who did not go to church; but these songs have vanished.

For vernacular literature, for the seventh-century budding of English poetry, we have to go to Northumbria.

And here, so much was English literature but a branch of the tree of European Christendom—a tree, however, at that time blasted and stunted by barbarian Gothic maltreatment—that the subject is rather the English element in religious literature than the religious in English. Cædmon and his school, Cynewulf and his, take their places in the literature of contemporary Christian Europe, that strange literature of allegory, Biblical paraphrase, and Christianised pagan myths.

The author or authors of the Cædmonic and Cynewulf poems blazed no new trails, but through paraphrases, allegory, and epics of saintly adventure, sound continually English war-cries, and the surging and breaking of the English sea, and of

the wild Northumbrian weather. The swan-road, the whale-road, the fishes' bath, the gannets' bath, the country of the sea-mew, the beaker of the waves, the clashing of the sea-currents, the sea-fastness, the sea for ever cold with its salt waves—every kind of characteristically English poetic circumlocution<sup>[6]</sup> was lavished on the element which played so strong and so unbiblical a part in the Old English epics of the Bible saints. They are war-like poems; the Cædmon cycle, in particular, has a rough vigour which is reminiscent of the popular minstrel—the Scôp applying himself, with a will, to scriptural subjects, the Saxon heroes christened by Biblical names, and still fighting in the age-old cause of good against evil, but now strengthened and defended by a more potent magic than of old. Christ leads apostolic thegns to battle, and steers apostolic crews through stormy seas; he is the war-lord, the helmsman, and the saviour. The adventures of the children of Israel became sagas, recited before kings and warriors in their halls, the more military parts of the Bible were vigorously retold; Abraham and the rest speak alternately as combative, half-heathen Saxon chiefs, and with the solemn didacticism of mediæval Latin Christianity.

In the Cædmonic poems, Christianity and heathendom seem to be fighting, now one element gaining the upper hand, now the other. If a wide gulf divides them from the pagan eighth-century verse—*The Wife's Complaint*, *The Husband's Message*, *The Wanderer*, and the first part of *The Seafarer*—a gulf narrower but definite separates them from the Cynewulf poems. With Cynewulf, the personal, introspective, melancholy, religious element which has characterised so many Christians of all races and ages entered English poetry. Cynewulf is the chief of sinners, the remorse-haunted penitent, and the finally ecstatic redeemed soul. He shudders away from the sins of his careless youth, from the transient glory of this world; he fixes his eyes on a personal saviour, and on the raptures of heaven and the pains of hell, of the vision of which he writes gleefully, echoing sentiments fashionable among mediæval theologians:

“In the baleful gloom  
The blissful throng shall contemplate the damned,  
Suffering, in penance for their sins, sore pain,  
The surging flame and the bitter-biting jaws  
Of luring serpents, a shoal of burning things.  
Then a winsome joy shall rise within their souls,  
Beholding other men endure the ills  
That they escaped, through mercy of the Lord.  
Then the more eagerly shall they thank God  
For all their glory and delight. . . .”<sup>[7]</sup>

There is nothing new in all this; nearly all Cynewulf's writings derive, closely or

distantly, from Latin sources. The drama of the human soul tormented by its sin and by the fear of retribution is common to all races, all languages, and all faiths. Its first expression in English literature was directly from Latin; indirectly (according to one theory) from Celtic influences working on poets exposed to the rigours of Northumbrian weather, the grandeur of Northumbrian seas. It may be so; anyhow, the Cynewulf cycle of religious poems, signed and anonymous, bears, along with its Latin-Christian impress, a more Gothic adventurousness, a wistful and storm-tossed sadness, poetic strangeness, and close observation of nature. The English saga-spirit, making its marriage with the Celtic genius of romance under wild and sombre climatic conditions, had given birth to its heir, the spirit of English poetry, which was already strong enough to put up a good show against its Latin step-parent, even when drawing on the latter for its subject-matter. From conventional Latin theology comes the framework.

“Thus long ago the great Melchizedek,  
So wise of soul, revealed the majesty  
Of the eternal ruler; he was the law-bringer.  
He gave them precepts, who had awaited long  
His advent hither, for it was promised them.”<sup>[8]</sup>

Tedious enough. And yet we can discern the moody Anglo-Celtic spirit, as it moved Northumbrian poets of the eighth-century, blowing like a troubling sea-wind through the creaking joints of the weary patristic theology and scriptural narrative, which was derived and often translated from Gregory’s homilies, from hymns, from the Acta Sanctorum and the Breviary. The old Teutonic pagan spirit moves with a clashing of spears, and above all with a breaking of great waves, among the pious legends. The deeds of the Christian saints are wrought by a strange rough English army in ecclesiastical haloes, looking towards hell and paradise as of old the Teutonic heroes had looked up to Valhalla, and, shudderingly, down to Niflheim. The phrases of Latin piety come sometimes oddly from their lips; more natural sound the occasional questionings that surge up from the doubting and fearful English heart—“Mirk and mysterious is that other world. No one returns to tell us of its secret.” Shakespeare was saying this eight hundred years later.

Yet there is a new element, not only of theme, but of spirit, brought into English literature by the new faith—the expression of remorse and sorrow for sin: “Much need have I,” cries Cynewulf, “that this holy one should help me . . . when out of my body my soul fares on its journey, I know not whither, to that undiscovered shore. . . . I think of all the sorrows, all the wounds of sin that I in earlier and later life have wrought within the world; crying woe, woe, I shall bewail it all with tears. Far,

far too late it was ere I shamed me of my evil deeds.”<sup>191</sup>

Latin models set the fashion for this too—if indeed this primitive theme needs a model. To the writer of *Christ, The Phœnix, Elene, Juliana*, and the *Dream of the Rood*, it was natural; he wrote of it with personal passion. Which parts of these and the other Cynewulf poems were actually by Cynewulf, and who, if anyone, Cynewulf was, scholars must (or anyhow do) debate. It does not much matter. The uninstructed must (or anyhow do) call these authors, for short, Cynewulf. Less fantastic than the Celt, less heavily and exhaustingly martial than the Norseman, less scholastically theological than the Latin, the Northumbrian school of Latin-Celto-English religious poetry flowered into its surprising day.

What would have been its growth but for the decay of Northumbria and for the arrival of those restless and discourteous invaders, the Danes? Would its native Gothic vigour have asserted itself over its Roman foster-mother? Would there, when the first glory and excitement of the new faith had dimmed with custom, have been a wider literature, a secular poetry, lyric, ballad, epic and dramatic, following the monasticised Cynewulf literature, and following the plague of riddles, runes, gnomic verses, proverbs, and dialogues that sprang up in its shadow? Would the nature elements and the dramatic elements in eighth-century religious poetry have been the forerunners of a great non-religious English literature? Or would the cultural hand of the Church have closed more and more on English poetry, silencing the last pagan questionings, the last shouts of heathen warriors, the last murmurings of the elf-haunted woods, witch-ridden winds, and storming seas, lighting the twilight of the gods more firmly with the candles of Christendom, smoothing the Teutonic metres into Latin mould?

We can only speculate, for Northumbrian literature decayed with the Northumbrian kingdom; anarchy tore literature in shreds, education perished, and amid “mickle whirlwinds and lightnings, and fiery dragons flying in the air,” “the ravaging of heathen men mournfully overthrew God’s Church at Lindisfarne with rapine and slaughter.” The Danish conquest had begun, and that was the end, for the time, of literature in Northumbria. That strange, charming, and yet irritating product of Gothic myth and spirit, monastic training, Latin learning, Roman, Celtic, and Neo-Platonic Christianity, and north of England weather, ceased to grow, mown down by the barbarian scythes. There is no more English poetry to matter—at least, none that has survived—till the tenth century.

The Wessex prose of the ninth century is conceived in a different air. Alfred, setting himself to restore lost learning to his country, created no new national literature; instead, he set flowing into England in the English speech, the rivers of

Latin scholarship, history, philosophy, and religion.

It is little use, either, to search the earlier part of the next century for English literature; all we shall find will be religious homilies, even if adorned with legend and tale. The religious and monastic revival was in full swing. The end of the world drew on apace, and literature was not worth while. Ælfric, great writer of prose as he was, drew his literary impulse from the old ecclesiastical tradition, and composed homilies on the Bible stories, and on Church history and doctrine. There is nothing new, and nothing peculiarly English, in his material; what is interesting and valuable is his application of the vernacular to his themes. Ælfric, like Alfred, carried on the bringing of England into the stream of European religious literature. He was a transmitter of patristic theology to the unlettered, keeping Church teaching alive during those troubled times of war, invasions, and barbarism, when men had no heart for learning, and when the dream of a literature of the humanities that had visited Europe during the Carolingian renaissance had flickered into darkness. There was no religious element in English literature in the tenth and eleventh centuries, for there was scarcely any literature apart from theological or educational writings. And these were almost wholly derivative, except when Archbishop Wulfstan delivered passionate Jeremiads on the national humiliations, decadence, and downfall. It was a literature of monks: inevitably, when the laity could neither read nor write, and the old minstrelsy was dead and the new not yet born. When the monk Byrhtferth wrote mathematical treatises, he felt that he must join them in the same book with tracts on the loosing of Satan, the seven sins, and the four virtues. The Gospels were translated, the early Christian and Jewish legends retold. Apart from the Eastern legend cycles of Alexander and Apollonius of Tyre, and apart from the medical and scientific treatises on beasts, herbs, recipes, star craft, prescriptions, and charms, the English literary world was a world of Christian mythology, decorated by the allegory and symbolism which mediæval Europe found so charming, and so essential to its expounding of either narrative or theology.

What it would have become, and how soon, if left to itself, is a question for speculative historians. One of the points about the British Isles is that they never were left for long to themselves; curious as it may seem, they have always presented an irresistibly tempting appearance to continental invaders. The English were about to receive one of those Visits which have periodically so jolted and disturbed them, and so adulterated the blood and the literature of the true-born Englishman.

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[1] Translation by Stopford Brooke.

- [2] Stopford Brooke, *History of Early English Poetry*.
- [3] See Footnote 2.
- [4] Translation by C. Scott-Moncrieff.
- [5] Cædmon, *Genesis A*, translated by Stopford Brooke.
- [6] See H. C. Wyld's *Essay on Anglo-Saxon Poetry*.
- [7] Translation by I. Gollancz.
- [8] Cynewulf, *Christ*, translated by I. Gollancz.
- [9] *Juliana*.

## CHAPTER II

### ENGLISH AND NORMAN

OLD English literature was checked. It was certainly none too soon. Old English was much too Germanic, too copiously declined, a language for us to contemplate as a medium for our best authors. *Hamlet* in Old English—it does not go so well.

But what must we count as English literature for the next hundred years? We can scarcely include in it the Latin and French writings of the frenchified Scandinavians (so rapidly to become anglicised-frenchified Scandinavians) residing in England; and, really, that was all there was of literature.

What elements, apart from merely linguistic changes, this odd business of the Norman invasion finally infused into English literature and thought it is fascinating to speculate, but impossible to know. It is easy to say that England was brought more into the stream of European thought—but, after all, she had not been out of it since the reception of Anglo-Saxon England into Christendom had started the islanders on that tremendous struggle to assimilate and digest the whole astonishing and in many ways unsuitable mass of Augustinian-Oriental theology which lay so heavily on their Gothic stomachs for many centuries.

The seventh and eighth-century poets wrote in an English manner, and often in an English mood, but what they had to express was of Latin ecclesiastical tradition. They had entered on what has been described as “the conflict of the two realms of ideas, German and Latin, that went on in all modern nations, beginning in the first encounter of the northern tribes with the intellectual and spiritual powers of Rome”; which conflict is, says the same writer, “the whole matter of early modern history,”<sup>[10]</sup> and is more evident in England than elsewhere. Another writer, going further, attributes the whole failure of the Saxons to form and retain an independent culture of their own to this unresolved conflict.<sup>[11]</sup> In his view the Normans went far towards resolving it for them; it is possible, however, to think that the Normans made it worse, setting back the clock by reducing the language of the conquered race to the status of a poor relation, and therefore making literature of the first order impossible to them for some centuries. “The Norman conquest took away the English literary standard, and threw the country back into an anarchy of dialects . . . and so it happened that for the greatest of the mediæval centuries, the twelfth and thirteenth, the centuries of the Crusaders, of the Hohenstaufen Emperors, of St. Francis, St. Dominic, and St. Louis, there is in English no great representative work in prose or rhyme. . . . The beauty of mediæval poetry and prose is not to be found in England;

or only in a faint, reflected way. . . . To spend much time with the worthy clerks who promoted Christian and useful knowledge in the thirteenth and fourteenth-century dialects of Lincoln or Yorkshire, Kent or Dorset, is to acquire an invincible appetite for the glory of other countries not quite so tame, for the pride of life of the castles and gardens of Languedoc or Swabia, for the winds of the forest of Broceliande. . . . Almost everything in the literature of the Middle Ages that is out of the common, that is in any sense magical or inspired, comes from beyond the English borders.<sup>712</sup>

What made the English and Normans so dull? Perhaps it was that they were not yet adequately mixed; perhaps that the Normans were an uncreative race, the English a subject people.

As to the worthy clerks, they wrote diligently away, even more imitatively and conventionally than before the conquest. But some of them now began to be less devout, to be acrimonious, rude, and sarcastic about their fellow-clerics, and about the Church in general. English ecclesiastical satire, deriving largely from France, is written often with a continental kind of violence, that one imagines due to the French-Norman element; since continental satire, like continental revolutions, has always been rougher and fiercer than our island brand. One would infer from contemporary literature that an even larger proportion of Anglo-Norman than of pre-conquest English clerics were rapacious, gluttonous, vicious, and corrupt, and of the Goliath type which was the satirists' easy butt. If so, it was, no doubt, merely that they had more opportunity. They were nearly of the same blood—that of Northmen, mixed with that of Franks, Burgundians, and Gauls—Scandinavian and Teuton and Celt, an odd Gothic mixture like ourselves. On the whole an attractive and admirable people; unlike their predecessors in the popular game of invading Britain, the Danes, whose presence and habits had reduced the country to that depth of dreariness to which all countries frequented by Danes, including Denmark, appear to sink. The Normans came in like a fresh and keen wind, and though they filled England with cruel and unjust oppressions, both legal and feudal, they also filled it with chivalry, business acumen, monastic orders, learning and letters, new songs of romance, brilliant historians, adroit and courageous ecclesiastics, splendid architecture, the French language, and that firm sense of direction which the dreamy and drunken Saxons for one reason or another so lacked. They were not a poetic race, and it is possible that their weight was permanently thrown in the scale against the more mystic and dreamy element in English religious literature, and towards the more definitely and firmly theological.

But all these surmises are speculative, and it is perilous to embark on that fascinating game, the separation of distinctive race characteristics from the so closely

bound European cosmogony.

What is certain is that the revival of monastic learning and letters of the twelfth-century, the close contact kept up with the scholarship of Paris, the considerable mass of entertaining and interesting Latin chronicles and satire written during the period by Anglo-Norman authors, and the incursion of the Arthurian cycle of romance, kept England from complete intellectual torpor, preparing it for the ferment and literary revolt of the thirteenth century, in which France led the way. It was an age of learning, of brilliant monks and clerics, to which England, with her new universities, contributed her share. But Grosseteste and Roger Bacon, Matthew Paris, Duns Scotus, and the rest of the priestly schoolmen and Latinists do not belong, except in influence, to English literature. This flowed, a thin but never quite-ceasing stream of native poetry, mostly religious, proverbial, or homiletical. It was an age of paradox; religious and monastic fervour, stimulated by the crusades and by the influence of the great orders, went side by side with hatred and ridicule of Church abuses; it might be true to say that in no age has the Church been more hated or more loved. Together with the piety of the *Poema Morale*, the *Ancren Riwle*, and the intense personal devotion of the hymns, there is the flood of clerical satire and fable—Goliath, Reynard the Fox, Isengrin the Wolf, the Husband, the Wife, and Sir John the Priest. Each order of clergy complained of and mocked the vices of the other orders, each clergyman those of his superiors and fellows, the laity (and particularly the sculptors and carvers) those of clerics in general. There is a mass of admonitory religious English writing, both verse and prose; the moral and puritan spirit was abroad in all countries, thundering against both clerical and secular sin, holding up dread warnings against judgment to come—*Sinners Beware*, *Signs of Death*, *Lutel Soth Sermon*, *The Eleven Pains of Hell*—such poems poured from clerkly pens. Hell is described in fearful detail; Sabbath-breakers, illicit lovers, priests' wives, and other sinners are threatened unceasingly with damnation. Homilies, hymns, and hagiology still held the day in England, both in verse and prose, in spite of the growing volume of romance and fables on French models. Large-scale romantic epics on the history of the world, such as the anonymous North-English *Cursor Mundi*, describe the course of history, but in its strictly theological aspect (in spite of the chivalric touch given to it by knightly titles and terms), beginning with the Creation and Fall, and ending with a commendation to the Virgin. Religious allegory was the basis even of natural history books and calendars; no beast, from ant to elephant, but must support its burden of allegorical symbolism. Monastic influence lay heavily even on the animal creation.

While the French were breaking in the twelfth and thirteenth centuries into a

humanist and laic renaissance, composing gay fabliaux, romances, and the songs of *jongleurs* and *trouvères*, the English writers remained bogged in the old themes. The *Ormulum* reverts to the old-fashioned device of paraphrasing and homilising on the Bible, with elaborate and lengthy conceits: it is a dull piece of work. The charming *Ancren Riwele*, far more cultured and attractive reading, lays down a rule of living for three anchoresses who wish to lead a semi-conventual life. Hortatory admonitions and mystical love-poems and a great growth of devotions addressed to Christ and his mother, some borrowed from Latin, some apparently originally in the vernacular, make their appearance. The monastic influence, working together with the romantic, added the story of the grail quest—the gay Goliardic satirist Walter Map was in part responsible—to the Arthurian cycle. Even the Owl and the Nightingale in the poem, sitting on their trees and exchanging uncomplimentary comments on one another's songs, do so on religious grounds, and their recriminations are acid with *odium theologicum*, whether the nightingale symbolises the secular priesthood against the monastic, or human love against the clerical ideal.

There is a growing tendency, however, to enliven didacticism, to point a moral and adorn a tale with illustrative fables. Robert Mannyng's *Handlyng Synne*, taken freely from a French model, and concerned with the Seven Deadly Sins, is rich in cautionary tales, showing forth the ill fates which reward worldly habits such as minstrelsy, usury, tournaments, mystery plays when played outside the church or dealing with anything besides the Nativity and Resurrection, dancing in churchyards during service, late suppers, gluttony, wrestling and games, eating before communion, and female attire (as, indeed, most other womanly attributes, for Mannyng felt the correct monastic anger against the female sex). It is an interesting, entertaining, and edifying example of the mediæval monastic tendency to caution and condemn the vices and amusements of society, both secular and clerical. Not, of course, a peculiarly English tendency: the gist of his poem was taken from the French; so was the Kentish *Ayenbite of Inwyt*, a later treatise on the Seven Deadly Sins; and indeed, it is practically impossible during this period, so closely was English literature, anyhow religious literature, bound by the encyclopædic system of Church education, to sift from it any peculiarly national element—not even (*pace* Mr. W. P. Ker) dullness. For a national note, one must go to the political and ballad verse. Complaints of oppressions and tyrannies take local and specific forms in each country, whereas the seven deadly sins, the seven sacraments, and the rest, belong to Christendom in general. *Piers Plowman*, that splendid, violent, cantankerous, and mystic vision of social evils and heavenly remedies, was only one of a great European mass of literature of discontent. Even its form—the dreamer and his vision

—was a conventional form of the time. In its use of allegory and symbolism, its relation to scriptural legends, its use of personified sins and virtues, *Piers Plowman* is in the regular tradition of visionary epics. France, Italy, Germany, and England were, in the fourteenth century, full of dreamers having long and instructive moral and religious visions, from Dante downwards. The author or authors of *Piers Plowman*, like their fellows, were inspired by anger against social evils, clerical and civil. Earnest yet critical churchmen (even if, as we are now sometimes bidden, we regard them as several, not one, and different in mentality and outlook as well as in dialect, they must still be credited with, on the whole, the same views), they raised more dramatically than anyone before or since the familiar cry against the familiar evils of mediæval Holy Church—simony, corruption, oppression, greed, lazy hermits, gluttonous friars, papal interference and extortion, and the rest of the dark list. Fervent mystical Christians, they thought Christian teaching in some ways very odd, unfair, and disturbing. All the good and great pre-Christians languishing in hell, for instance, while—

“A robbere was y-raunsomed, rather than they all . . .  
Than Mary Magdaleyne what woman did worse?  
Or who worse than David, that Uries’ death conspired. . . .  
And now ben these as sovereyns with seyntes in Hevene;  
And those that wisely wordeden and wryten many books  
Of witte and of wisdome with damned soulès wonye.”<sup>[13]</sup>

It was all very distressing to a theologian already oppressed by the terrific injustices this side of the grave.

