

ENGLISH LITERATURE OF TO-DAY

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A CURIOUS revolution has taken place in the English-speaking world during the past twenty-five years. Its effects are nowhere more evident than in the world of literature and art—particularly literature. Many subtle changes in thought and outlook, the decay of old ideals, the springing up of new ones, have resulted in a cleavage between the nineteenth and the twentieth centuries that is both deep and sharply defined. It is sometimes asserted that this revolution is due to the war. During that conflict old conventions were broken down; restraints, especially in the lives of women, were removed; and many emotions hitherto inarticulate found expression. But this explanation is not wholly satisfactory. The war did, indeed, cut rudely across the life of the people, and of the literary workers among others. Nearly all the principal authors dropped their own writing and gave their services to the allied cause. When the war was over, however, they went back to their former work, and continued writing precisely as they had been writing before the catastrophe. The Wells, Galsworthy, Bennett and Chesterton of to-day are merely the natural and logical development of the Wells, Galsworthy, Bennett and Chesterton of 1900. Even before that early date, unsuspected forces were at work preparing the way for the expression of modern thought.

Chief among these forces must be reckoned a wide-spread spirit of revolt, which, recognizing no authority, struggled against restraints of any kind, whether social, physical, or religious; against old formulas, old conventions in art and literature as well as in life. "All the poems have been written, all the tales told, all the songs sung; let us have something new, no matter how bizarre or grotesque it may be", cries the young writer of to-day. Pushed to an extreme, this desire produces such a book as *Lady into Fox*, in which the beloved and beautiful young wife is turned into a fox and is tenderly cherished by her unfortunate husband in spite of the wildness and savagery of the little beast; or it may inspire an audacious attempt to compete with the great masters of old, as when Sir Harry Johnston taking several groups of Dickens's

characters continues their stories, in the modern tone, in *The Gay Dombey*s or *The Veneerings*,—with a result both pitiful and ridiculous. Yet the fact remains that the writers of the present time are limited to the same materials as their predecessors; the stuff of life is always the same—the only thing that can be altered is the manner of using it.

The literature of the twentieth century has also been much influenced by the Scandinavian and Russian writers. Turn back to *Punch* of 1890-93—the history of English literature for the past eighty-five years is preserved in the pages of this great comic paper—and you will find an account of the first appearance of Ibsen's plays on the English stage. *Punch* did not find them much to his taste. Their drab realism without any kindly relief of humour was revolting to him, and he satirized them bitterly in *Pill-Doctor Herder* and *Mr. Punch's Pocket Ibsen*. Our own Canadian satirist, Leacock, has tried his hand, not unsuccessfully, at the same thing; *The Sub-Contractor*, *An Ibsen play Done out of the original Norwegian with an Axe*, is quite as funny as the *Punch* imitations. A taste for Ibsen is something like a taste for olives, it has to be cultivated; yet by 1900 these ugly but powerful works had caught the ear of the literary people, and the dramatist's philosophy had begun to affect the thought of the day. The doctrine of self-expression traces back to Ibsen. Heretofore the ideal heroine had been a gentle, loving, self-sacrificing creature—you will find her in a thousand different novels under a thousand different names. To instance Agnes Wickfield or Amelia Sedley will bring the whole tribe before your eyes. Ibsen may be said to have murdered this heroine; if she appears to-day at all, it is to be mercilessly satirized. The heroine who now holds the stage, not to speak of the young girl in real life, is a self-willed and self-confident personage who knows her own value, expects certain things from life, and is determined to have them at any cost. Like Ibsen, the Russians too have had their contribution to make to English literature. Tolstoi and Dostoieffsky are responsible for the brooding introspection, the dark pessimism which disfigures so many of our novels, traits which are naturally quite alien to the Anglo-Saxon character. The Englishman can be sad enough on occasion—he can sound the depths of tragedy—but it is scarcely possible to find one really great English author who is wanting in a strain of wholesome humour.

Another most important factor in the transformation of English literature is the rapid development of psychology during the past two decades. While a host of intrepid adventurers have

been exploring the earth and the universe, others, scarcely less daring, have found more interest in looking in instead of out, and have been exploring the recesses of the human mind. Then arose Freud and his school of psycho-analysts, and the mischief was done! Happy, indeed, were our ignorant ancestors to whom right was right and wrong was wrong, and who were never troubled by inhibitions, inferiority complexes, or their sub-conscious selves! But the novelty of the new teaching has appealed to many writers; like the explorers, they had traversed the universe, there were no further conquests to be made in the realm of the actual; so, following the psychologists, they set out to study the mind of man. Then came a flood of analytical plays and novels, in which the characters talked a great deal and did next to nothing, for action was left to the few remaining romanticists. Much of this writing is quite untrue to life. The majority of people are too wholesomely busy and too unscientific in mental constitution to be able to analyse their thoughts and feelings even if they wished to do so. The aim of literature is to hold up a mirror to life. It is quite permissible to pick out the high lights, to illumine some and subdue others—herein the writer displays his art—but he has no right to read into life that which is absent from it.

A still more potent cause for the wide chasm between the literature of to-day and that of yesterday is the dissipation of a once strong religious faith into a confused and often very wordy materialism or scepticism. The Victorians, whatever their failings, were for the most part men of intense earnestness, of sincere faith, and Victorian literature is permeated with their beliefs. They held that God was in Heaven, and though all was not as yet right with the world, there was at least some semblance of order in the midst of chaos. Their conviction that there is some meaning in life, some reason for man's being, gave them a steadfastness and serenity which is now contemptuously dismissed as "smugness." Writers of the present day have cut loose from all beliefs. Much of the corroding pessimism which disfigures the work of Hardy, Galsworthy, Miss Sinclair and a host of lesser folk is due to this sense of futility