It is on the passionate mysticism of Langland (for so we must still call these authors) that some critics, notably M. Jusserand, have laid greatest stress: that stormy mysticism sometimes bordering on the insane that M. Jusserand sees as peculiarly characteristic of the Teutonic and Celtic genius; though, for that matter, Italy and Spain (leaving aside France, as largely Teutonic-Celtic herself) have always held a fairly good record for mysticism, sane and insane, as witness St. Catherine of Siena, St. Theresa, the Spanish mystics, and the revivalists of the Alleluia movement of the thirteenth century and the Savonaro-list of the fifteenth. In *Piers Plowman* mysticism is joined to an obsession with practical morality. It turns, rather churlishly, from the pardons, penances, indulgences, and pilgrimages quite rightly offered as means to heaven by a Church who knew human limitations, to a sombre insistence on virtuous living—Do-Wel, Do-Bet, Do-Best. Truth, love, and holiness—these alone, Piers insists, will save the soul. He has a wild, sanguine vision of a reformed humanity—rich and poor idlers alike turning from their sloth to good works, and “ye

lovely ladies with your long fingers” sewing chasubles for chaplains—a rather curious suggestion, seeing how little chaplains were to his taste.

Equal disgust filled him, it seems, at the sight of the idle rich at their overfeeding, “telling a tale or twain” of the Trinity between mouthfuls (a mediæval dinner-party must have been rather entertaining), and the idle poor, who refused to work. But those who came in for the bitterest scourging of this violent coterie of authors were the mendicant friars, the comfort-seeking hermits, the whole ecclesiastical hierarchy from the Pope and Cardinal Legate downwards. It is the old familiar cry—the cry of all discontented men throughout those centuries. Langland echoes and amplifies Roger Bacon’s morose pessimism—“Let us see all conditions in the world, and consider them diligently everywhere: we shall find boundless corruption, first of all in the Head. Lechery dishonours the whole court, and gluttony is lord of all . . . see the prelates; how they hunt after money and neglect the cure of souls. . . . Let us consider the Religious Orders. I exclude none from what I say. See how far they are fallen, one and all, from their right state; and the new orders are already horribly decayed from their past dignity. The whole clergy is intent upon pride, lechery, and avarice. . . . None care what is done, or how, by hook or by crook, provided only that each can fulfil his lust.”

Thus Roger Bacon in the thirteenth century, and thus and more *Piers Plowman* in the fourteenth. It is the severest indictment of English clergymen ever composed; parsons and parish priests desert their pestilence-ravaged country parishes at London to dwell, and sing there for simony, for silver is sweet. The friars have every sin and no virtue, and live in gluttonous sloth and wealth. Pardoners, summoners, pilgrims, and all their pestiferous tribe are contemptuously berated. Yet Langland is no heretic and no Lollard. He is, so far as his theological views appear, an orthodox and fervent Christian, with devout reverence for the ideal, though not the existing, Church. Here too he is in accord with the other European writers of his age. As M. Jusserand points out, there are interesting parallels between Langland and Dante, for instance in their attitude towards the salvation of good heathens, such as Trajan, “an emperoure of Rome that was an uncrystene creature,” whom Langland records as explaining, a little boastfully—

“Wythouten any bede-byddyng,  
And I saved, as ye may see, withoute syngyng of masses,  
By love and by lernyng, of my lyvyng in treuthe.”

Langland comments, with some triumph—

“Nought throw preyere of a pope, but for his pure treuthe

Was that Sarasene saved.”

It is tempting to regard this sturdily unclerical, independent moral attitude as peculiarly English; perhaps we may do so, in spite of all the continental parallels. One may hear its rather complacent echo to-day in village and town—“I’m not one for much church-going. What I say is, if we act right, it’s enough. . . .” That tremendous conditional is, in our island glibness, oddly often and easily made; as if we were to say, “I’m not one for all this theorising about mountaineering. What I say is, if we climb Everest, it’s enough.” Langland is not glib, nor complacent. He pleads with passion for the enthronement of Truth, Reason, Conscience, and Love as the rulers of life, for justice and charity and labour as the guides to social reform, but wakes from his vision in tears, because victory is so far.

One feels that all these anti-clerical authors, so impassioned and so sweeping, cannot have been entirely just. Not even in the worst period, not even in the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries, can every member of any class, even mendicant friars and hermits, have been contemptible and corrupt. Human nature must, one feels, have been more various than that, and there must always have been white (or anyhow piebald) sheep in every fold. Langland takes the satirist’s licence, and lays on his colours thick. His savage satire has nothing in common with Chaucer’s suave and enchanting irony. Chaucer might have endorsed all Langland’s views on Church questions, but he had neither Langland’s passionate religiousness nor his anger; and none of M. Jusserand’s “Anglo-Saxon mysticism.” Polite and gentle-mannered ironist, travelled man of the world, he seems an outwardly acquiescent churchman, touched with the amused scepticism prevalent in the fourteenth-century among men of the world, and particularly on the Continent, where he had travelled so much. He betrays little sign of being bothered about the respective fates of Trajan, Aristotle, or the penitent thief. He had better things to think about; and, though he writes of monks, friars, summoners, and pardoners with the usual scorn, it is in his case a kindly, amused and tolerant scorn. He smiles cheerfully and cynically on the vices of his fellows; his manners, in short, are much better than Langland’s, and his reforming zeal much less. His urbane, amused spirit is as far from Langland’s passionate disgust with the world as his drama of flesh-and-blood characters is from Langland’s conventional mediæval framework of allegory and personified sins. Yet at times a troubled questioning breaks through his urbanity:

“Oh, cruel goddes that govern  
This world with binding of your word eterne, . . .  
What is mankinde more unto you holde  
Than is the sheep that rucketh in the fold?”

For slain is man, right as another beast,  
And dwelleth eke in prison and arrest. . . .  
And when a beast is dead he hath no pain,  
But man after his death mote weep and plain,  
Though in this world he have care and wo.”

If this may perhaps be taken dramatically, as the complaint of Arcite, more personal is the Knight’s sceptical comment on his hero’s death:

“His spirit changèd house and wente there,  
As I came never, I cannot tell where:  
Therefore I stint, I n’am no divinister  
Of soulès find I not in this register; . . .”

This again may be merely the Knight’s own (improbable) agnosticism; but it is of a piece with the unobtrusive scepticism of which Chaucer shows signs elsewhere, along with his conventional acceptances and pieties, and in queer contrast (if any moods in any writer can be called queer) to the religious emotion of his occasional devotional poems, his recantation of vain writings, and the admonitory religiousness of short poems such as *O yonge fresshe folkes*, and *Truth*. That he was a good deal interested, at some period of his life, in religion (anyhow in a scholarly and literary way), he showed by joining in the great procession of those literary men who, before and since his day, translated that mighty handbook of the mediæval Church, *Boethius’ Consolations of Philosophy*. Apart from the lapsing into mediæval common form shown by this action, Chaucer’s literary dealings with religion have the freshness and firsthandness one would expect, and sometimes, as in “And truth thee shall deliver, it is no drede,” a haunting beauty. Early in life he laid aside the tools of mediævalism—allegory, the deadly sins, and the rest—and became, so to speak, a novelist, with whom religion was not a theme but incidental.

Meanwhile, the moral Gower, though also a good story-teller, was writing vast works of edification on the current though already old-fashioned French and Latin models, only more enormous and comprehensive than any, covering that always tempting field, the purposes of Providence, the methods of salvation, and the iniquities of man’s whole guilty state (in Gower’s view, as in that of most of his contemporaries, little but guilt was to be found in any part of society, secular or lay, though the Law Courts and the Church come off worst). But in his English book, the *Confessio Amantis*, he leaves off being purely didactic, and writes an omnibus-book of the love-stories of the world, though even here the framework is that of a lover confessing his sins under the grouping of the seven deadly sins and their offshoot vices, each vice illustrated to him by an interesting tale from Genius, his

confessor. The machinery is theological, but the stories are secular enough. He explains, sensible and discreet man—

“I woulde go the middel way  
And write a book between the twey  
Somewhat of lust, somewhat of lore,  
That of the lesse or of the more  
Some man may like of what I write.”

The resulting book is a long, entertaining, and edifying conversation, that must have made many penitents discontented with their own confessors who failed to point a moral and adorn a tale for them in this interesting manner.

Gower, while Chaucer pushes on into the humanity of the Renaissance, remains a captive of mediæval theological allegory, that strange, primitive spirit which, descending from Greek lineage, takes on so stiff and Gothic an outline in the scriptural interpretation of the Christian Fathers and their poetic scribes, and later informs the epics of Dante and Langland, the *Roman de la Rose* school of chivalric narrative, and all mediæval drama.

There is, indeed, little mediæval religious literature, either English or other, that is not allegoric. But, through the thirteenth, fourteenth, and fifteenth centuries, beside the heavyweight theological poets, and beside the rather crude, stiff, and creaking religious drama (which lagged in England so far behind the increasingly rich and secular drama of France), there is heard the fluting, lyrical song, never dying out, and recalling literally the fluting of birds in a wood, of the devotional lyricists.

Reading these short, often lovely poems,<sup>[14]</sup> one is amazed at their tenderness, their passionate mysticism, their frequent good sense, their poignant and direct expression, their often beautiful phrasing and rhythms. It is one of the paradoxes of the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries, those seemingly most corrupt ages of the Church, when “the whole clergy is intent upon pride, lechery, and avarice,” when few serious writers and no satirist had anything to give to clerics, high or low, but bitter condemnations, laments, or contemptuous gibes, that, in spite of the corruption and degradation so generally charged to them by those who knew them best, so seldom (if ever) denied by any writer of their time, many monks, priests, and friars were writing, through it all, such poems as these. These poets would have been found, one imagines—some, we know, were so found—among the most melancholy lamenters of the sins of the Church and age. Some are under the name of the mystic Richard Rolle of Hampole, the author of the *Mendynge of Life*; and whether by him or not, are informed by that note of ecstatic and loverly devotion characteristic of him, of the Lady Julian of Norwich, and the other literary mystics of the time. Many

are translated from Latin hymns. Some are by friars, some by secular priests, and they are written in every kind of dialect, midland, northern, and southern. There are orisons to the Virgin, meditations on the Passion, appeals to man from the Cross, Christmas carols, and occasional melancholy speculations on death, and on the vain transitoriness of this world, such as the poem beginning—

“I wolde witen of some wys wight  
Witterly<sup>[15]</sup> what this world were:  
It fareth as a foules flight,  
Now is it hence, now is it here,”

with its sad, musical refrain, “This world fareth as a Fantasy.” If any religious poem can be called typically English, and un-Latin, this poem is so, with its weary wistful agnosticism:

“Which is Man, who wot, and what  
Whether he be ought or nought?  
Of Earth and Air groweth up a gnat,  
And so doth Man when all is sought;  
Though Man be waxen great and fat,  
Man melteth away so doth a moth . . .  
Who wot save he that all hath wrought  
Where man bi-cometh when he shall dye? . . .  
Dyeth man, and beastes dye,  
And all is one Occasion; . . .  
Who wot if mannes soule styze,<sup>[16]</sup>  
And bestes soulès synketh down? . . .”

Each sect, the poet continues, hopes to be saved, but why should God trouble himself with them? Man agitates about this and that, but does not know when “stilly deth” will steal on him. Let us give up disputation on matters beyond our grasp, for

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“The more we trace the Trinity  
The more we fall in fantasy.”

He ends on a more cheerful note:

“Of fantasy is all our fare, . . .  
But make we merry and slay care,  
And worship we God while we ben here; . . .  
Thus waxeth and waneth Man, horse, and hounde,  
From nought to nought thus then we hize;  
And here we stayeth but a stounde,<sup>[17]</sup>  
For this world is but fantasye.”

This strikes an unusual note among the devotional love-poems, poetic meditations, dialogues, lullabys, visions, and angelic salutations. So, too, do the verses on the earthquake of 1382:

“And also when this earthe qwok,  
Was none so proud, he ne was agast,  
And all his jollity forsok,  
And thought on God while that it last;  
And as soon as it was over past  
Men wox as evil as they are.  
Each man in his herte may cast,  
This was a warnyng to be ware. . . .”

“Forsooth, this was a lord to drede,  
So sodeynly made Man agast;  
Of gold and silver they tok none hede,  
But out of ther houses till some be past,  
Chambers, Chimeneys, all to-barst,  
Churches and Castles foule gone fare,  
Pinacles, Steples, to ground it cast;  
And all was warnyng to be ware.

“The Rysing of the Commons in lande,  
The Pestilens, and the earth-quake—  
These three things, I understande,  
Betokens the grete vengeance and wrake  
That should falle for synnes sake,  
As this Clerkes can declare. . . .”

More cheerful is a poem in praise of priests (a refreshingly unusual note among the literature of the time) and the occasional moral verses, such as the charming exhortation to “let not thy tongue have all his will, but ever fond to say the best. . . .”

“Looke that thou no man de-fame  
With wicked wille, so have thou blisse;  
For who so hath a wicked name  
Me seemeth forsoothe half hanged he is;  
Thou mayst not make amendis this  
With all the treasure in thy chest;  
For Christis love then think on this,  
And ever fond to say the best.”

If I have given disproportionate space to these poems it is because it does seem to be rather in verse than in prose that the English religious genius has always best expressed itself, and because it is well to realise how, beneath the Latin expositions of the schoolmen, the epics of the greater poets, and the satires of satirists, the

religious spirit was expressing itself through hundreds of quiet clerical poets up and down England. One may complain of the comparative limitations and poverty of English literature through these centuries, of its slowness to emancipate and humanise itself; but one has to look at the tree of religious literature by itself, without discontent for the scarcity of its more secular sisters; and of this tree, these poems are lovely branches.

Quite other branches are the clerical satires, such as the *Land of Cockayne*, that dancing and profane Gallic paradise of gluttonous monks. It is one of the more amiable satires on clerical life, sounding a more elegant note than the Goliath verse, a lighter one than the invectives of the serious reformers. It would serve for a children's nursery poem:

“There there be bowers and halls,  
And all of pasties be the walls,  
Of flesh, of fish, and of rich meat,  
The likefullest that man may eat.  
Flour cakes be the shingles all  
Of church and cloister, bowers and hall.  
The pinnacles be fat puddings . . .  
There be fair wells in the abbey  
Of treacle, and halwei . . .”

The rest, however, is less suitable for the nursery:

“Another abbey is thereby,  
Forsooth a great fair nunnery . . .  
The monk that wol be stout and good,  
And can set aright his hood,  
He shall have without dangere,  
Twelve wives each year . . .”

The conclusion is not suitable even for adults.

One must admit that France can claim to have set the mediæval fashion, whether in religious or profane literature. The conventional framework of the *Roman de la Rose* was used, anyhow once each, by most self-respecting poets in all countries. The anonymous English Midlands author of *Pearl* used it, by falling asleep and having a vision; though in the vision itself—that of the New Jerusalem, shown him by his dead daughter—he borrows at least as much from the Book of Revelation. Borrowings apart, *Pearl* marks a new stage in English religious poetry, for it is the first religious poem in English which centres round a human love and loss; its resigned grief is soothed with allegory and gilded and bejewelled with all the ornaments of the Jewish-Christian heaven.

The poet's two other religious poems, *Cleanness* and *Patience*, are dreadfully dull. They return to the scriptural and didactic manner of a tradition which had already ceased to be modish, and are not comparable in interest with his secular romance, *Sir Gawaine and the Green Knight*.

It is one of the strangest things in literary history how long the drama, in all Europe, but longest in England, was religion-bound. The Church, that tremendous puritan authority, had, naturally enough, never admitted classical drama into that educational curriculum which rather grudgingly and distrustfully included from the first a little classical learning. In each country the drama was left to evolve itself, and if it seems odd that so natural a human instinct as play-acting should for so long have found no literary outlet (popular outlet it to some extent had, through "the rascal mimes and jocolatores who scoured the provinces at the fall of the Empire"<sup>[18]</sup>), one has here again to remember the great puritan censor and arbiter of mediæval literature, the Church, whose eye was turned suspiciously and forbiddingly on all extra-clerical activities of the human mind. But the Church, true to her policy of admitting and sanctifying human impulses and traditions—that policy which enshrined pagan rites in Christian festivities, sanctified human mating with the solemnities of the marriage service, and admitted religious ceremonial processions—the Church allowed a dramatic setting forth of the story of the Resurrection to develop out of her Easter liturgy.

In the rite of the *Sepulchri Officium*, the cross was buried and disinterred. "From this mute symbolism the clergy passed to an actual representation during the service of the incidents connected with the Resurrection. After the third lesson on Easter Sunday there was a procession to the choir, in which was enacted a colloquy between the apostles and the holy women:

*Apostoli*.—"Dic nobis, Maria

Quid vidisti in via."

*Prima Maria*.—"Sepulcrum Christi viventis

Et gloriam resurgentis."

*Secunda Maria*.—"Angelicos testes,

Sudarium et vestes."

*Tertia Maria*.—"Surrexit Christus, spes mea,

Præcedit nos in Galilæam."<sup>[19]</sup>

And so on. Here is the germ of a complete Resurrection drama, and of the miracle or mystery play. It developed rapidly, drawing on the whole story of Redemption for its incidents, from the Creation onwards. The clergy acted it, inside the church; its edifying effects were found excellent, and it drew large congregations.

But somehow—rapidly in France, more slowly in England—it escaped to the churchyard, then to the village green and town square, where it became the annual excitement of the delightful new festival of Corpus Christi. It slipped out of clerical hands, and was managed henceforth by the highly efficient, if purse-proud, trade guilds. The shipwrights took in hand Noah's Ark, the carpenters the Crucifixion, and so on; the production and presentation were managed with immense care and splendour; it even became a little worldly. The comic element (Noah and his wife, Cain and his servant, the sheep-stealing shepherd, and so on) came in, and became more and more popular a feature. To quote Thomas Warton: "Many licentious pleasantries were introduced in these religious representations. . . . It is certain," he kindly goes on, "that our ancestors intended no sort of impiety by these monstrous and unnatural mixtures." The contemporary clergy, however, did not feel so certain; they discerned in the performances, thus escaped from the careful hands of the Church, unseemly worldliness. Robert of Brunne firmly says that all that the faithful may do is to see the Resurrection and Christmas plays in church:

"Yf thou do it in weys or grenys,  
A syght of synne truly hyt semys."

However, the miracles went cheerfully on. They were all England had of drama: unlike France, which by the fourteenth-century had a thriving and secular stage. "Des farceurs, des jongleurs, et des plaisanties qui divertisseoient les compagnies par leur faceties et par leurs comedies, pour l'entreten"—thus Du Cange describes the entertainment offered to the French court at dinner in the thirteenth century. *Sotties* and *farces* made but a poor crossing of the channel. The Biblical miracle plays gave way in England to the allegorical moralities, which remained didactic and instructive, even when they became, in the sixteenth-century, short pieces to enliven the intervals between courses at banquets. The conflict between good and evil remained their theme; the actors are called Studious Desire, Sensual Appetite, Idleness, Ignorance, Experience, and such enlightening names, which must have been helpful to diners who might otherwise have been a little lethargic and confused about the characters of the *dramatis personæ*. Not until Henry VIII's reign did moral purpose weaken in the Interludes, disappearing to the jingling of the Morris-dancers' bells.

Drama was the last of the arts to secularise itself. English poetry had, by the end of the fourteenth-century, a good deal of pleasant variety, ranging from Richard Rolle, the Hampole hermit, to Robin Hood. Rolle was one of the most single-minded of the exclusively religious writers; in a turbulent political and theological period, he remained a mystic and a *dévôte*, joining a little and at times in the current protests

against social and ecclesiastical evils, but for the most part writing devout theological poetry, such as *The Pricke of Conscience*, meditations in prose, such as *The Mendynge of Lyfe*, and paraphrases of the Book of Job, the Lord's Prayer, and the Penitential Psalms. Thomas Warton firmly remarks: "Our hermit's poetry, which indeed from these titles promises but little entertainment, has no tincture of sentiment, imagination, or elegance." This is to say too much, for some of our hermit's short religious lyrics are good, though one must own that a long poem which opens—

"Here begynnes the first part  
That is of Man's wretchedness.  
First when God made all thynges of noght,  
Of the foulest matere man he wrought . . ."—

has a discouraging air, which is, in fact, well sustained throughout.

Meanwhile, that other zealous, if more critical, scholastic, and learned churchman, Wyclif, from quite another theological angle, was launching on the world treatises on theology, political and ecclesiastical governance, the doctrine of lordship, and social and Church reform. Wyclif was, of course, primarily a university professor, schoolman, philosophic theologian, reformer, and homilist; the titles of his English and Latin writings promise, like Rolle's, but little literary entertainment. "Of the Ten Commandments," "Of the Seven Works of Mercy, bodily and ghostly," "Of the Seven Deadly Sins," "Of wedded men and of their wives and children too,"—the interest of his works in English, except for their forcible use of the language, is not literary. One may regard this vigorous Oxford don as one of the strongest links in the long chain of English malcontents who protested against ecclesiastical and monastic abuses from the eleventh-century on; as (if we like) the philosophic leader of Lollardy; as (along with the author of *Piers Plowman*) one of the first English social radicals; as one of the last of the Oxford realists; as a philosophic and theological controversialist, with troublesome heretical theories on the nature of matter; as one of the earliest Protestant Reformers; as the organiser of the Poor Priests; as an earnest Christian preacher and homilist. But it is for his responsibility for the Wyclif versions of the Bible that English literature owes him its profound debt. He and his assistants in the task have the distinction of being, out of many triers and partial translators, from Bede onwards, the first to stay the course and to render the whole of the Canonical Books into English. If it had not been for the invidious Lollardish glosses circulated with the text (glossing the Bible seems an irresistible and age-old temptation), which rather naturally annoyed ecclesiastical censors, and gave the book a (to them) unpleasant look, the Wyclif Bible would no doubt have got away with it better than it did. However, censored and condemned as it was, it did pretty

well.

That it has not the beauty, grace, and flexibility of Coverdale's translation, or of Tyndale's, is probably due less to the differences in the literary talent of the translators than to the respective stages of the language. Wyclif's English is, even when he is writing homilies, forcible, even when he is protesting, scholarly. What he would have thought of the vulgar literary style used by some of his "lewd and unkennyng" disciples, even down to this present, one can guess. It was not this scholarly don who vulgarised Protestantism. But the drive that his energetic vernacular handling of controversy gave to the scattered and uncohered forces of theological, anti-clerical, and anti-papal revolt—forces which had never, indeed, throughout the later Middle Ages, lacked expression, but which had not, until Lollardy so insolently swelled up, been united in a movement—can scarcely be over-estimated. Wyclif brought into English religious literature the controversial note; the poetical devoutness of the mystical movement of the fourteenth-century, the didactic scriptural allegories, the scholastic disputations of the Latin schoolmen, the protests against Church abuses of doctrinally orthodox churchmen such as Langland and Gower, and the jests of the satirists, seem, all alike, to belong to a different world from this sharp, reasoning disputatious voice from Oxford, arguing so rationally against the doctrine of transubstantiation and the abuse of clerical ornaments and images.

These questionings, these unfortunately annotated English Bibles, so sharply and firmly dealt with by authority, are a century and a half ahead of their time. But modernism affected also even Bishop Pecock, who, refuting Wyclif's heresies, does so with a certain reasonableness. His defences are a trifle weak and tepid—as his upholding of religious orders on the grounds that those in them might well, if they had not been monks, have been something worse—"guileful artificers, or unpitiful questmongers and forsworn jurors, or soldiers waged into France for to make much murther of blood, yea and of souls, both in their own side and in the French side. And no man can find that these persons, while they lived in religion, have been guilty of so much sin . . . though they be men and not angels, and cannot live without all sin. . . ."

Pecock is something of a quibbler. But it is refreshing to come on a book called *Repressour of Over-much Blaming of the Clergy* among the chorus of mediæval clergy-baiting, which sometimes stirs one to pity for this so little appreciated estate.

As to religious literature in the fifteenth century, it seems in its main manifestations a poor and weak affair. The vigour of Wyclifism was crushed out; the mystics were too specialised; the better-known poets were, on the whole, derivative and banal;

prose ran to romance, travel, history, and political treatises. The glory and beauty of the century was Malory; and there is more of Christendom's romance in the quest of the Grail than in all the devout and dull expositions of Lydgate, Occleve, and the rest. Lydgate, who was afflicted with severe logorrhœa, and wrote almost infinitely, is ponderously prolix in his Christian allegories and lives of the saints. Occleve, less voluminous, is duller, "a feeble writer, considered as poet," as Warton, who for some reason rather admires Lydgate, puts it. There is something weary and flat about these heavily moral and orthodoxly devout fifteenth-century poets, with their incongruous lip-service to their master Chaucer.

What is charming in fifteenth-century religious verse—and there is much of it—is the output of mostly anonymous carols and hymns and religious lyrics that continue in unbroken tradition from the last century. Here, indeed, is an age-old element in English religious literature; minstrelsy, folk-song, community singing, carolling, and mumming. Songs to the Virgin, songs of the fall of man, of redemption, of heaven and of hell, songs against the clergy or in praise of the saints, carols of Christmas, Easter, or Lent, of holly or of ivy, translations from Latin hymns, spiritual lullabies—these delightful poems, both those derived from Latin or French sources, and those purely English, have a freshness and prettiness that seem to belong to a different world from the heavy mediæval allegories and tedious conceits of Lydgate and Occleve; they have that lyrical lilt that belongs to the dawn of the Renaissance, and achieve the feat of harmonising piety and poetry, which had eluded the more pretentious poets of that and of preceding ages. It was, indeed, the moment of the troubadour of religion, the zenith of the carollers. French lyrical measures inflamed English singers; Renaissance freedom and lightness of prosody already stirred like a wind in the stiff halls of mediævalism.

Yet these poems belong essentially in spirit to mediævalism. They have its solemn moral spirit, its allegory, its moralising of nature even down to the birds, which sing didactically in the forest trees of virtue and vice, of the good life, and of the rewards to come. Many of the poems gravely reflect on the sins of the world, and admonish the sinner, sometimes in the typical spirit of mediæval puritanism, sometimes with shrewd and wise worldly counsel. And then they will break into such lovely lyricism as: "I sing of a maiden that is makeless," or "The twelve days of Christmas," or "Who cannot weep can learn of me." But, indeed, there is so much delightful poetry, secular and religious, amorous, ballad, didactic, dramatic, and satiric in the fifteenth century that one concludes that it can only be called a dull poetic century by those who are concentrating entirely on the known names. These one may, indeed, with few exceptions, give to the mislikers of this century. Lydgate, Occleve, and the other

worthy pseudo-Chaucerians dull its first forty years or so; the Scotch poets, so highly esteemed by many critics, are no doubt better, but the alarming language in which they are couched builds between modern readers and themselves so prickly and ungainly a hedge that it is difficult to be enchanted by them. As to the English Skelton and Hawes at the end of the century, their religious verse, when they perpetrate any, comes with a curious air of old-world formalism, still in the allegorical and rather ponderous tradition of the Middle Ages. Here is the strange spectacle of continental Europe seething with the new ferment of the Renaissance, and our remote and conservative island scarcely touched, still pursuing its traditional course, producing untroubled mystical writers such as Walter Hylton and Juliana, and ecclesiastical fabulists, such as the writer of the *Gesta Romanorum*, who might never have heard of Boccaccio or the *Canterbury Tales*, so little are they in the stream of the humanist movement which had been steadily carrying all forms of literature—drama, poetry, allegory, fables, and romance—away from their didactic and ecclesiastical origins.

One can, and one does, make too much of the newness of the Renaissance. One sees it as a break, rather than as the natural growth it must, like other human developments, have been. One imagines, seeing it in foreshortened retrospect, streams of Greek learning flowing in suddenly from the East, as from a broken casket, taking western Europeans by surprise, flooding Europe with sweetness and light—a dramatic and magical moment, like the turning on of lights in a dark room. The authors and the historians have been, as usual, very sudden about this affair of the Renaissance. “The breaking down of the limits which the religious system of the Middle Ages enforced upon the heart and the imagination,” Pater calls it. “The liberation of humanity from a dungeon,” says J. A. Symonds. “Men opened their eyes to light against which they had been closed for ages,” Freeman tells us, as if our Renaissance ancestors had been kittens arriving at their ninth day.

They must, I suppose, be right; but they all sound rather sudden and brisk about a light, a liberation, and a breaking down which had been going on, a long progress with many setbacks, throughout the Middle Ages. The anti-humane puritanism of the learned and educational Christian Fathers, of Tertullian with his “*hæreticorum patriarchæ philosophi*,” of Novatian, and even Jerome, of Gregory, who quoted, rather hypocritically in so learned a man, “*Quoniam non cognovi litteraturam, introibo in potentias Domini*,” and wrote the famous letter to his classic-loving bishop: “A report has reached us which we cannot mention without a blush, that thou expoundest grammar to certain friends, whereat we are so offended and filled with scorn that our former opinion of thee is turned to mourning and sorrow”; the heavy

formalism and prosaic scholastic orthodoxy of the half barbarian Christian Church, for ever at war with freedom of spirit and of life—these had continually had to deal with successful rebellion. And one can scarcely describe as prisoners in a dungeon the secular lyricists of twelfth-century Provence, the host of French and German poets and romancers of the thirteenth century (the contemporary English authors move, it must be said, with more clanking of chains), or Petrarch and Boccaccio, even if Dante is counted as creating his splendours within the dungeon's four walls.

“The Middle Ages,” says Ozanam, referring specially to Italy, “are full of the ruins of paganism,” and they are full, too, of the sprouting roots of the Renaissance, which, like bulbs growing first darkly in a cellar, pushed up and broke into flower, first in Italy, and then over Europe, in the late quattrocento, watered by Greek streams.

But England, as usual, was late. She did not really “get” the Renaissance until Europe was in the throes of the religious squabbles, of the Reformation and Counter-Reformation. And even then (and again as usual) she got it less violently than her neighbours. While the Italian humanists, Greek-intoxicated, were flooding Europe with pagan learning, with new ideas of life, literature, art, manners, and morals, while popes and princes alike were caught in the stream of the new civilisation, while French scholars crowded to Italy and returned with Italian culture, while Villon and Blanchet and Charles d’Orléans prepared the way for Ronsard and the Pleiad and for Rabelais, the most naturally poetic country in Europe, politically troubled and torn, intellectually unexcited and perplexed, geographically isolated by the estranging seas from foreign influences, plodded rather wearily and flatly along the last lap of her outmoded mediæval way.

England had missed the boat. She caught a later one, and took the new seas, sails full to the winds; but she should have caught it before the turn of the century, for, alas, the winds that drove her later carried also the thunder of a violent voice from Worms, and the Renaissance was not what it was.

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[10] W. P. Ker, *The Dark Ages*.

[11] H. V. Routh, *God, Man, and Epic Poetry*.

[12] W. P. Ker, Introduction to Craik’s *English Prose Selections*.

[13] Dwell.

[14] See *Fourteenth-Century Religious Lyrics*, edited by T. Carleton Brown.

[\[15\]](#) Certainly.

[\[16\]](#) Ascend.

[\[17\]](#) Hour.

[\[18\]](#) G. Gregory Smith, *Transition Period of European Literature*.

[\[19\]](#) W. J. Courthope, *History of English Poetry*.

### CHAPTER III

## HUMANISM AND THE CHURCHES

THE age-old conflict between humanism and religion, between secular interest in and acceptance of this world and religious (not specifically Christian, for with all religions the conflict has been, with varieties, the same conflict) rejection of it, entered, with what we (with our customary excesses of speech and thought) call the Renaissance, into a fresh phase.

The clash, that (as I believe) is one of the parents of the literature of religion, altered in nature; while the universal Church loosened its grip on society and on the minds of individuals, becoming weakened though never defeated, its enemy the world advanced like an army with banners, adorned with all the graces of learning and knowledge and new thought. Later the struggle was to take on new elements from the spread and vigour and anger of Protestant individualism; in the early sixteenth-century the revolution was in the hands of the humanist scholars and poets within the Church. The poets, largely Italianised in form and spirit as they were, were never in England secular in the sense that the Italian Renaissance men were secular; though they were more secular than any English authors had been since English literature had been commandeered, a thousand years ago, into the service of the Christian Church. The religious note sounds less often, but sounds with the old traditional piety. Wyatt, Surrey, Lord Vaux, and the other Tottel's Miscellany poets, all wrote occasional devotional verses, laments for youthful sin, moral reflections on life, verse paraphrases of the penitential psalms, carrying on thus the line of personal and introspective devotion which joins English authors from Cædmon to Francis Thompson and beyond. The devotion of the penitent follows and alternates with that of the devout lover; Wyatt's—

“Forget not yet the tried intent  
Of such a truth as I have meant,  
My great travail so gladly spent,  
Forget not yet!”

is the other side of the emotional abasement of—

“But thou, O Lord! how long after this sort  
Forbarest thou to see my misery?  
Suffer me yet, in hope of some comfort,  
Fear, and not feel that thou forgettest me.  
Return, O Lord! O Lord! I thee beseech  
Unto thy old wonted benignity

Reduce, revive my soul; be thou the leche  
And reconcile the great hatred and strife,  
That it hath ta'en against the flesh, the wretch  
That stirred hath thy wrath by filthy life,"

or of Lord Vaux's—

"Thou that canst heal and help in all assays,  
Forgive the guilt that grew in youth's vain ways."

Among the Reformation poets (and Wyatt and Surrey were both of the Reformation party) the new secularity shows itself rather in diminished quantity of religious verse than in altered quality; their secular literary activities are to them a worldly pastime, to be disavowed with penitence in their more moral and pious moments. They are dualists, full of unresolved conflict. It is in the humanist scholar churchmen, the disciples of Erasmus—Grocyn, Linacre, Fisher, Colet, More, Latimer—that we must look for the change in the quality of religious thought. To read the Dean of St. Paul's, the first Liberal High Churchman, with his sensible English distaste for the subtleties of Thomist scholastic theology, his rational, human, unmediæval exposition of St. Paul's letters, is to step into the modern theological world.

In More, since he was primarily a literary man and not a Dean, there is the Manichæan conflict so usual among religious literary men between the enjoyment of the world of letters and the monkish impulse of abnegation and austere withdrawal. In his later life, the two impulses, no doubt always active, were outwardly harmonised in a life at once scholarly, human, and devout. There is no deviation in More's writings from Catholic orthodoxy, except on the question of religious toleration, where he was visited by an odd flash of anachronistic light which, in view of his subsequent theories and practice in the matter, one must regretfully put down to a passing literary intoxication.

One cannot read the early sixteenth-century humanist churchmen without regret that the religious reformation, the break with the Papal Church, could not have been left in their scholarly hands, to develop gracefully, learnedly, and rationally, reacting against Thomism, Augustinianism, and the harsh and ugly puritanism of the mediæval Church, broadening slowly down into a freer, more humane, less shackled, more intellectual and more Christian form of religion, without being troubled, scarred, narrowed, and permanently damaged by Protestant sectarian excesses, by retentions of the Augustinian Calvinism which had uglified the theology of the Middle Ages, the meaningless and acrimonious disputations on grace, determinism, justification, imputed righteousness, salvation by faith, which echoed with such foolish noise round

sixteenth-century Europe. The elegant and moderate Anglicanism which was presently evolved, the dignified Anglicanism of Hooker, might have developed more easily, more elegantly, and with less peril from all sides, if the great English scholars had kept it in their hands.

But no religious movement is ever for long in the hands of scholars. England, like the rest of Europe, became flooded with controversial tracts, Lollard reprints, pamphlets from abroad, acrimonious wranglings on doctrine and Church discipline. The level of literary manners was even lower than it is to-day; when scholarly gentlemen such as More called their religious opponents apes that dance in hell, the language of the more popular pamphleteers may be imagined. Sixteenth-century prose was a magnificent weapon in the hands of denunciators, and it was strengthened and enriched by the rhetoric of the English translations of the Bible that appeared in quick and glorious succession through the thirties. Religious dislike, equally strong among reformers and unreformed, had, by the time of the Elizabethans, taken firm hold of all parties.

Spenser, whether he felt personally acrimonious on the subject, or was merely bent on edification, loads his allegory in the *Faerie Queene* heavily against the old religion. Spenser is a psychologically curious case. Prof. H. J. C. Grierson, in an interesting study of the *Faerie Queene*,<sup>[20]</sup> sees him as a lover of chivalric romance and sensuous imagery, obsessed by Protestant Christianity, and constrained thereby to mar his romance and his poems by allegory that should gratify it. "How is he to reconcile the serious spirit of Protestant Evangelical religion with the varieties of chivalrous romance? . . . These things and the 'gospel' go not easily together." The answer of all but the most wholesale Spenserians is that he does not reconcile them, and that the moral allegory is a burden heavy to be borne. He knew himself that it might not go down very well, "To some I know this method will seem displeasent, which would rather have good discipline delivered plainly by way of precepts, or sermoned at large, than thus cloudily enwrapt in allegorical devices." But, displeasent or no, one cannot dismiss as unessential to the poem the structure of "continued allegory and dark conceit," derived alike from Platonic philosophy and the mediævalists.

Spenser, philosophically a Platonist, doctrinally a Protestant, drew his literary method from the old scholastic theological personification and allegory. The "serious spirit" referred to by the critic just quoted was not that of the "Protestant Evangelical religion," but of traditional Catholicism, which held all poetry not didactic to be of sin. With this didactic mediæval allegory Spenser mixed his romantic fables after Ariosto, his strong religious prejudices, his tale of knightly adventures, and his

chivalric love-story. An odd, rich, confused mixture; perhaps we are wrong to prefer it without its would-be moral and religious lessons, since he put them into it and served it up to us like that, and since it is the lovely thing it is. The more attractive, devotional, and less controversial sides of Spenser's religious feeling show themselves not in the *Faerie Queene*, and certainly not in the religious eclogues in the *Shepherd's Calendar*, but in his hymn of Heavenly Love:

“Love, lift me up upon thy golden wings,  
From this base world into thy heaven's height. . . .”

In this poem he seems to desert the Platonic theory of earthly love which had inspired his youth, for the conventional note of remorse for his lighter writings sounds, and sounds strangely from the author of the *Epithemalian*:

“Many lewd lays (ah! woe is me the more!)  
In praise of that mad fit which fools call love,  
I have in th' heat of youth made heretofore  
That in light wits did loose affection move;  
But all those follies now I do reprove,  
And turnèd have the tenor of my string  
The heavenly praises of true love to sing.”

It is the old dualism that few Christian poets have escaped. Sidney did not escape it. Spenser repents his virtuous love-sonnets as “lewd lays”; Sidney dismisses his more gently thus:

“Leave me, O Love, which reachest but to dust;  
And thou, my mind, aspire to higher things;  
Grow rich in that which never taketh rust;  
Whatever fades, but fading pleasure brings. . . .  
Then farewell, world; thy uttermost I see.  
Eternal Love, maintain thy life in me.”

Christian humanism was not, for a long time, to emancipate itself from the puritan-monkish tradition, which is, indeed, a tradition only because rooted in one of the fundamental reactions of human nature. The world, the senses, human affections—seeing the rejection of these as involved in the love of God, or in any practice of the higher life of the spirit, is man's most primitive reaction to religion: the Blessed Angela of Foligno, praying for the decease of her husband and children that she might have no counter-distractions in the pursuit of the devout life, only represents the cruder and more logical side of Sidney's “Leave me, O Love, which reachest but to dust,” and perhaps even of Shakespeare's human and non-religious disgust at the expense of spirit in a waste of shame; the hatred of the lower principle by the higher,

the impotence of the spirit in face of the bewildering, impossible task of harmonising life.

Valiant assaults against this eternal dualism had been made, and were in the sixteenth-century continually and most fashionably made, by the sonneteers of idealistic human love. Wyatt, Surrey, Sidney, Spenser, Drayton, Shakespeare—it would be difficult for a reader who was not also a human being, and therefore equipped with similar reactions, to reconcile the high, half-religious idealism of sentiment in their love-poetry with their wholly religious repudiation of it, in other moods, as “lewd,” “dust,” and “vanities.” What the greater humanism and freedom of the Renaissance did for this eternal paradox was, not to resolve it, but to make it more strange, more paradoxical, by adorning literary love with all the high ornaments of the spirit. Spenser, besides hymns of heavenly love, could write thus of earthly love:

“For love is lord of truth and loyalty,  
Lifting himself out of the lowly dust,  
On golden plumes up to the purest sky,  
Above the reach of loathly, sinful lust.”

Shakespeare, of all the Elizabethans, if not of all poets, the most human and the least dualistic, poured into sonnets and plays alike his sense of the heights to which human passion and devotion could rise. Yet every now and then disgust and despair at the whole business would seem to rise in him like a tide. Though in this matter, as in others, it is well not to be bold in inferring Shakespeare’s personal attitude from his plays. A great deal of delving has, naturally, always been done in them, with the object of discerning his supposed attitude, religious and general, towards life. Much of this seems silly work, with an imaginative dramatist of Shakespeare’s stature, who was capable, if any man ever was, of writing dramatically and objectively. No doubt every possible (and opposed) quality and point of view can be fastened on him, if we go through the utterances of all his characters and apply them to their creator. This has sometimes been done, with foolish results, by those who have been desirous of deciding what, if any, religious creed he held. The result of this research seems to be what might be expected. Roman Catholics discover him to have been of the old religion; Positivists find him of none; Protestants discern in him easily the tenets of the reformers; Anglicans assign him to the Established Church; Agnostics cannot help regarding him, whatever his professions may have been, as an Agnostic, with a profound religious and mystic sense and few certainties; these see in Hamlet’s dubious and wistful speculations his own most basic mood. He may have been Catholic, Anglican, Protestant, Agnostic, or anything else (except perhaps a Jew or

a Calvinist). I have read a Roman Catholic treatise which proves him a Thomist, from Hamlet and Aquinas both having made the not surprising remark that the power of reflection is distinctive of rational creatures, from Polonius's aphorisms on the formation of habits, and from the fact that he could create character.

When criticism reaches this level, one is inclined to leave the subject alone. In fact, it matters not at all to the religious side of Shakespeare's work to what particular denomination he subscribed. He is too far above sect, too independent of mind, perhaps too indifferent to religious differences, anyhow too dramatic a poet, to be affected by the controversies that raged round him. Spenser and Sidney showed themselves convinced Protestants; so did Gascoigne. The ruffling band of university dramatists—Nash, Lyly, Marlowe, Dekker, Lodge, and Greene—took sides, often scurrilously, in ugly sectarian wranglings, flinging themselves into the Marprelate controversy or the Romish quarrel with rude and strident words. Meanwhile, Shakespeare's poetic imagination, brooding over the field of human passions, human foibles, virtues, comedies, and tragedies, reaching out on one side to philosophic speculation, on the other to tavern ribaldry, made its own religion, within or without any religious formulæ to which he may or may not have subscribed.

No other poet was detached. Mostly, the poets and dramatists had no modesty about showing their political and religious colour. The bulk of them were anti-Puritan, largely from professional reasons (since the Puritans, following the example of the early Church, were strongly anti-stage) and anti-Papist from upbringing, national fashion, patriotic feeling, and presumably, conviction. Cries against the "Romish anti-Christ" shrill from Lodge and Greene, from Marlowe and his *Massacre of Paris*; from Dekker and his *Whore of Babylon*. The Elizabethan dramatists, however rowdy in their living, seem to have had a great amount of strong partisan religious feeling. Indeed, this was a dramatic tradition. For a long way into the century, the old form of the Morality was used for controversial purposes; personified abstractions proved an excellent vehicle of attacks on the new religion or the old, according to the ecclesiastical policy of the state authority of the moment. These partisan Moralities went on into Elizabeth's reign; but the Queen had no liking for this use of the stage: she probably found it not only impertinent but dull. Dull they can, I think, scarcely have been, for their broad and solemn didacticisms were increasingly enlivened by character, and increasingly also topical and controversial, which no doubt was exciting to the audiences of the time, and is even agreeable, like much dead theological controversy, to us. From its purely religious and moral late-medieval phase, the Morality and Interlude, taking colour from the Renaissance, began to reflect the struggle between knowledge and ignorance; humanity (the

susceptible protagonist) is torn between the blandishments of characters entitled Sensual Appetite and Studious Desire.

But the Reformation gained ground, and the purely religious element again influenced the minds of the dramatists. By the time of Edward VI we find Lusty Juventus, the hero, surrounded by characters called Abominable Living, Hypocrisy, and God's Merciful Promises. In this play, and in the Elizabethan *New Custom*, the dramatists follow to-day's fashion of exalting the virtue of the newer generation over that of the older. The Devil complains that—

“The old people would believe still in my laws,  
But the younger sort lead them a contrary way.  
They will not believe, they plainly say,  
In old traditions and made by men,  
But they will live as the Scripture teacheth them.”

For “Scripture” substitute “truth,” or “reason” (which the playwright would, no doubt, willingly have done), and this would do for the twentieth century.

As to *New Custom*, he very properly—

“Commands the service in English to be read,  
And for the Holy Legend the Bible to put in his sted.”

The *Conflict of Conscience* concerns the remorse of a recusant from Protestantism, and must have caused much booing and clapping. At the same time, there was a crop of more human and less exclusively abstract and theological Interludes; the drama of manners, though of rather crude manners, was developing, and though some of the characters were still called Virtuous Life, Severity, and Lucifer, more lively humanity is promised by Cuthbert Cutpurse, Pierce Pickpurse, Tom Tossplot, and Hawkin Hangman.<sup>[21]</sup> The old allegorical method supplies Robert Wilson's *Three Ladies of London* with its framework, and the ladies, Love, Conscience, and Lucre, talk and behave strictly according to name, though they are lively and characteristic ladies enough. But dramatic abstractions had almost had their day. The old Interlude had long since passed into genuine comedy, with little moral, in the hands of Heywood, Udall, and Lyly, though Gascoigne justly describes his comedy, *The Glass of Government*, as “a figure of the rewards and punishments of virtues and vices.”

The new tragedy took over more of the elements of the old religious drama. The struggle between good and evil, in one form or another, had been the staple of all great classical and all mediæval drama; it was still so in Renaissance and Elizabethan drama; either fabulously, definitely, and mediævally, as in *Faustus*, when the struggle

is for a human soul, or, in a pettier form in controversial drama (such as Marlowe's *Massacre of Paris*), or in the legitimate drama of character and action, which, until the decadence of the seventeenth-century, was as steeped in moral purpose and poetic justice as Greek tragedy. Classical tradition and classical influences combined to give to even the most violent and bloody plays, by the most graceless, disreputable, and even atheistical dramatists, a nobility and religiousness of sentiment, a continual reference to an Almighty God who defends the just and pursues the wicked with retribution. Among what Prof. Saintsbury has called "the extraordinary and unique rant and bombast" of the greater number of Elizabethan dramatists, these fine theistical sentiments sound as naturally as their other cries. In the main their themes, even after the passing of the fashion of Senecan melodrama, were the clash of human passions, bloody vengeance, love, lusts, wars, and crimes. Their subjects were often (and increasingly) repulsive, their crimes atrocious, their moral codes crude. But through this frightfulness, the note of conventional piety sounds, reminding us that writers who deal in violent incidents are, as a general rule, religious men. It shows the irrational and bigoted prejudice of Calvinism, that it campaigned against a stage not on the whole incongruous with godly views. Far more logical had been the similar puritanic prejudice of the early mediæval Church against the study of classical literature, which had, after all, stood for ideas opposed to its own. But the inherited distaste for the stage, which had never slept, and had shown itself intermittently throughout the Middle Ages in attempts at repression, only making terms with the perilous thing on condition that it dealt exclusively with scripture, saintly legends, or moral and religious issues, broke out undefeated and with fresh vigour in sixteenth-century Puritanism, and new presbyter, we are reminded, is but old priest writ large, with all the old characteristics under a new form. The thunders of the anti-stage writers breathe the indomitable, make-no-terms spirit of eleventh-century and later ecclesiasticism. The frenetic Calvinists denounced the histrionic art with that characteristic wholesale impartiality which makes them so curious a spectacle in history. They hoped and believed that all drama contained all vices, and firmly started that long wrangle which has even now only lately died down. The wrangle was not only external; it was waged in the dualistic, mixed English souls of the dramatists themselves, so that Greene, Gascoigne, and the rest seem to stand between two conflicting worlds. "I began to call in mind," says Greene, "the danger of my soul . . . for those gross sins which with greediness I daily committed, in so much as sighing I said to myself, 'Lord, have mercy on me and send me grace to amend and become a new man!' But this good notion lasted not long in me. . . ."

Repentance was, indeed, the fashion of the day, both in life and literature. It is a dominant motive not only in Greene and Peele, but preeminently in *Faustus*, by the irreligious Marlowe, and continually in Shakespeare. It is, indeed, less a fashion than an age-old classical theme. But with the Elizabethans it clashed more conspicuously than it had clashed in the Middle Ages with other and opposed views of art and life. It is only Shakespeare who seems to weld them all together, naturally and without violence, as he welds all human impulses and passions, making them interactive parts of a living character, instead of setting them bombinating in a vacuum, in the manner of some of his more convention-bound contemporaries.

As we know from Dr. Johnson, there was in Shakespeare a lack of moral purpose that “not even the barbarity of the age could excuse.” Johnson would perhaps have been glad if Shakespeare could have seen his way to adopting the simple religious and moral aims of Massinger, and yet remained Shakespeare. It could not be. Shakespeare had, besides his individual genius, the genius of the Renaissance, the Renaissance attitude towards morality, art, and the poetic fatality of human passions in conflict. Ben Jonson, at once more classical and more mediæval, could regard tragedy as teaching a moral lesson:

“Let this example move the violent man  
Not to grow proud and careless of the gods.”

His impatience with the wild hysterics of the later romantic drama combined with his own dramatic principles, perhaps with his religion, to make him partly return to the didactic abstractions of the old Morality, and incline to satirise humours rather than people. Ben Jonson’s was definitely a case in which artistic and moral purpose both in some measure hampered art, and he is always best when neither is much in evidence. Shakespeare’s are infused through the whole texture of his work, inseparable and indivisible.

As to Elizabethan prose fiction, that curious, experimental, not very interesting, but voluminous output, the religious element is almost lacking in it, in spite of many moral and pious aphorisms. The novelists were probably as religious men as the dramatists—indeed, many of them were the same—but prose romance and realistic fiction were not the mediums for religious expression. At its most direct and intense, this is found, as usual, in poetry; apart from the religious homilists, who were, in these days of new religious ideas, vigorous new idiom, and the gradually penetrating influence of the splendid prose of Coverdale’s and Tyndale’s Bible translations, in a very racy condition. “I have now preached three Lents,” says Latimer. “The first time I preached restitution. ‘Restitution?’ quoth some, ‘what should he preach of

restitution? Let him preach of contrition,' quoth they, 'and let restitution alone; we can never make restitution.' Then say I, if thou canst not make restitution, thou shalt go to the devil for it. Now choose thee either restitution or else endless damnation. . . . There is no remedy but restitution or else hell."

This forthrightness makes a happy change from the all too much about God's promises, holy scripture, corrupt tradition, and the rest, which are the burdens of the sixteenth-century homilists, as Biblical interpretations, the Fall of Man, and the Redemption had made heavy their predecessors.

But homilies are not within the scope of this book, nor are the manuals of devotion, which, and especially after the compilation of the new Prayer Book, appeared continually through the Elizabethan and Jacobean periods. The greater freedom of religious thought gave it fresh impulses; a half-century which provoked, as varieties of prose religious expression, the reasoned philosophical "pure Canterbury" of Hooker, the devout meditations of Lancelot Andrewes, and the tracts of the Puritans, must have been good rich soil. Religious controversy and persecution stimulate and intensify religious passions. It was not an accident that so many of the English martyrs, both Protestant and Catholic, wrote poetry (like the passions, both bad and good). The young woman Anne Askew, faced with rack and stake, the young man Chidiock Tichborne, between the rack and the gallows, composed verse out of the ardent heat of the martyr's temper, when in an age more moderate and humane they would perhaps never have rhymed a line. Tichborne, writing in early life and on the eve of a frightful death—

"The glass is full, and now my glass is run,  
And now I live, and now my life is done,"—

moves us to the tears that rise in us for the martyrs and soldiers of all time.

Robert Southwell, the Jesuit poet, in prison, and always in the shadow of danger, writing of life and death, Christ on the Cross, St. Peter, and Mary Magdalen, redeems a certain verbosity and over-elaboration by the passionate ardour which transmutes his conceits.

In that amazing burst of lyricism which filled England with a singing which has not been before or since, it is not odd how much there was of religious verse, since it was an age of religious, as well as of other, discovery. It seems, when we look at the conspicuous soldiers, statesmen, chancellors of the exchequer, agriculturists, courtiers, lawyers, solicitor-generals, musicians, adventurers, and clergymen (of all denominations) of this exciting and versatile time, as well as at the dramatists and prose-writers, that most of them wrote poetry at one time or another, and of those

who wrote poetry, nearly all wrote some religious verse, even if it was only (unfortunately) metrical versions of the psalms.

Raleigh, lying in prison, in the intervals of intrigues and appeals for his deliverance, could write (with an admirable simplicity, though without the splendid cadence of his prose)—

“Give me my scallop shell of quiet,  
My staff of faith to walk upon.”

Sidney shows what a mess a poet may make of metrical versions of beautiful prose by his rendering of the psalms, of which the less said the better. The dramatists, the lyricists, the court and love poets, the romancers, the Spenserians, the Petrarchians, turned aside from the sonnet of compliment and of affection, the pastoral idyll, the madrigal, roundelay, lullaby, the historical and adventure ballad, agricultural treatise, drama and prose novel, to write philosophical-religious meditations, hymns, carols, devotional lyrics, Biblical epics, and didactic aphorisms in verse.

On the whole, there is less passionately mystic poetry than in the late mediæval devotional verse; fewer appeals from the cross, and meditations on the passion; a more secular and less conventual element entered into this Christian poetry by men of the world, both Protestant and Catholic. It has more philosophy, more metaphysical speculation; perhaps on the whole more moral teaching, but this had never lacked; neither had that most tedious of elements, Biblical and hageological narrative in verse.

The experienced love sonneteers conferred pious prestige on their suspect foreign tool by using it in the service of religion, and published “sundrie sonets of Christian persons with other affectionate sonets of a feeling conscience,” and many other devout collections. Michael Drayton produced his immense and rather dull *Harmonie of the Church*; there were, in fact, few writers, either notable or unnoted, who did not confer on themselves a kind of amateur Divinity Degree by some poetic excursion into theology or devotion. It had become a fashion, and was too often conformed to by those better equipped for other activities. But, if one compares the output with what one imagines a corresponding literature would have been in any century later than the seventeenth—with, for instance, what it would be to-day, if military officers, explorers, secretaries of state, judges, professional dramatists, novelists, and even poets, all felt it up to them to put forth a volume, slim or stout, expressing their religious (if any) emotions and thoughts—one is amazed, as usual, by the Elizabethans and Jacobean. It was as if that strong fresh wind that

blew over Europe, carrying new beauty into men's minds, new freedom into human thought, adventurers into new lands, carried also into unlikely places this religious energy that found often a so vivid expression. When else has a masque writer, musician, and lyricist published *Divine and Moral Poems*, written alternately "There is a Garden in her Face" and

"Seek the Lord, and in his ways persevere,  
O faint not, but as eagles fly . . .?"

A mediæval Champion would have written the one, a modern Champion the other; the sixteenth and early seventeenth centuries produced this kind of all-round talent as naturally as they produced martyrs, dramatists, sonnets, and translations of the Bible.

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[20] H. J. C. Grierson, *Cross-Currents in English Seventeenth-Century Literature*.

[21] *Like Will to Like* (1568).

## CHAPTER IV

### ANGLICAN AND PURITAN

WITH the passing of the Renaissance period, and the settling into its constituent elements of the ferment of the Reformation, the age of the great dramatists and the great humanists, of the courtier and adventurer and tavern poets, passes too. The world seems to sober and narrow a little, to become less child-like, less windy, less bombastically or nobly patriotic, less adventurous and more domestic. Is it fanciful to see the first half of the seventeenth-century in England as preeminently the age of clergymen, the apogee of the pulpit and of the great divines? Our libraries are full of them; the brown calf volumes of sermons, of devotions, of theological controversy and religious meditations. The Anglican preacher, grave, learned, and ruffed, proclaims from his Sunday morning stage to entranced congregations the intricacies of divine providence, the mysteries of redemption, the follies of heresies, the meaning and application of texts. Theological controversies thunder to and fro, between Anglican and Jesuit, and Anglican and Puritan. And many of the preaching, controverting clergy are poets and authors as well.

Anglicanism, fortified by its Authorised Version and its Book of Common Prayer, was settling into its dignified and leisurely stride. Intelligent and versatile clergymen, of all denominations, were a fine and flourishing period growth; but on the whole the Anglicans produced, in England, the finest intellectual crop, as, indeed, they usually have (having had considerably more comfortable and encouraging conditions than their rivals) since that solid branch, the Church of England, was first put forth (or lopped off, according as you look at it) from the surprising tree of Christendom. A Church which, within the space of a century, produced Colet, Latimer, Hooker, Donne, Burton, the Fletcher brothers, George Herbert, Lancelot Andrewes, Henry Vaughan, Robert Herrick, and Thomas Traherne (to name only some out of a long list of clergymen authors) has reason to take to itself literary credit, and to feel that, whatever may be said for or against the somewhat peculiar position it has been held by some critics to occupy in Christendom, the experiment has, on the whole, pretty well suited the English genius. In its nature a more or less intelligent, perhaps a rather secular, compromise, it has always lacked some of the negations, the doctrinal acceptances, the austerities, and the excesses, of Roman Catholicism and dissenting Protestantism, which have always, indeed, been oddly in some respects similar one to another, alike in the puritanic fundamentalism of their other-worldly doctrine and in a certain excessiveness of sentiment in its expression.

The diverse growths of English literature have thriven best in the easier and more cultivated gardens of this not inelegant half-way house, which, even when planted amid the (to modern minds) dry and savage deserts of sixteenth- and seventeenth-century theology, succeeded in preserving a more agreeable and attractive air than the gardens set about Geneva and Rome. This one may grant without endorsing Isaac Walton's charmingly complacent partiality on the subject of "the active Romanists, the restless Nonconformists—of which there were many sorts—and the passive peaceable Protestants. The counsels of the first considered and resolved on in Rome; the second both in Scotland, in Geneva, and in divers selected, secret, dangerous conventicles, both there and within the bosom of our own nation; the third pleaded and defended their cause by established laws, both ecclesiastical and civil; and if they were active it was to prevent the other two from destroying what was by these known laws happily established to them and their posterity. I shall forbear to mention the many and dangerous plots of the Romanists, against the Church and State, because what is principally intended in this digression is an account of the opinions and activity of the Nonconformists, against whose judgment and practice Mr. Hooker became at last, but most unwillingly, to be engaged in a book-war, a war which he maintained not as against an enemy, but with the spirit of meekness and reserve. In which numbers of Nonconformists, though some might be sincere, well-meaning men, whose indescreeet zeal . . . ,” but enough of the Nonconformists and their innate restless pride, malice, and pitiful crooked wisdom; though no match for Mr. Hooker in a book-war, they were all too soon to get the better of him and his persuasion by politics and knavish tricks; and yet it was to make little difference to literature.

As to the learned and reverend Dr. Donne, that stupendous Dean of St. Paul's, he too was a "passive peaceable Protestant," and of the High Anglican variety which was then beginning to be, and has ever since been, one of the most typical types of the Establishment. Not that Dr. Donne himself could ever have been called typical of anything. "In him," as Izaak Walton says, "the English Church gained a second St. Austin." Like St. Austin, he was the sensualist turned religious, flinging himself into his new devotions with all the ardour with which he had pursued the old. He had "a kind of dormant religiosity, ready to break into flame as soon as the tumult of the senses and the enraged curiosity of life had been somewhat assuaged by experience."<sup>122]</sup> There is no touch in this harsh, often obscure metaphysical intellectualist of the religious gush which is the sensualist's snare. The dominance of his intelligence would, apart from his very masculine qualities of heart, have prevented that. The religious passion of the sensualist, that so common and so

frequently unpleasant phenomenon in nature, was in him welded by his intellectual force into a magnificent toughness, and worked by his subtle imagination into intricate elaborations of imagery and thought.

“The old divines . . . seem, with their imposed dogmas, their heavy and obsolete methods of exposition and controversy, almost as if they belonged to some remote geological era of human thought”<sup>[23]</sup>—and particularly the rather mediævally minded and patristic Dr. Donne seems so. That is Dr. Donne’s paradox; he was an Augustinian and Thomist scholastic, in some ways a theological throwback to before the Renaissance. In spite of his strictly Anglican and anti-Roman views, his dislike of transubstantiation, and his defence of that treasured possession of Anglicans, the Real Presence, his commendation of the worship of the Church of England as “more convenient and advantageous than that of any other kingdom,” and as “the middle way in which we should stand and walk,” he was by temperament and early training hardly suited to so moderate a middle way. An ardent and excessive man, violent in passion, in repentance, in the terror of mortality, with a streak of unfastidious nastiness in his dark and brooding imagination, tremendous in his love of God, as in his hatred of his own past corruption of soul and future corruption of body (“such strifes as these St. Austin had,” as Walton remarks), he yet looks at times out of his newly Copernican universe with an oddly modern eye. Or so we think; but after all, this talk of modern and ancient, when it comes to the human mind, is rather superficial nonsense. Donne, that stupendous mixture of imaginative poet, satirist, cynic, wit, passionate lover, metaphysical philosopher, tremendous preacher, devout penitent, ambitious careerist, scholastic mediæval theologian, and High Church Anglican, was himself, though he belonged to one age and set a fashion (it has sometimes been called a bad fashion) for another. He added to religious literature, as he had to secular poetry, something new and his own. Roughly speaking, one might say that he brought more brain and more intensity into secular poetry (and that is a perilous fashion for those less equipped to imitate) and more originality and analytic and introspective power into religious poetry and prose. There was, too, another element—“With Donne appears for the first time in poetry a passionate attachment to those Catholic elements in Anglicanism which, repressed and neglected, had never entirely disappeared.”<sup>[24]</sup> To this we might add that in some of the religious verse of his pre-clerical period there appears almost for the first time in poetry the spirit of earnest and enquiring scepticism:

“Doubt wisely; in strange way  
To stand enquiring right, is not to stray  
To sleep or run wrong is. On a huge hill

Cragged and steep, Truth stands, and he that will  
Reach her, about must and about must go,  
And what the hill's suddenness resists win so.  
Yet strive so that before age, death's twilight,  
Thy soul rest, for none can work in that night."

But this wise doubting no more appears after his ordination; it must have been slain by the combined forces of ardent personal conviction, patristic learning, firm Anglicanism, and those tremendous sermons. The doubts engendered by the new philosophy and a sceptical temper met, in that impact with faith, their Waterloo. No more was he to feel that—

"The new philosophy calls all in doubt;  
The element of fire is quite put out;  
The sun is lost, and the earth, and no man's wit  
Can well direct him where to look for it.  
And freely men confess that the world's spent,  
When in the planets and the firmament  
They seek so many new; they see that this  
Is crumbled out again to his atomies.  
'Tis all in pieces, all coherence gone,  
All just supply and all relation. . . ."

It is a long way from this to his best-known hymn—

"Wilt thou forgive that sin which I begun,  
Which was my sin, though it were done before?  
Wilt thou forgive that sin through which I run,  
And oft run still, though still I do deplore?  
When thou hast done, Thou has not done,  
For I have more."

Probably no other English religious writer has this Dean's peculiar blend of subtlety, intensity, melancholy, and introspective passion, harsh, obscure, yet often splendid style, elaborate imagery, recondite and intricate conceits, learning, and original thought, that exploded like a volcano among the rocky mountains of traditional theology, without, however, shaking their ancient foundations. In intensity and intellectualism Donne stands head and shoulders above contemporary religious poets—his fellows in the school of "theological wit"—the finely fervent and lyrical Southwell, the long, philosophical, Platonic, rather facile "Nosce Teipsum" of Sir John Davies, the verbose and fluent dullness of Davis of Hereford, tiresomely devouring itself with its own conceits, and those two Protestant clergymen and Spenserian allegorists from Cambridge, the brothers Fletcher. For sheer mildness, these epical-religious successors of Spenser and forerunners of Milton can scarcely

be surpassed. Scarce any poet, for instance, has done more poorly by hell, meaning so well by it, than Phineas Fletcher:

“Thy soul there restless, helpless, hopeless lies,  
The body frying roars, and roaring fries,  
There’s life that never lives, there’s death that never dies.”

The Fletcher brothers seem to be two of the best arguments against the adventuring of poets into the once so popular fields of scriptural epic. They write with the gusto of the early and late mediæval poets on the same themes, but still more wordily, and with much less excuse. Why anyone, having before him the prose of the English translations of the Bible, should feel moved to turn any of it into bad verse, is one of the literary and psychological puzzles that accrue round poets; another is the metrical versions of the psalms. However, it seems obvious that a passion for paraphrase is one of the primitive human lusts.

Phineas was overcome also by another fashionable temptation of the time, and produced an allegorical description, in twelve books, of the human body and mind, under the semblance of an island. It was all most unfortunate, and largely Spenser’s fault; though, if one comes to that, the fault might as well be laid at the door of Gregory and all the allegorical-scriptural patristic writers who gave so desolating a lead to religious literature. Catholic or Protestant, it has never made much difference either to the worst or the best Christian literary traditions, which persist through all changes; and indeed, the more one considers religious literature, the more one realises how comparatively trifling a cleavage this between Catholic and Protestant has always been. Tertullian, Augustine, Gregory, Aquinas, Calvin, Donne, Bellarmine, Milton, Newman—from a dip into their theological utterances it would be hard to denominate them, except in general to that wonderful Church which based itself on the surprising and exotic Eastern scriptures penned by an unerring Holy Ghost. Yet, if one examines more closely, differences do emerge in style and tone, between, say, the devotional poetry of Anglicans such as Herbert and Vaughan, and Roman Catholics such as Crashaw. Anglican critics, no doubt biased, like Walton about his “passive peaceable Protestants,” have been apt to find Herbert commendable in his greater reserve, dignity, and restraint, and to regret “that tone of familiarity which is so distressing in so many devotions used by Romanists and our own dissenters,”<sup>1251</sup> and which is shown, together with a still more distressing voluptuousness of imagery and thought, sometimes in Crashaw, as in his macabre dwelling on the wounds of Christ, on the tears of the Mater Dolorosa, and of the Magdalene (though there are bright passages in this lachrymolatry, such as this about

the stream of the Magdalene's tears flowing through heaven—

“Every morn from hence  
A brisk cherub something sips,”)

and, most distressing of all (if we have not indeed, long since steeled our minds against the manifold distresses occasioned by mediæval theology), on God's thirst for the blood of his son, as in the lines on the Circumcision:

“Thy wrath that wades here now ere long shall swim,  
The flood-gate shall be set wide ope for him.  
Then let him drink and drink and do his worst,  
To drown the wantonness of his wild thirst.”

Into this unfortunate orgy of sentimental materialism (of the kind that annoys us in many of the visions of the saints) he may likely enough have been impelled partly by an aggressively anti-Romanist father, and partly by the disgusting excesses of the Parliamentary Visitors at Cambridge, who wrecked Peterhouse (of which college he was a resident Fellow), destroying “two mighty great angels with wings, and divers other angels, and the Four Evangelists, and Peter with his keys over the Chapel door, and about an hundred cherubims and angels.” Turned out of his college for refusing to sign the Covenant, he joined that Church which was already his spiritual and temperamental home, and threw himself more and more into the voluptuous, ecstatic, sensuous, and erotic piety which has, in art, produced modern Italian Church statuary and Carlo Dolci, in religion the Cult of the Sacred Heart and the sentimentalities of which the Cult of the Little Flower of Lisieux is typical, in literature Marino's poetry, the hymns of Faber, and much beside.

This religious eroticism combined with a Goyaesque dwelling on the details of torture and anguish to give the Roman Catholic literature and art of the century a rather high and gamey flavour, anti-humanist, anti-intellectual, and sometimes anti-spiritual. “Sometimes,” as the Rev. C. J. Abbey remarks, in his forthright and sensible Anglican way, speaking of Crashaw's religious poems, “there is too much of the love-song in them.”<sup>[26]</sup> Pope, though such a different kind of a Roman Catholic, took no exception to this excess of amatoriness, even finding some stanzas in *The Weeper* “pleasing” as well as “soft.” He underestimated Crashaw, who has splendid passages (notably in the *Hymn to St. Theresa*); still, we can on the whole agree with his summary—“His thoughts in the main were pretty, but oftentimes too far-fetched.”<sup>[27]</sup> Let us leave it at that, and grant that his secular verse is much easier to enjoy than most of his religious. It is easier, also, to enjoy the old-fashioned scholastic allegories and *Emblems* of the Protestant and didactic Quarles. Indeed,

the *Emblems*, though mostly baddish poetry, are rather entertaining reading, if taken in small doses, and contain a few beautiful things. Less can be said for *A Feast for Wormes*, a rhymed narrative about Jonah, in which Jonah's conversation with the sailors during the storm, before they threw him to the whale, occupies several hundred lines. After some pages of "the quaint commonplaces of Francis Quarles" in his allegoric and scriptural moods, one is inclined to exclaim "Terence, this is stupid stuff," and to count oneself with Grosart's "slant-browed fools who would not have this read"; but, turning on, one comes on the short and familiar *Divine Rapture*—"E'en like two little bank-dividing brooks"—and, among the *Emblems*, the very beautiful "Why dost thou shade thy lovely face?" (stolen by Rochester for his well-known address to his mistress); and one forgives even *Hadassa, or the History of Queen Esther*, and the *Hieroglyphics of the Life of Men*.

Quarles's scriptural epics were fortunately almost the last in this expiring tradition. After it comes the sweet reasonableness, the Anglican restraint, "true refinement," ardent devotional love, and moral common-sense, of "that man of primitive piety, Mr. George Herbert," and of his disciple, Henry Vaughan. Herbert is, in a sense, the first of the Anglican poets; the first Anglican poet, that is, whose whole expression and art was coloured by and confined within the walls of his Church. It seems as if, with the settlement and triumph of the Anglican Church, after its stormy break with its parent, the poetry of personal devotion which had always run like a quiet stream through dry land, gathered fresh force, and brimmed its banks, in this great Anglican half-century. Herbert's devotion was the ardour of a man who has renounced dear worldly ambitions for religion's sake; for that he turned his back of his own device on the court career which from his Cambridge days had tempted him, is stated by Walton, in spite of the holocaust of lives which a careful Providence had arranged, in order to make Mr. Herbert's ordination more secure. "God, in whom there is an unseen chain of causes, did in a short time put an end to two of his most obliging and powerful friends . . . and not long after, King James died also, and with him all Mr. Herbert's court hopes."

However that may have been, Mr. Herbert resolved on Holy Orders, and both English religion and English poetry were well served thereby. He has, indeed, become so typical of the best type of meditative and devotional churchmanship, his poetry such a treasury of familiar and often-quoted beauties, that he has been to many people ever since his own time, including his friend Izaak Walton, outside impartial judgment. One can criticise some of his conceits and hold him at times over-elaborate, metaphysical, and introspective; but his method and matter—meditations on the Christian life of the soul as derived from God through the

ceremonies and sacraments of the Christian Church, and the spiritual apprehension of the divine through contemplation and thought—is, to those who are not temperamentally out of sympathy with such themes, perpetually agreeable. Following Donne, he is often a little elaborate, artificial, and tedious, as in *Prayer*:

“Prayer, the Church’s banquet, Angel’s age,  
God’s breath in man returning to its birth,  
The soul in paraphrase, heart in pilgrimage,  
The Christian plummet sounding heav’n and earth.

. . . . .

Softness, and peace, and joy, and love, and bliss,  
Exalted manna, gladness of the best,  
Heaven in ordinary, man well drest,  
The milky way, the bird of Paradise,

Church-bells beyond the stars heard, the soul’s blood,  
The land of spices, something understood.”

Simpler than these quiddities are the many prayers and odes of a more direct mystic devotion, the shrewd moral advices (as full of familiar quotations as Polonius’s not dissimilar maxims, or as Pope’s *Essay on Man*), of the seventy-seven stanzas of *The Church Porch*; and the agreeable English reasonableness, defying the schoolmen’s transubstantiation controversies, of *Holy Communion*, which breathes the very spirit of the Anglican catechism.

“First I am sure, whether Bread stay,  
Or whether Bread do fly away,  
Concerneth Bread, not me;  
But that both thou and all thy train  
Be there, to Thy truth and my gain  
Concerneth me and Thee.

. . . . .

Then of this also I am sure,  
That Thou didst all these pains endure  
T’abolish Sin, not Wheat;  
Creatures are good and have their place,  
Sin only, which did all deface,  
Thou drivest from his seat.

I could believe an Impanation  
At the rate of an Incarnation,  
If Thou hadst died for Bread. . . .  
Into my soul this cannot pass;  
Flesh, though exalted, keeps his grass,  
And cannot turn to soul.  
Bodies and minds are different spheres,

Nor can they change their bounds and meres,  
But keep a constant Pole. . . .”

Though such a confident assertion as this last would shock later metaphysical scientists, the whole argument is the most rational and sensible piece of unscholastic devotion, and shows Herbert once more as the most Anglican clergyman poet in the world. Certainly an authentic poet, though frequently the clergyman is more to the fore, as when he wrote—

“On Sunday heaven’s gate stands ope;  
Blessings are plentiful and rife,  
More plentiful than hope,”

and other all too prosy or strained meditations, singing on earth, as Izaak Walton, perhaps rather pessimistically, comments, “such hymns and anthems as the angels and he and Mr. Farrer now sing in heaven.”

Vaughan carried on this new Anglican tradition. Indeed, he modelled his religious poetry too closely on that of “that blessed man, Mr. George Herbert,” which gave it probably a more ecclesiastical note than was natural to his own temper. He is sometimes so close to Herbert as to be second-hand, and is best when more himself, as in his isolated bursts of lyric poetry—

“My soul there is a country  
Far beyond the stars,”—

and his Wordsworthian meditations on nature and childhood. Less ecclesiastically Anglican than Herbert, he is more English, for he carries on to some degree the English poetic tradition of seeking images and inspiration in fields, woods, flowers, and streams:

“It was high spring and all the way  
Primrosed and hung with shade.”

“Fresh fields and woods! the Earth’s fair face!  
God’s footstool! and man’s dwelling-place! . . .”

“If Eden be on earth at all  
'Tis that which we the country call. . . .”

Sometimes, as in *The Water Fall*, Wordsworth’s inspiration is obvious; and *The Retreat*, as has often been pointed out, must be responsible for the *Intimations of Immortality*. Like Wordsworth and other pre-Freudian poets (excepting those who were rigidly mediæval and Calvinistic), Vaughan was a believer in original virtue, in the innocent heavenly-mindedness of childhood, from which life is a slope down.

“Happy those early days when I  
Shined in my Angel-infancy! . . .  
When yet I had not walked above  
A mile or two from my first Love,  
And looking back at that short space—  
Could see a glimpse of his bright face. . . .”

Wordsworth’s debt is obvious. In a later poet—Francis Thompson—we surely also hear echoes of Vaughan’s—

“Angels lay leaguer there; each bush and cell  
Each oak and highway knew them;  
Walk but the fields, or sit down by some well,  
And he was sure to view them.”

In the line of poet-mystics, Vaughan takes a characteristic place, hampered as he allowed himself too often to be by his master and model. He takes his place also in the line of religious writers who have turned their backs with unnecessary severity on the profane writings of their unsanctified past, though, as he says (in his preface to *Silex Scintillans*), his writings were “as innocuous as most of that vein used to be; besides, they are interlined with many virtues and some pious mixtures.” Still, “I do here most humbly and earnestly beg that none would read them.” Of the licentious writings, both in verse and prose, of others—one infers that nearly all contemporary secular writers came under the ban—he speaks with that horror which had always been one of the distinguishing marks of strong religion, from Tertullian onwards. Anglicanism, with its compromising comprehensiveness, had come nearer than either the old Roman or the new Protestant puritanism, to reconciling the religious and the profane; it was closer, even in the seventeenth-century, to the humanity of the Renaissance than either of them; it had more philosophy, more culture, and more tolerance, though this last was so fugitive and rare a virtue that no Church could claim it, and certainly not the persecuting Church of Laud and Charles I; it only showed its head here and there in individuals, such as Hooker.

But clerical Anglicanism retained, for long, the old puritanic dualism, the suspicion of worldly letters—anyhow contemporary worldly letters—as corrupt and of the devil. This has, of course, always been a view possible to take of a good deal of contemporary literature, without being a puritan. The objector is not always, nor was then, of that cantankerous and abusive line which, from Elizabethan days on, sounded Blasts of Retreat from plays and theatres, arming itself with the translated thunders of early Christian Bishops and all the fury of sixteenth-century Calvinistic pamphleteers. This school of conscientious objectors to the stage culminated in the

almost insane antipathies and indiscriminating disapprovals of Prynne; to read *Histrion mastix* is to feel, almost, that Prynne deserved the loss of his ears, which had heard nothing but evil in music and in Shakespeare's plays. The Prynne mentality can be dismissed, in all ages, as a strange and morbid growth. But it is difficult not to be impatient with the less puritan, but still puritan, Anglican Church, which might have taken contemporary secular drama and poetry into its sympathetic comprehension, to the enrichment of both itself and literature, and did instead say, in effect, "Get thee behind me, Satan." The Church had partly itself to thank for the vulgarity of much seventeenth-century drama and verse.

The Reverend Robert Herrick must be nearly the only seventeenth-century clergyman who continued to write love-poems and light odes after his ordination, and lightened the cares of his incumbency by maying-songs and uncivil lampoons upon the more irritating members of his flock. This, together with his Horatianism, his delight in pagan country festivities, his poetic sporting with his Julias, Corinnas, and Celas (for or against whose actual existence in the parish we have no evidence, except their surprisingly superior attractions to the other members of his flock), his joy in daffodils, meadows, and primroses, may-poles, hock-carts, wassails, morrisings, mummings, and wakes, has always made critics stress the pagan side of this very mixed vicar, and rather overlook the strongly religious strain that produced *Noble Numbers*, with its variety of religious experience, its devoutness, its fear of hell, its gratitude for the blessings of life, its burst of presumably well-earned penitence. A disciple of Jonson in art, his secular verse was unformalised by Jonson's moral purpose. One of the most interesting spectacles of the century is this pagan-Christian parson in his Devonshire village, often bored, discontented, and acrimonious, yet delighting in the seasonal festivities of the country year, alternating rude and Martialesque epigrams about his neighbours and his congregation, with some of the loveliest country odes in the English language, and with thanks to his Lord, who—

"Mak'st my teeming hen to lay  
Her egg each day,  
Besides my healthful ewes to rear  
Me twins each year,  
The while the conduits of my kine  
Run cream, for wine."

He had his morbid hours. But, pagan in sympathies, and perhaps sensual, as he was, he fortified himself with firm beliefs:

"I do believe the good and I

Shall live with him eternally;  
I do believe I shall inherit  
Heaven by Christ's mercies, not my merit."

Though he wrote (among other and more mundane topics which he enumerates in his lines on his literary activities)—

"Of Hell, I sing and ever shall  
Of heaven, and hope to have it after all,"—

his contemplation of his spiritual future was, in the main, optimistic. His mystic sense, his joy in unseen worlds, magic and myth, is mainly applied to the elfish fairy-lands of the countryside. Here he was unlike the Reverend Thomas Traherne, who thought that "You never enjoy the world aright . . . till you can sing and rejoice and delight in God as misers do in gold, and kings in sceptres, you never enjoy the world."

Yet Traherne's own enjoyment of the world and its—

"New burnisht joys  
Which finest gold and pearl excel,"

makes his *Poems of Felicity* the most engaging and lovely mixture of mystical pleasures and naïve surprise at having been so fortunate as to be born into this world of "strange treasures."

"But that they mine should be  
That strangest is of all; yet brought to pass."

Traherne, in his imaginative, wondering, child-like speculations and meditations in verse, so free from moralising, with his happy possession of the earth through the Infant's Eye, is a Wordsworthian mystic without Wordsworth's solemnity, a looker back to childhood, like Vaughan, without Vaughan's didacticism about it. Traherne's is the only real poetic picture of childhood in the century. His recurrent tune is the Franciscan freedom from the cares of possessions and needs, the return to nature, infancy, and felicity; *nihil habientes, omnia possidentes*. But the theme, in his hands, has a gay imaginative loveliness which lacks in the ascetic saint. His prose meditations are, in their way, as good, and even more delicately cadenced.

In this great century of sermons, of divines, of the new Anglicanism, of the clerical poets and prose-writers, one finds in nearly all writers, either serious or light, religious or profane, the accepted orthodoxies. That hugely learned and attractively cantankerous divine, Robert Burton, maintained his staunch Protestant Anglicanism, undrowned by the weighty cascades of his erudition, alluding to Papists, Schismatics, and Atheists with impartial disapproval. No, not impartial, for his diatribes against Papists, Friars, Capuchins, and Pharisaical Jesuits recall the bitterest

denunciations of the mediævalists. "Had he examined a Jesuit's life . . . he should have seen an hypocrite profess poverty, and yet possess more goodes and lands than many princes, to have infinite treasures and revenues; teach others to fast and play the gluttons themselves . . . vow virginity, talk of holiness, and yet . . ." and so on, in the accents of Roger Bacon, Langland, Gower, and the satirists. Only what in these had been ethical and religious disapproval and social discontent, and sometimes inter-clerical jealousy and dislike, was, in this rather churlish seventeenth-century Protestant, wholesale detestation of anything that came out of modern Rome. "Such a company of human traditions, Purgatory, the Limbo of the Fathers, of Infants, and all the subterranean Geography, Mass, adoration of Saints, alms, fastings, bulls, indulgences, Orders, Friars, Images . . . that rabble of Romish deities . . ."—when Burton gets going in this vein, he continues for several pages and gets rather tiresome. Yet it is all part of his large moral indignation at the evil, folly, and injustice of the world. As a social and ethical reforming treatise, his introductory *Democritus to the Reader* has seldom, for invective, moral indignation, and grasp been bettered. Indeed, if he could have infused into the Churches some of his condemnation of war ("They put," he complains, "a note of divinity upon the most cruel and pernicious plague of human kind"), of unjust lawyers and laws, social oppressions ("Many poor men . . . are compelled to beg or steal, and then hanged for theft; than which what can be more ignominious?"), dishonest commerce, hypocritical zealots, religious persecution, and tyrannies and ambitions of governors and kings, there might have been no Civil War in England. But, though Burton was widely read for diversion, and no doubt for hints on the cure of melancholy, it is improbable that his social ethic was infectious. It lacked the hypnotic attractions of style which made Sir Thomas Browne's moral and Christian counsels, a few years later, so persuasive and so readable.

This charming doctor, distinguished among writers of the day by *not* being a clergyman, produced, in the most exquisite and splendid prose of the century, the best and most agreeable confession of the Anglican religion ever, before or since, published. He was one of a long line of staunch English churchmen who have refused the name of Protestant and claimed to be as good Catholics as the Romans: indeed, better.

"I am," he says, in words too familiar to be quoted, but, like all his words, too apt and charming not to be quoted, "of that reformed new-cast religion, wherein I dislike nothing but the name; of the same belief our Saviour taught, the apostles disseminated, the fathers authorised, and the martyrs confirmed; but, by the sinister ends of princes, the ambitions and avarice of prelates, and the fatal corruption of

times, so decayed, impaired, and fallen from its native beauty, that it required the careful and charitable hand of these times to restore it to its primitive integrity.” He confesses himself “naturally inclined to what misguided zeal terms *superstition* . . . at my devotion I love to use the civility of my knee, my hat, and hand. . . . I could never hear the *Ave Marie* bell without an elevation, or think it sufficient warrant, because they erred in one circumstance, for me to err in all—that is, in silence and dumb contempt. Whilst, therefore, they directed their devotions to her, I offered mine to God, and rectified the errors of their prayers by rightly ordering mine own. . . . There is no Church whose every part so squares into my conscience . . . as this whereof I hold my belief, the Church of England, to whose faith I am a sworn subject. . . . It is an unjust scandal of our adversaries, and a gross error in ourselves to compute the nativity of our religion from Henry the Eighth. . . . It is as uncharitable a point in us to fall upon these popular scurrilities and opprobrious scoffs of the Bishop of Rome, to whom, as a temporal prince, we owe the duty of good language.” (Burton would here have disagreed.) “I confess there is cause of passion between us; by his sentence I stand excommunicated; *heretick* is the best language he affords me; yet can no ear ever witness I ever returned to him the name of *Antichrist*, *Man of Sin*, or *Whore of Babylon*. It is the method of charity to suffer without reaction; these usual satires and invectives of the pulpit may perchance produce a good effect on the vulgar . . . yet do they in no wise confirm the faith of wiser believers, who know that a good cause needs not to be patroned by a passion.”

There follow his gentle, half-ironic claims to a difficult orthodoxy against reason, in which he categorically disavows various heresies which it might seem natural to hold.

“In divinity I love to keep the road, and, though not in an implicit, yet an humble faith, follow the great wheel of the Church, by which I move. By this means I leave no gap for heresies, schisms, or errors. . . . I must confess my greener studies have been polluted by two or three . . . but old and obsolete, such as could never have been revived but by such extravagant and irregular heads as mine. . . .”

But these, which he recounts, he suffered not to grow into heresies. In a bland passage, he boasts of his present orthodoxy: “I love to lose myself in a mystery. . . . ’Tis my solitary recreation to pose my apprehension with those involved enigmas and riddles of the Trinity, with Incarnation and Resurrection. I can answer all the objections of Satan and my rebellious reason with that odd resolution I learned of Tertullian, *Certum est quia impossibile est*. . . .” For instance: “I believe there was already a tree whose fruit our unhappy parents tasted, though, in the same chapter, when God forbids it, ’tis positively said, the plants of the field were not yet grown.”

And again, "That Eve was edified out of the rib of Adam I believe; yet raise no question who shall rise with that rib at the resurrection." As to Noah's Ark, that preserved all kinds of creatures, with a competency of food, in one ark, and within the extent of three hundred cubits, this "to a reason that rightly examines it, will appear very feasible." (One may imagine the pleasure that the tolerant, cultivated, sceptically orthodox men and women of the time found in this.)

I have quoted at some length, because these latter passages are a good example of the delicate, amused, philosophically ironic mind of the most charming writer of his time, and the former are an admirably typical Anglican apology.

Dr. Browne picks his way among mysteries, superstitions, vulgar errors, scientific theories, heresies, and ethics, with the graceful tread of learning, humour, and good taste. "Who can speak of eternity without a solecism?" The answer is that he can, and a few others. If Henry Vaughan had remembered that he himself could not always do so, he would, after his splendid opening—

"I saw eternity the other night  
Like a great ring of pure and endless light,"—

have stopped, and spared us the bathos of what he further saw.

Sir Thomas is an odd mixture of the wild beliefs of his age, in astrology, witches, demoniacal possession, and so on (and though as to all these things we can never take him at his face value, for his discreet irony lies sometimes very deeply hid in the suave turn of a phrase, he is by no means playing at witch-belief), and of a sane and advanced modernism as regards, for instance, the nature of dreams, and hell. "Men speak too popularly who place it in those flaming mountains, which to grosser apprehensions represent hell. The heart of man is the place the devils dwell in; I feel sometimes a hell within myself; Lucifer keeps his court in my breast; Legion is revived in me."

This is a long way ahead of any current infernography, whether Anglican, Puritan, or Roman. There is, so far as I know, nothing quite like it until William Law, a century later, wrote: "Let it be supposed that your ingenious reason should suggest to you that there are no devils or hell . . . do but turn to that which is sensible and self-evident in you, and then you must know, in the same certainty as you know yourself to be alive, that there is wrath, self-torment, envy, malice, evil-will, pride, cruelty, revenge, etc. Now say, if you please, that there are no other devils but these, that men have no other devils to resist, and then you will have said truth enough, have owned devils enough, and enough confessed that you are in the midst of them. . . ."

But this is to jump on beyond Dr. Browne, who believed in all kinds of devils, beyond the learned Burton, with his erudite investigations into demons and their habits, beyond the entertaining and humane Prebendary Fuller, for all his witty sanity, beyond even the spiritual insight of Jeremy Taylor, and the Little Gidding school of mystical devotion, so typical of the best Anglican thought. It was an age of demonology, and scarcely the most enlightened religious (or irreligious) could outstep it, or did. You will not find this freedom even in Jeremy Taylor, of whom the Reverend George Rust declared in his funeral sermon, "He had the good humour of a gentleman, the eloquence of an orator, the fancy of a poet, the acuteness of a schoolman, the profoundness of a philosopher, the wisdom of a chancellor, the reason of an angel" (Rust knew these to reason well) "and the piety of a saint. He had devotion enough for a cloister, learning enough for a university, and wit enough for a college of virtuosi."

Of all the rich seventeenth-century crop of English clergymen (*clerus Anglicanus stupor mundi*, as we know), Jeremy Taylor was the most eloquent and the most distinguished, and probably the most influential in literature. Like Bishop Andrewes, and all the school of Laud (including that conformity-enforcing, heretic-baiting, cruel, narrow, and petty primate himself) he had grasped the position of the Anglican Church as steering a careful course between Scylla and Charybdis, and was concerned to maintain her claims to primitive Catholicity. But, though he could write controversy on the Real Presence as well as anybody, he was not a controversialist, or really a theologian. His was that kind of moral sanity and spiritual breadth which endears Englishmen to one another when they possess it, for they think it a peculiarly national gift; it is this, besides his devotion and his beautiful prose, which has lifted him above the heads of the other Anglican devotional writers.

Anglicanism was fighting its battle well. In the hands of Taylor, Hooker, Andrewes, Little Gidding, Sir Thomas Browne, Fuller, and the Cambridge Platonists, it was carried to a point from which it might have developed into a wider, more rational, more intellectual, tolerant, humane, and spiritual body, than it yet has. But against it beat the ever-swelling and distasteful tide of religious and political Puritanism, causing it to harden its orthodoxies and defences; on the other side Rome still loomed, a hated shadow, stiffening the Anglican Protestant; and ahead a more sinister shadow showed itself—the shadow of Reason, of rational and scientific enquiry into the bases of life, philosophy, and religion. A Renaissance Church should have welcomed and embraced all knowledge, and might have, if it had taken a slightly different path; if, for instance, it had more generously welcomed the Platonist philosophy which had since the Renaissance been struggling to express itself both

within the Church and without, and which is the essence of Lord Brooke's *Nature of Truth*, Herbert of Cherbury's deistical philosophic writings, and, later, those of the Cambridge Platonists. Philosophic enquiries and speculative works had been published in English at intervals since the middle of the sixteenth-century; a dangerous enterprise, when even for a book in the vernacular on logic the Inquisition could and did put a man in gaol.

Even stifled as it was, philosophy and a freer mode of speculation broke from time to time into the fortress of theology. The Anglican writers have their moments when one feels that the Church may break its walls and become a humane, intellectual, and philosophic, as well as a learned and devout, Christian body. But owing to this and that, and perhaps most to the unripeness as yet of most human beings for any large liberties of thought—after all, the Church of England had a thousand years of rigid dogmatic theology behind it—it never, in the seventeenth century, did so; the Renaissance promise receded; the Church hardened and narrowed, as did Puritanism, and both were nearly as much alarmed at Reason and at Hobbes as was their sister of Rome.

Meanwhile, Puritanism at last, after many centuries, burst its dykes, and English religion foundered in that queer, uninviting sea, which nevertheless threw up such strange rare creatures as Bunyan and Baxter.

Presbyterian doctrine was as ancient as Augustine and Tertullian, and based on the same interpretations of the Bible. Like the Catholic Church, Presbyterians believed in the corruption of man, justification and redemption through Christ, salvation by grace, a Jewish heaven, and a yawning hell. Presbyterian disputations are very like those of the Catholic schoolmen, of whom Burton complained that they asked "a rabble of questions about hell-fire; whether it be a greater sin to kill a man, or to clout shoes upon a Sunday." The new puritan sermons, too, are much like the old Catholic puritan homilies, full of the anger of God and the torments of the damned. These two great branches of the tree differed in little but their superficial and ceremonial aspects. Both loved scriptural paraphrase, allegory, and homily; both distrusted pastimes and gaieties, as savouring of paganism, and spread themselves in denunciations and ecclesiastical condemnings.

But, with the triumph of Puritanism in the seventeenth-century, the old puritan elements came to their own; the discipline they found themselves at last able to enforce was as rigid, as terrifyingly anti-humanist, as the ascetic tyrannies of St. Dunstan. There is, indeed, something very monkish about these Puritans who so detested monks. "The Puritanism of the Reformation was simply the strictest and most logical attempt yet made to realise certain thoroughly mediæval ideals; its

theory had long been the theory of the Religious, but none had yet dared to enforce it wholesale.” Seventeenth-century Puritanism “for the first time found itself strong enough to force time-honoured ideas for a brief moment upon an unwilling nation.”<sup>128]</sup>

Baxter, indeed, and a few other Puritan theologians, were of a natural humanity that transcended their creed; but even in Baxter there sounds the wild and alarming note of puritan anti-worldliness, reminding one of Savonarola, of the early Dominicans, or of St. Bernard’s “We who have reputed as filth all that shines bright or sounds sweet to the ear.” The same stern and time-honoured ideas—conviction of sin, seeking after God, abnegation of the world, terror of hell, and the rest of the ancient other-worldly equipment of man’s soul—are shown here and there in poets and prose-writers of all the Churches throughout the century. How, and to what extent, the particular and passing phase of Protestant puritanism that triumphed in the middle of the century had its reflection, or its reaction, in literature—real literature, that is, as apart from tracts, treatises, and controversy—is an interesting study.

The poets of the seventeenth-century, however secular, however courtly, however much given over to the popular themes of sexual admiration, affection, and reproach (it is really remarkable how unyielding, on the whole, the ladies of the period seem to have been), nearly all had a cheerful and engaging Christian piety, to which they occasionally gave a look in, though they are for the most part void of self-questionings, self-tormentings, speculations, and philosophic meditation. Sometimes they yielded to that peculiar temptation which beset our ancestors to turn the Bible into rhymed couplets or blank verse; more often they threw out a pious or moral reflection in passing, or a carol, or a religious ode, even though “Gather ye rosebuds while ye may” was the general drift of their secular philosophy, and

“In a lover’s breast doth dwell  
Very heaven or very hell,”

their normal eschatology. This particular remark, however, was made by the pious Quarles, during the period in which he was writing also *Divine Emblems*. The religious poets had their earthly, the amorous poets their heavenly, moments. Carew turned from petitioning his lady for “more love or more disdain,” from raptures, rosy cheeks, coral lips, and star-like eyes, to denunciations of pleasure and pious remorse for his past licence. Wither, in the *Great Assizes holden in Parnassus*, makes him say—

“In wisdom’s nonage and unriper years,  
Some lines slipped from my pen, which, since, with tears,

I have expunged,”—

and Clarendon records that “he died in the greatest remorse for that licence, and with the greatest manifestation of Christianity that his best friends could desire.” Like Herrick’s

“For these my unbaptised rhimes  
Writ in my wild unhallowed times,”—

such penitence was common form. There were few writers of love-poetry who did not express it, at one time or another. The old mediæval distrust of profane literature lingered oddly on into the post-Renaissance world, and not only among Puritans.

“For every sentence, clause and word  
That’s not inlaid with thee, my lord,  
Forgive me God, and blot each line  
Out of my book, that is not thine. . . .”

Thus Herrick; and thus, in effect, many of his fellow poets, as much in the courtly Caroline age of light love-songs as in any other. Their usually tasteless repentance seeks confusedly to express what the calm and high-minded Drummond of Hawthornden, who, being a religious poet, did not need to repent of so much of his output, worded better:

“Love, which is here a care  
That wit and will doth mar,  
Uncertain truce and a most certain war,  
A shrill tempestuous wind,  
Which doth disturb the mind,  
And like wild waves all our designs commove;  
Among those powers above  
Which see their Maker’s face,  
It a contentment is, a quiet peace.”

The court poets, as well as the religious, felt, as the Tudor court poets had felt, that heavenly love was finer than earthly, and did, anyhow, lip-service to it, particularly when they saw age and death in the offing, but often before. Even the easy Suckling had his Trinitarian moments, and found time to controvert the Socinian heresy between love-poems and masques. Not only that religious and Puritan chronomastix, Wither (naturally a churchman, but driven into anti-episcopalianism by resentment against Church and State, and, one gathers, by disappointment at not having his *Hymns and Songs of the Church* bound up and sold with the Psalms)—not only Wither, and not only Habington, that grave Roman Catholic and “spoilt Jesuit,” and Beaumont and More, the serious Cambridge Platonists (whose poetry

bears eternal witness that, to hatch poetry, Platonism is not enough, even in Cambridge, the nest of poets), but Lovelace, Denham, Montrose, Cleveland, Davenant, and almost every versifying Cavalier and Roundhead.

Waller turned late to divine poems. A man of tact, having addressed himself in complimentary verse to each alternating civil power—Charles I, Cromwell, and Charles II—in succession, at the age of eighty or so he paid his addresses to God, with the wish (unuttered in his previous complimentary addresses):

“O that my youth had thus employed my pen!  
Or that I now could write as well as then!”

Cowley had far more religion; alas, it betrayed him into Biblical epic, and, as Dr. Johnson remarked, “This useless talk of allegorical beings is very wearisome.” To Cowley the writing of what he called “sacred verse” was a matter of principle. Poetry had, he says in his preface, been stolen and usurped by the devil, and it was “time to recover it out of the tyrant’s hands and to restore it to the Kingdom of God, who is the Father of it.” Still, he adds, “If any man design to compose a sacred poem by only turning a story of the Scripture, like Mr. Quarles, or some other godly matter, like Mr. Heywood of Angels, into rhyme, he is so far from elevating of Poesy, that he only abuses Divinity.” He did not take this warning, meant for Mr. Quarles and Mr. Heywood, to himself, and so produced his *Sacred Poem of the Troubles of David* in four books. “He that can write a profane poem well, may write a Divine one better,” he observes. True; but he may, on the other hand, write it worse.

Marvell brings to both kinds his extraordinary and unique charm; though in the *Coronet*, he is a little defeated by his subject. There is no prettier song of religion anywhere than the song of the pilgrims among the Bermudas. Indeed, had Marvell written a Biblical epic, a volume of Emblems, or an allegorical play, it would probably please, such was the peculiar quality of his fancy and turn of his verse.

Milton, almost alone in his time, shows no sign of the dualistic conflict between religious and profane. No doubt his better judgment approved and endorsed all he wrote. He asks no forgiveness for writing of “quips and cranks and wanton wiles”; indeed, he asks no forgiveness for anything. Soul and body are to him intertwined, not conflicting and opposed. He is far more modernist in his religious views than most of his contemporaries. In his treatise, *De Doctrina Christiana*, he shows himself unorthodox and even heretical, verging on Socinianism. He maintains free will against the Calvinists, Sunday sports against the Sabbatarians, divorce and polygamy against all Christians, religious toleration against most. Never before had a poet with

such a strange theological equipment tackled the great epic of Christendom which, from Avitus onwards, so many Christian poets had, in one fashion or another, written. The magnificence and freshness which Milton brought to the ancient theme, the poetry, the reasoned argument, the bursts of eloquence, the interest of characters and situations, are his own. But the theme itself, and the theology on which it rests, are twelve hundred years old; it is in no sense a poem arising out of seventeenth-century Puritanism. Newman was right to regard Milton as an enemy to the Catholic faith; but *Paradise Lost* and *Paradise Regained* are doctrinally Catholic poems. When Milton wrote—

“O goodness infinite, goodness immense,  
That all this good of evil shall produce,  
And evil turn to good . . .  
. . . full of doubt I stand  
Whether I should repent me now of sin,  
By me done and occasioned, or rejoice  
Much more, at what more good thereof shall spring”—

he was only expanding the liturgical “O felix culpa!” His central doctrines, even though he gave his own turn to the theology involved (a turn not belonging to any religious body, for, as Dr. Johnson points out with disapproval, he associated himself with none), were accepted by all Christians, then, and for long after. “It is justly remarked by Addison,” says Johnson, “that this poem has, by the nature of its subject, the advantage above all others that it is universally and perpetually interesting. All mankind will, through all ages, bear the same relation to Adam and to Eve. . . . In the description of heaven and hell we are surely interested, as we are all to reside hereafter in the regions of horror or bliss. . . . But these truths are too important to be new; they have been taught in our infancy. . . . Being therefore not new, they raise no unaccustomed emotion in the mind. . . . Of the ideas suggested by these awful scenes, from some we recede with reverence, except when stated hours require their association, and from others we shrink with horror, or admit them only as salutary afflictions. . . . The good and evil of eternity are too ponderous for the wings of wit. . . .”

Thus the voice of Christian orthodoxy a century later. This vast imaginative mythology of super-life-size beings, human, angelic, and divine, was to seventeenth- and eighteenth-century readers not a mythology but an awful truth, an ancient drama rewritten and freshly presented, in a still Ptolemaic universe (for Milton, a good producer, kept this antiquated *mise en scène* as more suitable). Johnson, who, as we know, disliked Milton a good deal, who found *Lycidas* easy, vulgar, and

therefore disgusting, and *Paradise Lost* full of faults of impropriety and incongruity and wanting in human interest, criticises it admiringly yet uneasily; he is uncomfortable before this *De Originali Peccato*, and cannot get on to terms with it. The main theology is his, but the treatment, in spite of the sublimity he admits, is not all he can approve.

As to theology, as it emerges in any literature of the time, it is still almost mediævally unchanged. Quarrels had been about externalities, discipline, and ceremonial, rather than about doctrine. John Bunyan believed practically what the Italian revivalists of the thirteenth century, recorded by Salimbene, had believed; theirs and his were the same conviction of sin, terror of hell, personal assurance of salvation through Christ. They were far nearer one another than Bunyan was near Milton, who showed no signs (if he ever felt them) of conviction of sin, or terror of hell, though his personal assurance very likely, being extensive, included salvation.

The excited tinker, with his rustic joy in the cuckoo's song and in country life, his terror of God's wrath, his horror at his own sin, moves about the sophisticated world of the Restoration "mob of gentlemen who wrote with ease," like a romantic, frightened, imaginative child, run by mistake out of the Middle Ages. He was one of the last who wrote the mediæval allegorical Morality, and has the distinction of having written the liveliest of that tribe. "In the works of many celebrated authors, men are mere personifications. The mind of Bunyan was so imaginative that personifications, when he dealt with them, became men."<sup>29</sup> He could call his characters Faithful, Hopeful, and Mr. Badman, and get away with it; though one must own that Election-Doubter is, as a human being, a trifle weak. And in his great romantic book (his others are, by comparison, out of sight) he wrote an imaginative odyssey which children have loved ever since, in spite of its burden, so heavily strapped on to its protagonist's back, of a theology now long since rolled away down the slope into the limbo where the dead theologies lie like the bones of extinct mammoths.

To Bunyan's contemporaries, this mammoth still stalked the earth. Except to the most advanced and dangerous rationalists, there was nothing to disagree within Bunyan's doctrines. Even the "mob of gentlemen," now assembled again, reinforced, from their scattered exile or obscurity of the Commonwealth years, and writing their love-lyrics with more gusto (but less talent) than ever, did lip-service to the same God as Bunyan. The most worldly and licentious of them (that I believe is the time-honoured adjective for these gentlemen) broke, like their pre-Commonwealth predecessors in the same art, ever and anon into rather perfunctory ejaculations of penitence, pleadings that their bawdy works might be forgotten and expunged. The

death-bed of Rochester, as recorded by the good Bishop Burnet, is as edifying as Aubrey Beardsley's two centuries later, and recalls his "let all my bawdy drawings be destroyed," though we have no record of Rochester's having repented his worst literary offence—his adaptation of Quarles's most beautiful devotional poem to his own amorous purposes without acknowledgment.

But even while in full career, and without waiting for death (which was of course, always, as now, round the corner, and then appeared trapped in all the horrific fustian of hell), these poets wrote, at times, verses full of heartfelt religious sentiment and remorse. I have often thought that if our bawdier writers of to-day were to indulge from time to time, by way of a change, in these articulations, contemporary literature would be a more rich, various, and entertaining spectacle. But it cannot be; the premises on which such repudiations rested are, anyhow for the majority, broken and discarded, and those who still hold them deem them too good, or not good enough, for public exhibition. And, indeed, it was scarcely an edifying spectacle, in its admission of the complete absence of adherence to literary principles. These penitents, and those before and since their day, may have been right or wrong in their belief that they sinned against God in writing of passion with more frankness than was customary (for that is what it as a rule amounted to), but it is difficult to be patient with writers who not only sin against their own canons with a hasty pen, but calmly see the manuscript through the press and into a volume, and reap profit from the sales, perhaps of several editions, and then bewail their turpitude. The modern view, that the degree of outspokenness permitted is merely a question of good manners and taste, could hardly be expected in the ages of coarser manners and greater faith.

Even the dignified Dryden, visited by one of these fits of poetic remorse, writes:

"O gracious God! How far have we  
Profaned Thy heavenly gift of poesy!  
Made prostitute and profligate the Muse,  
Debased to each obscene and impious use,  
Whose harmony was first ordained above  
For tongues of angels and for hymns of love!  
O wretched we! Why were we hurried down  
This lubrique and adulterate age  
(Nay, added fat pollutions of our own),  
To increase the streaming ordures of the stage?"

Jeremy Collier could scarcely say worse.

As to the ordinary non-literary man of the world, such as Pepys, his orthodox piety does not seem to have been at all disturbed by, or felt incongruous with, the

more deplorable of his habits. Pepys was, as we know, shocked at improper plays, a keeper of the Lord's Day, and a great sermonophile; he would even listen to a friar with a cord about his middle preaching in Portuguese, who was "full of action, but very decent and good, I thought." Not that Mr. Pepys had any Papist leanings; he did not care for the Sunday morning when he went "unto St. Margaret's Church, where I heard a young man play the fool upon the doctrine of Purgatory." He was a sound Church of England libertine, like most of the poets.

There is, among the on the whole rather mediocre and insipid tinkling of Restoration verse, a surprisingly large quantity of really good religious poetry. At the meeting of the centuries, a fine surge of hymns is heard: not only Baxter and Ken, John Austin, Joseph Mason, Shepherd, Pomfret, Foxe, Penn, and Isaac Watts wrote in this sort, but Cowley and Dryden, and, later, Addison and Pope, tried their hands. It was as if the romantic, mystical, and ecstatic elements that had once found a place in drama, poetry, and prose literature, fled, now that these were all nearer the ground, to a special department labelled "religion," there to wave the other-worldly or heroic banner that literature always demands as one of its ensigns.

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[22] E. Gosse, *Life and Letters of Donne*.

[23] L. Pearsall Smith, Introduction to *Selections from Donne's Sermons*.

[24] H. J. C. Grierson, *Cambridge History of English literature*.

[25] H. C. Beeching, *Religio Laici*.

[26] C. J. Abbey, *Religious Thought in Old English Verse*, 1892.

[27] Pope, *Letters to H. Cromwell*.

[28] G. C. Coulton, *Ten Mediæval Studies*.

[29] T. B. Macaulay.

## CHAPTER V

### REASON AND PASSION

THE stage has become too crowded, the space too short. Confronted by this abounding, unclassifiable, and so familiar mass of material, one can only trace here and there a thread running through; one must deal less with individuals than with what they represented—if, indeed, individuals represent anything but themselves. We herd literature together in masses, like dumb driven cattle; we talk of Restoration drama, the Age of Reason, eighteenth-century good sense, the Romantic Revival, and the rest; and possibly we have to, in self-defence, carrying on our pathetic task of seeking to co-ordinate and understand the history of the mental development of the glory, jest, and riddle of the world.

I have, then, herded into one pen the lyric verse of the end of the seventeenth-century, and into the next the drama, poetic satire, and prose literature, because the one does seem to belong to the pre-Civil War age, and the other, for all its thousand varieties and opposed ways of thought, to the new age, a more modern age, the age, it has been called alternatively, of prose, of reason, of satire, of anti-Romanticism, of classicism, of sense; though when one repeats these schoolroom terms, nothing rises in one's mind but evidences which contradict them. Still, let us classify and herd; it is done, and is easier, and perhaps really less unintelligent, than the purely empirical and unco-ordinated dealing with each piece of literature as a separate phenomenon, to which one is tempted by its variousness, and not less by the easy grouping indulged in by those who think in periods.

At the end of this amazing and perplexed century (for at least we can say of centuries that they all amaze and were perplexed) England, like France, was in an odd tangle and confusion of criss-crossed lines of religious thought, feeling, and debate. Whereas in France the cross-firing was between Cartesians, Platonists, Jesuits, Jansenists, Gallicans, Ultra-Montanes, Quietists, rationalists, and anti-modernists, in England it was between Puritans, Anglicans, Calvinists, Arminians, Platonists, Quaker mystics, Cartesians, Hobbists, Lockians, Deists, and Romanists. These last, however, were not prominent as a controversial force. England has never had her Bossuet. That tremendous anti-tolerance and anti-modernist priest thundered away across the Channel, breathing his devastating irony at the tolerance-mongers and at Protestant Holland. "Happy country, where the heretic is at rest as well as the orthodox, where vipers are preserved like doves. . . . Who would not admire the clemency of these reformed States?" An increasing number of thinkers in

the reformed State of Great Britain were beginning to answer that they would admire it.

Dryden, even after his Roman conversion, puts in a mild plea for it, as uninspired as his religious tone in general. His elegant discussion between a hind and a panther on the two Churches recalls in machinery, but in neither method nor tone, the theologically minded animals so dear to the Middle Ages. He was in much better form when it was his job, before the accession of James, to uphold the panther's Church, in the rather smug but very reasonable *Religio Laici*, one couplet of which makes the essentially Anglican remark—

“’Tis some relief that points not clearly known  
Without much hazard may be let alone.”

In another couplet he seems to sound the note of a mass of Anglican, philosophic, and theological writings of the time:

“So pale grows reason at religion's sight,  
So dies, and so dissolves in supernatural light.”

But reason did not, according to most of the scientific philosopher-theologians (in the main of the most blameless orthodoxy), usually need to grow pale and die at religion's sight. Quite the contrary; she was religion's busy and docile handmaid, engaged in strengthening her mistress's position by all she did.

Nothing is more interesting and remarkable among the complexities and inconsistencies of the human mind, than the sight of these dwellers in the somewhat shaken but still stalwart stronghold of mediæval theology, busily and ably undermining with their spades the very foundations of the fortress's walls, while remaining wholly unconscious of this side of their activities, and uttering the most pious and orthodox of Christian and Anglican sentiments the while. The Platonists in England, as Malebranche in France, had long been seeking more consciously to combine reason, Cartesian methods of thought, Neo-Platonism, and Christian orthodoxy, and to evolve, in some sort, a new kind of religious viewpoint from the mixture. When Henry More, the most brilliant of the Cambridge Platonists, and the half-rational, half-superstitious poet of the *Song of the Soul*, wrote, “Every priest should endeavour to be also, as much as he can, a rational man or philosopher,” and then, going behind this, declared, “A second principle, more noble and inspired than reason,” that of illumination, he was writing as a man inevitably confused in his task of reconciliation, yet with hope for some new thing; he was definitely a modernist; like Cudworth, Culverwel, Glanvill, Lord Brooke, the deist Herbert of Cherbury, and all the Latitudinarian group, earlier and later. They have the spirit, though not the

genius, and certainly not the logic or the style, of Malebranche. What no English modernist ever got anywhere near (Swift would have, had he been a modernist) was the thoroughness and energy, trenchant power, vicious fighting, and ironic scepticism of Bayle. In brief, in England they did it in English.

More's long philosophical poem, in its humane plea for rationality and against the stupid bigotry that condemned Galileo, does, in its quiet English poetic way, say something not said before. The gentle and intelligent modernism with which he protests against the anti-Copernicans seems to forestall the later Broad Churchmen, as the sharp rejoinder to it by Rust, in a university sermon, forestalls the later High Church replies to Latitudinarianism; for Broad Church Platonists have always incurred the dislike of more dogmatic minds.

But it is when we turn from the Platonists to the scientists and lay philosophers that the state of affairs seems queer.

These were not, like the "latitude men," trying to co-ordinate different elements into a better religion; they accepted the orthodox revealed religion as they found it, and were determined at all costs to subscribe to its tenets. There is no sign that they found any difficulty; none even of the ironic acceptances of Sir Thomas Browne, or of Bayle in France. Sincerely and firmly the scientists of the Royal Society, including Newton, brought their scientific knowledge to the aid of the Deity, used it to justify the ways of God to man, and solemnly argued from design. Coming on such arguments in their scientific writings, one feels something of the irritating irrelevance that strikes one when some of our present-day physicists turn aside from their subject for a little excursion into eternity. Who, one feels with Sir Thomas Browne, shall speak of eternity without a solecism? The philosophers perhaps, but not the scientists. When Newton enquires, "Did blind chance know there was light, and what was its refraction, and fit the eyes of all creatures, after the most curious manner, to make use of it?", when Ray, the zoologist, writes of "the wisdom of God manifested in the Works of Earth," when Joseph Glanvill, of the Royal Society, after writing *Anti-fanatick Theology and Free Philosophy*, condemns as dangerous Sadduceeism the disbelief in witches, one learns to accept any incongruity. "Carnal learning," so suspected by the extreme Protestants, had clearly not corrupted these men of science; they never allowed it to weaken their orthodoxy.

As to Hobbes, when, after reading the ecclesiastical and popular denunciations of "Hobbism," one turns to, say, the Christian Commonwealth section of *Leviathan*, one is amazed by its pious moderation. To be sure, it would, and did, annoy ecclesiastical authorities to be told that they had no civil power apart from the state, that their kingdom was not of this world, and that they could not excommunicate or

condemn; indeed, the whole chapter “Of Ecclesiastical Power” is Erastian enough to irritate them. There is, of course, also a good deal of what the nineteenth-century used to call Higher Criticism of the Bible, and dangerous Arian tendencies may be detected, together with a mild naturalism. As to his theory of the selfishness on which man’s race in life is based, in which he anticipates more modern psychologists, it is strictly in accord with the orthodox view of corrupt human nature. The abuse of the religious Hobbes as an atheist seems as exaggerated as the enthusiastic view of him expressed by Sheffield, Earl of Mulgrave:

“While in dark ignorance we lay afraid  
Of Fancies, Ghosts, and every empty Shade,  
Great Hobbes appeared, and by plain Reason’s Light,  
Put such fantastic Forms to shameful flight.”

Which was the greater feat since Hobbes was, for his part, always terrified of ghosts.

But Hobbes’s real danger was less theological than moral, since he declared the variability, Erastianism, and local application of the moral laws, and seemed to rob ethics of their divine sanction. That was to be already half-way to Atheism. The other half of the distance was soon covered by the label of Epicurean atomist. Yet Hobbes, much as he annoyed the believers both in inward illumination and in ecclesiastical authority, held by the Bible (even though looking into it with unseemly closeness), and was never of the Deists. As to that, none of the philosophers and scientists whose discoveries and writings inspired Deism were of the Deist camp. Descartes, Newton, Locke, Berkeley, all opposed these hated and despised beings; and as to the literary men—Addison, Steele, Swift, and the rest—they saw red at the thought of them. Into that enormous controversy that swirls like a river round the junction of the centuries, it is fortunately no part of our task to look. The literature thrown up by it was inconsiderable—unless, indeed, we are to include in it Pope’s *Essay on Man*, which, if it be Deistic, is Deism and water, unconscious and unrealised. Pope enjoyed his own philosophising; still, probably what mattered most to him in the poem is what alone matters to us, not its general philosophy, but its neat and epigrammatic moral didacticisms and aphorisms.

Among the other religious and semi-religious conflicts which raised the dust about the Restoration and Augustan writers’ feet, was one far more important to the majority than any philosophical battle. Puritanism and anti-Puritanism met again, after the long triumphant reign of the former, in bitter hate. In one camp were the dramatists and satirists. Of the mass of anti-Puritan satire that poured forth, the only important contribution to literature was from Samuel Butler, whose savage mockery

of Saints, Sects, Fanatics, Hypocrites, and Salvation-chasers is an eternal contribution to the literature of distaste. It was a distaste that, in a calmer and less wittily derisive form, was to colour much eighteenth-century literature. Religious fanaticism was peculiarly repugnant to that age of classicism and good sense.

Meanwhile, Puritan religious feeling was divided against itself. The Quaker mystics, the extreme and more unlettered end of Platonism, relying entirely on the light within, had long been the most religious, virtuous, and persecuted sect in England. "Abominable infidels," the mostly tolerant Puritan Baxter called them, and Henry More, "the most melancholy sect that ever was in the world." These were in fact the sentiments which these unfortunate people, the most high-minded, godly, charitable, and tolerant Christians in the world, appeared to evoke in the breasts of their neighbours. They were hunted down, jailed, pilloried, railed at, written at, but never written down. Quite the contrary; never was there a sect more prolific of explanations of their way of thinking in journals, treatises, and memoirs. If they were misunderstood, it cannot have been their fault. But, though they wrote much, they did not really, for the most part, write well. The best they produced was Penn's *Fruits of Solitude*.

Though, as we have often been told, mysticism was not a characteristic product of this rational age, it was not only the Quakers and the "latitude men" who were seized of this disease. William Law, the non-juror and the author of the *Serious Call*, contracted it from reading Jacob Boehme. The objective moralist and fabulist of the *Serious Call* became a sane and liberal mystic, and has left the most attractive and persuasive mystical writings (largely because of their sanity and liberality) of any English mystic. The burden of them is: "The only religion that can save anyone must be that which can raise or generate the life, light, and spirit of Heaven in his soul, that when the light and spirit of this world leaves him, he may not find himself in eternal death and darkness. Now, if this light and spirit of heaven is generated in your soul . . . then you are become capable of the Kingdom of Heaven, and nothing can keep you out of it." And: "You can know nothing of God, of nature, of heaven, or hell, or yourself, but so far as all these things are self-evident in you." He is the most reasonable and the most modern of all the mystics; inferior to Fénelon in scholarship and intellect, to à Kempis in intensity, to Blake in genius, he has a quality of cultured sanity which sets him apart. He moves in a different world from the other Anglican religious writers of the time—Tillotson, South, Barrow, Burnet, Atterbury, Sacheverell, Wilson, and the rest of the sensible and controversial but unenthusiastic Erastian divines. These were not lively writers. Even Bishop Butler, the greatest among them, lacked style and grace. To turn to the eighteenth-century divines from

the splendours of Fuller, Jeremy Taylor, and Donne's sermons, is like stepping from purple mountains on to a flat high-road, where nothing is lively except the clattering and thundering of the traffic of perpetual controversy. And even controversy had lost the grand manner. On the high-road chariots had given place to a cortège of stout horses with measured trot, drawing dignified barouche-landaus, in each of which sat a calm, plump, wigged, banded, and disputatious divine, vindicating the Trinity, or confounding the Deists, or talking down the Socinians. Even the brothers Wesley, carriage-less and running breathless and eager along the road, lacked style, though the best of Charles's hymns do belong to poetry.

Let us leave the clergy (always excepting the Dean of St. Patrick's, Bishop Berkeley, and the curate of Coxwold) aside; they are no longer what they were, or part of the stream of English literature; they have become a theological caste, profuse in words, indeed, as they had ever been, but the words are now flat prose. Religion in literature has lost its lyric element. It has become sentimental, pompous, proper, or didactic; natural theology neatly harnessed to a smartly trotting tandem, as with Pope's moral couplets, which seem to keep time to the brisk cracking of a whip, and never break into canter or gallop; shocked and rather sanctimonious, as with Collier; respectably and charmingly orthodox, as with the gentlemanly Addison; dissentingly pious, with the quite ungentlemanly genius Defoe; didactic and evangelical with Isaac Watts; creation-worshipping and optimistic with Thomson; classically Whiggish with Akenside; narrowly and bitterly and officially Church of England and sarcastic with Swift. It has become complacent and limited, controversial but unperplexed—as expressed, that is, in literature, for no doubt in life it inspired much the same reactions as it had always done.

One of the chief things that strikes one in any varied reading of eighteenth-century writers in verse or prose is the widespread piety that they express. It was an age, in the main, not of scepticism, not of religious speculation or doubt, but of general and rather complacent faith in a religion both natural and revealed. Did not nature clearly show the awful reign of God? The Augustian and earlier Georgian writers, astonished and gratified by the ordered whirling of the spheres, admired unreservedly both the mechanism of such a clock and the power and beneficence of its Designer. The words *Atheist* and *Deist* were (interchangeably) terms of the vilest opprobrium, used with horror, scorn, and disgust by nearly all. It was a rude and scurrilous age; but among the insults fired so freely by authors at the physically deformed and diseased, at the lowly born, at those who had unfavourably reviewed them, or who differed from them in politics, the fiercest were reserved for those who did not hold the prevalent views as to the origin and government of the universe.

The mild and benignant Addison, the sentimental and kindly Dick Steele, were roused to hatred at the very thought of a Deist; the far from mild, benignant, sentimental, or kindly Dean Swift spat at them his most poisoned venom, more poisoned even than that which he aimed at Dissenters, Whigs, those who would repeal the Test Act, and the whole human race; Pope, from out of his neat temple of Natural Theology, looked with demure shudders at Atheists who denied the Great First Cause. He might, in a couplet or two in the *Essay on Man*, seem to say that all religions are the same if they lead to a good life; but he knew that Atheism could lead to no good life.

The novelists, like the poets and essayists, were all sound Churchmen or sound Dissenters; Robinson Crusoe suffers conversion on his island, and adds thenceforth his peculiar Protestant piety to his other charms, so that when he is alarmed by cannibals, "My head was for some time taken up in considering the nature of these wretched creatures, I mean the savages, and how it came to pass that the wise Governor of all things should give up any of His creatures to such inhumanity as to devour its own kind."

Fielding interlards *Tom Jones* with, what is, somehow, a much more tiresome kind of moralising, of the hearty, manly-Christian, semi-facetious, buttonholing, slap-you-on-the-back type. His hero is the good-hearted, vulgar, mildly dissolute young man Jones, whose religious beliefs, though not obtruded, are all that is proper when he has occasion to mention them; but his ideal of an English gentleman is the smug, wordily pious and moral Mr. Allworthy, whose notion of a lecture to a young unmarried mother is an expansion in five pages of "What can be more dreadful than to incur the Divine Displeasure, by the breach of the Divine Commands; and that in an Instance against which the highest Vengeance is specifically denounced." Fielding, who is always worst when serious, would have done well to leave religion alone; but no one, in what has been often and oddly called a sceptical century, on account of a few great sceptical names, left religion alone.

Richardson is, of course, much more pious than Fielding. As he premises in the preface to *Clarissa*: "The Gentlemen, though professed Libertines as to the Fair Sex . . . are not, however, with respect to Religion, either Infidels or Scoffers." The Gentlemen were, in fact, "reasonable Beings who disbelieve not a future State of Rewards and Punishments." As to that far more virtuous Gentleman, Sir Charles Grandison, he, as we know, was "a Man acting uniformly well thro' a variety of trying Scenes because all his Actions are regulated by one steady Principle: a Man of Religion and Virtue."

The Reverend Lawrence Sterne lacks this unction, but has a sound unsceptical

Christian creed, which he keeps in good order, and never allows to interfere with his facetious improprieties. Indeed, eighteenth-century religion (though we may, in this connection, exonerate Smollett from having much of it) did little, it seems, to mitigate eighteenth-century coarseness. Pope was not helped to ordered manners by his ordered universe; the excellent example of the calm and obedient spheres did little to calm his own temper; as he justly observes, “What Reason weaves, by Passion is undone.”

Addison, that most engaging and lovable prig, had a natural and gentlemanly decency that scarcely needed the restraint of his decent and gentlemanly and rather priggish religion, though this no doubt added to his view of his function as a moral censor. Steele, with his *Christian Hero*, his pleas for Christian philosophy as against pagan, his very poor plays (in which the only triumph is virtue’s), and Mr. Isaac Bickerstaffe’s moral counsels, presented a lovable picture of the sentimental morality of the good-hearted rake reformed. It was a remarkable age, when the two chief magazines of the day, one after the other, exercised so attractively the function of arbiter of morals.

Swift’s religion was violent and sincere; it emerges in nearly everything he wrote, but rather as Church of England bigotry, hatred of Latitudinarianism, as well as of Dissent of all kinds, Roman and Protestant, than as an inward devotion, though in his *Proposal for Advancement of Religion* he expresses praiseworthy concern for the reform of irreligion and vice. But, being

“A clergyman of special note  
For shunning those of his own coat,”

he was probably not averse to scandalising his brethren by coarse language about things they held sacred—or, indeed, about anything else. Swift’s coarseness is of the unforgivable kind—not witty impropriety, but merely that sickening nastiness that gives readers the physical sensation of the boat having rolled under them. This particular brand of nastiness does not seem to be affected by the amenities of religion; it is a question of taste (and Swift’s, like that of many geniuses, was bad) and of a naturally disgusting imagination, in which many of the Christian Fathers exceeded most pagans.

The general literary interest in religious questions was acute. Theological controversy raged, not only among the clergy and philosophers, but among men of letters, who were nearly all amateur theologians, and flung themselves panting into the Bangorian controversy, the anti-Deist campaign, the Test Act dispute, discussing with ardour the First Cause, Revelation, and the Evidence from Design. The

thunders of theological disputations from the past were tamed and harnessed and rationalised; they did not roll round the heavens with such grandeur of fulminating phrase; they exploded less impressively but more continuously in coffee-houses, periodicals, treatises, and conferences, and were echoed by the literary gentlemen, whose gossip alternated between the Author of the Universe and the author of the latest lampoon. It was a curious mixed age of satisfied orthodox acceptance, of free speculation, of sentimentalised piety and morality, reacting from the cynicism of the Restoration court, of passionate and contemptuous religious and political bigotries, of the rational voice of science and reason raised with increasing frequency in the cause of tolerance and moderation. “What,” Halifax had asked through his *Trimmer* in 1685, “do angry men ail to rail so against moderation?” His is one of the first sustained English pleas for that mean which is the genius of the “hybrid race of the true-born Englishman”—“He is troubled to see men of all sides sick of a callenture of mistaken devotion . . . a devouring fire of anger and persecution breaketh out in the world. We wrangle with one another for religion till the blood cometh, while the commandments have no more authority with us than if they were so many obsolete laws or proclamations out of date. A nation will hardly be mended by principles of religion, where morality is made a heretic.” He pleads for a greater toleration of Dissenters, ill-mannered and troublesome as they are, and for Papists; though you cannot, he admits, make terms with “the Popish clergy, who have such interest against all accommodation that it is a hopeless thing to propose anything to them less than all, their stomachs having been set against it ever since the Reformation.” But with less intransigent citizens, the state should come to terms.

Yet even the *Trimmer's* moderation has its limits; he would, one gathers, draw his line at Atheism, for “without religion, man is an abandoned creature, one of the worst beasts Nature hath produced, and fit only for the society of wolves and bears.” To be tolerant of Atheism was a lesson not learnt till much later than the *Trimmer*, and later than the eighteenth-century.

Even Locke, who, in pleading for the Toleration Act, laid down principles of liberty, reason, and toleration, and in the *Essay on Human Understanding* laid stress on turning from what cannot be known to the patient acquisition of knowledge about what can—even Locke would not admit to full citizenship those who professed allegiance to a foreign power, and those who denied God.

Locke and the scientists are really the heroes of this new age; it was the scientific spirit that, filtering slowly into the crass intelligences of the laity, was to fight the battle of humane moderation of spirit. If the philosophers and the scientists, thus helping to rationalise and moderate religious enthusiasm, helped also to make religious

literature, both in prose and poetry, a little trite, a little flat and dull, it was not all their doing.

Mysticism was out of fashion, the metaphysical school long gone, “wild divinity” no more, Sir Thomas Browne’s “wingy mysteries” impaled on pins for inspection, Donne, Browne, Herbert, Vaughan, Crashaw, and Milton all gone into the world of light, leaving behind them a less starry generation, who gazed on the heavens through telescopes, and observed with awe and gratification the intelligence of the Creator through the order of the universe.

“In Reason’s Ear they [i.e. the planets] all rejoice,  
And utter forth a glorious Voice,  
For ever singing, as they shine,  
The Hand that made us is Divine.”

That is how Mr. Addison very properly felt about the stars and their Creator. The finest intelligences were not feeling mystically devout, but were otherwise engaged, or agreed with Dr. Johnson that “poetic devotion cannot often please,” though “the doctrines of religion may be defended in a didactic poem.” Perhaps the soil was wrong for poetic religion. There was religious poetry, but it had, too often, the pious sentimental moralising with which religious poetry so easily is marred, the hum-drum complacency, or the abasement of the worm before its Awful Maker, which are, one fears, eighteenth-century characteristics.

Sir Richard Blackmore (that worthy medical knight of whom Johnson said that to have been once and for a short time a schoolmaster was the only reproach that malice, animated by wit, had ever fixed upon his private life) wrote and wrote and wrote, of Creation, of Redemption, of the Nature of Man, of the Smallpox; but alas, to no purpose now, for, though defending the doctrines of religion in didactic poems, he cannot be read.

On the other hand, there was Dr. Watts, who, when not warning naughty children of their latter end, holding up the human race for reprobation, or the insect world for emulation, or treating too terrifically the mediæval doctrines of the Atonement, could write extremely fine hymns. “O God, our help in ages past,” and “There is a land of pure delight” are among them. More charming and original, in a different vein, is the poem on the riches of the soul, which recalls Traherne in thought and Marvell in expression:

“There are endless Beauties more  
Earth hath no Resemblance for:  
Nothing like them round the Pole,  
Nothing can describe the Soul;

’Tis a region half unknown,  
 That has Treasures of its own,  
 More remote from publick view  
 Than the Bowels of Peru;  
 Broader ’tis and brighter far  
 Than the golden Indies are . . .  
 Yet the silly wandering Mind  
 Loath to be too much confined,  
 Roves and takes her daily Tours  
 Coasting round the narrow Shores,  
 Narrow shores of Flesh and Sense;  
 Picking shells and pebbles thence  
 Or she sits at Fancy’s Door,  
 Calling Shapes and Shadows to her,  
 Foreign visits still receiving  
 And t’herself a Stranger living . . .”

There is nothing here of didacticism, smugness, or complacency; it is the old joyful mystic note, which sounds oddly side by side with such minatory terrors as *The Atheist’s Mistake*:

“Laugh, ye profane, and swell and burst  
 With bold impiety;  
 Yet shall ye live for ever cursed  
 And seek in vain to die . . .”

(and so on, and worse). Dr. Watts wrote at times so well, at other times so ill, that one must put him down as a good poet and a good man damaged by a bad creed and a rather bad moment in time. He took the least favourable view of the human race, and was in no way a victim of the angel-childhood Pelagian illusion of Traherne and Wordsworth. He knew better: “Cast a glance,” he says, “at the sports of children from five to fifteen years of age. What toys and fooleries are these! Would a race of wise and holy beings waste so many years of early life on such wretched trifles?” However, the race whom he so severely condemned eagerly and forgivingly took his hymns to their hearts, regardless of denomination, and overlooking, tolerating, or enjoying the rather gory Calvinistic excesses in too many of them, which recall at times Crashaw’s similar distressing images.

No such pietistic excesses disfigure the melancholy, philosophic, and for many years best-selling, *Night Thoughts*, in which Dr. Young, that pathetic, place-hunting clergyman, reproached Pope for not singing “immortal man.” “What now but immortality can please?” he enquires, but was little enough pleased even by this.

“A fathomless Abyss,

A dread Eternity! how surely mine!”

he ejaculates at one o'clock at night. Indeed, his religion gave him small joy during his forty years of production of sad religious and philosophic blank verse, high-flown plays, and moral satires in epigrammatic couplets. Though, it must have certainly pleased him, as it pleases us, when his worldly young female demands—

“Shall pleasures of a short duration chain  
A lady's soul to everlasting pain?”

This disappointed yet dignified clergyman has some of the pensive and romantic melancholy that he would not be permitted by those who think austere in groups, and say that romantic melancholy had not, when *Night Thoughts* was written, yet arrived. These will divide this hotch-potch of a confused century neatly into chunks—classicism, romantic revolt, nature-worship, and so forth—and hail as the pioneer of the religion of romantic nature-love, James Thomson, with his *Seasons*. Sir Edmund Gosse goes so far as to say, speaking of Thomson: “For nearly eighty years the visual world, in its broader forms, had scarcely existed for mankind.” This would seem very odd; mankind was not, one feels, like that; sunsets, dawns, meadows, spring, and the moon make the kind of eternal appeal to human sensibilities that, though it is infinitely weaker to one person than to another, even to one race than another, cannot, surely, suddenly disappear for eighty years; why should it? Besides, the witness of literature confutes this view. The early eighteenth century, that supposedly unromantic epoch (to those who find themselves able to suppose any epoch unromantic) abounds in close poetical description of landscape; not only of Nature, God's admirable creation, but of nature with a small n, her colours, moods, flowers, glow-worms, waterfalls, groves, “the hills and dales and the delightful woods,” and the romantic emotions thereby inspired. Even Pope in *Windsor Forest*, though one does not infer that he passed his favourite kind of day, at least closely observed and admiringly recorded all he saw. It was in those early years of the century, not later, that a new school of nature poetry grew up, “For it was then, for the first time, that the phenomena of external nature came to be regarded as objects of poetry in and for themselves.”<sup>[30]</sup> Not, indeed, pleasure in nature, but the literary fashion of commending her detail in verse, was born several years before Thomson wrote the *Seasons*.

It was the logical emotional consequence of Natural Theology. The worship of the Deity through his works went hand in hand with semi-worship of the works for their own sake. Thomson thus devoutly apostrophises nature:

“O Nature! all-sufficient! over all!

Enrich me with the knowledge of thy works!  
Snatch me to heaven! . . .”

and deduces his immortality from the coming of spring. His is a happy and an admiring religion:

“By swift degrees the love of Nature works,  
And warms the bosom, till at last, sublim’d  
To rapture and to enthusiastic heat,  
We feel the present Deity, and taste  
The joy of God to see a happy world.”

Yet it has elements of a more mysterious pantheism:

“Where angel forms athwart the solemn dusk  
Tremendous sweep, or seem to sweep, along,  
And voices more than human through the void  
Deep-sounding, seize th’ enthusiastic ear.”

However, the general gist of his pleasant religion is expressed by “Heavens! what a goodly Prospect spreads around!”

With the shadow of poor Cowper a generation ahead, one is moved to cry, “*O si sic omnes!*”

The days of this serene and prosperous natural Deism were numbered. Mark Akenside had it, though in him it was a trifle chilly, Whiggish, Shaftesburian, and dull. But it was doomed, sturdy and innocuous plant, to wilt under winds from three quarters—Methodist Christian enthusiasm; the hard scepticism which, though it rarely flourishes among poets, could not but be perceived by them to be flourishing in the scornful brains of various foreign and English philosophers and historians; and the melancholy wildness of that literary fashion which is called, in a phrase so time-honoured that it must be correct, the Romantic Revolt. Already even Gray strolls by with a more brooding and romantic and less satisfied air, with less of “Heavens! what a goodly Prospect!” and more complaints of men and cats dying young, and pessimism as to the futures of the little victims who play regardless of their doom. Gray and Collins cannot think that whatever is right, in a world which they people with the most alarming and ferocious abstractions:

“Disdainful Anger, pallid Fear,  
And Shame that skulks behind,  
And Envy wan, and faded Care,  
Grim-visag’d, comfortless Despair,  
And Sorrow’s piercing dart. . . .”

Gray had, of course, a melancholy temperament; but the poetic fashion was

setting to melancholy, and placid optimism was losing favour, so fickle is the literary world in such matters. Philosophy was not what it was: the sceptical Hume had succeeded the Christian Locke and Berkeley; Deism had become more atheist. The mediæval stronghold of faith was a little crumbling. Dr. Johnson, with his tremendous and passionate beliefs, had not the calm and cheerful orthodoxies of the Augustans—again, perhaps, mainly a question of temperament; but the quick-firing of the anti-Christian guns at home and abroad was certainly making breaches in Christian serenity, where it existed.

It did not exist in the Methodist movement, that noisy *enfant terrible* that came charging, with hymns and extempore prayers, against the entrenchments of the Anglican Church. A remarkable movement. Horace Walpole found it even more ill-bred than talking free thought before the servants at dinner, as they did in Paris.

“Wesleyanism is, in many respects,” says Leslie Stephen, “by far the most important phenomenon of the century. . . . It represents heat without light—a blind protest of the masses, and a vague feeling after some satisfaction to the instincts which ends only in a recrudescence of obsolete ideas.”<sup>[31]</sup>

The tepidity and lethargy of the Church is often blamed for this phenomenon, and no doubt but the Church was tepid and lethargic; but revivalism seems to be endemic in the world, and to be demanded every now and then by a number of human beings, irrespective of particular causes. It elicited from Charles Wesley an enormous output of devotional hymns, most of which can be classed, in some sort, as poetry. In that the movement had good fortune. What might not have been flung to these excited and illiterate converts to sing, if Charles Wesley had not chanced to be a poet, and both Wesleys men of education? John Wesley claims that “In these hymns there is no doggerel. . . nothing turgid or bombastic on the one hand, or low and creeping on the other, no cant expressions or words without meaning”; he is nearly right; and one may believe that, to the brothers, even the phrase “free grace” was neither cant nor without meaning, though to us it may be foolishness, and was to the Calvinist, Mr. Whitefield, certainly a stumbling-block.

It was not the Wesley brothers’ free grace, but Mr. Whitefield’s Calvinism, with its grace not so free, because “God may withhold or give it to whom and when He pleases” (and it pleased Him, said Mr. Whitefield, not too often) that overturned the unlucky Cowper. Excessive and emotional Calvinism seems always to have had a peculiar success with the mad. Newton, Cowper’s Calvinistic friend and evil genius, boasted that he “preached people mad”; but he may have confused effect and cause. Certainly it is difficult, in the cases of both Cowper and of Christopher Smart, to distinguish between the religion that made them mad and the madness that made

them religious. All we know of Smart's form of religious mania, which sounds like acute Methodism, is that Dr. Johnson's "poor friend Smart showed the disturbance of his mind by falling upon his knees and saying his prayers in the street, or in any other unusual place." His agreeable but too prolix *Song to David* perhaps shows a little of this exuberant lack of appreciation of the appropriate place to pray in, with its "glorious Hosanna from the den."

But poor mad Smart's religion, unlike poor mad Cowper's, does at least sound cheerful. Before the spectacle of the tormented Cowper, unsaved by the peaceful meadows of Olney, by his faithful female friends, by his hares, his dog, his rustic neighbours, or even by his beneficent wishes for the regeneration of mankind, a prey to the desperate assaults of predestinating theology, a reprobate, a castaway, a stricken deer, and yet a poet, one's mind draws back in some dismay. What, one asks, is this disturbing affair that is on the way, that seems about to break up the peace of Natural Religion, and even of those charming, pursy, wigged Hanoverian clergymen, engrossed in their Christian evidence, their pompous Anglican sermons, which would, they hoped, be published presently in brown calf, and in those hopes of preferment which sprang eternal in the eighteenth-century clerical breast? What will be the effect, if any, on literature? Or will it only affect "yon cottager" who—

"Just knows, and knows no more, her Bible true,  
A truth the brilliant Frenchman never knew?"

There is something painful about emotional religious revivals. They make against the literary humanities; they have always done so, in all countries, long before Christianity took hold of the world. The very thought of Methodism made men of culture shudder, and it says much for the strength and fervour of the Christianity of Dr. Johnson, that he admired John Wesley, who went clean against all his principles and tastes concerning ordered Church worship.

Having, inevitably, run into this religious revival, these notes must break off. Literature and religion are shortly to become too voluminous and too complicated; as if a stream were to broaden out and split into a hundred arms. The fact is, that there are not enough words left to follow it in this book.

Besides, the nineteenth and twentieth centuries have a terrible look. They have too much literature, and too many religious trends. Ahead there is Rousseau and the cry of the noble savage, which had such *réclame* on this side of the Channel; Blake meeting the prophet Ezekiel on his walks; the lake poets and their earth and sky and stream apparelled in celestial light; Coleridge with his learned religious musings, his idealism, and German philosophers; Southey and his unlearned Protestant emotions

and his unsuitable ambition to write an epic on the religions of the world; Shelley and his Godwinism and his Promethean perfectible man; Byron and his sentimental pieties; Wilberforce and the Clapham Sect writing of Practical Christianity and expressing it by freeing slaves; Paley and his twelve men of known probity finding a watch; Carlyle with his German philosophy and his uncouth Scottish-crofter's preaching; Hannah More writing tracts for the virtuous poor; all the pious tales and homilies of the Evangelicals; the grimly devout Mr. Fairchild and his unfortunate family; the Oxford Movement, with its Pusey and its Tracts, its Keble and his school of High Anglican fiction, such as the *Heir of Redcliffe*, which made the Oxford dons (but not, so far as we can learn, the Cambridge dons) cry; Newman, who took his Roman conversion with such austere sorrow, making of it an even more heavy and desperate business than the Victorians were wont to make of their changes of faith.

Then the Broad Church writers: Kingsley and his muscular Christian Socialism; *Westward Ho!*, with its Papist villains and brave Protestant young men; *Essays & Reviews* as a blast against the *Tracts*; Bishop Colenso disturbing the minds of the simple Ethiopians by doubts as to the date of the Flood, so that the orthodox in England discarded his arithmetic book, feeling that he could not be good at anything to do with numbers; *Ecce Homo*, with its determination to wrest Christian ethics out of the doctrinal wreck (for Christian ethical wreck was not considered the correct procedure until the following century); Matthew Arnold, with his power-not-himself-that-made-for-righteousness; the episcopal Biblical scholars; the attack from Darwin and evolution; Huxley and Tyndale and Spencer; the defence and restatement from *Lux Mundi*, and the brief candle of Roman Catholic modernism, so soon and so firmly to be snuffed out that it scarcely, beyond George Tyrrell, left any traces on English literature.

And meanwhile, the poets and the novelists, taking colour, after the ingenuous manner of their kind, from all this theology that was going about: Tennyson, with his assiduous assimilation of the findings of science for the purposes of honest doubt in which there lived more faith than in half the creeds (he had not our advantage of the writings of Professor Eddington); Browning, with his breezy creed of optimism and of love; the pre-Raphaelites preaching religion and Socialism in Gothic; Swinburne declaring his complete freedom from the yoke of priest, tyrant, and creed; Christina Rossetti accepting this yoke with lyric fervour; George Eliot, full of conscience, purpose, and noble agnosticism; Mrs. Humphry Ward, grave with Arnold unbelief; *John Inglesant*, that ladylike and eviscerated historic fantasy of a mystic; R. L. Stevenson, lightly wearing his Scottish panache of moral didacticism; Meredith with his ancient dragon and his germinal earth; Hardy, brooding like fate over the

darkness of Dorset soil; the Roman Catholic poets—Gerard Manley Hopkins, with his harsh, tortured, Donne-like measures; Coventry Patmore, with his philosophy of devout eroticism; Francis Thompson, tempestuous as a river; Alice Meynell, aloof and restrained; and, beating his drum strangely among these, the young man Kipling with his Lord God of Sabaoth.

But by this we are at the eighteen-nineties (which people sometimes speak of in such a peculiar manner, as if they had been a little age all to themselves, without father or mother, like Melchizedek, and without posterity), and the next century is perilously near, and, in my view, it is not seemly to comment on a century until it is gone by; so these notes must end here.

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[30] G. C. Macaulay, *Thomson in English Men of Letters*.

[31] Leslie Stephen, *English Thought in the Eighteenth Century*.



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## TRANSCRIBER NOTES

Misspelled words and printer errors have been corrected.

Inconsistencies in punctuation have been maintained.

A cover was created for this eBook.

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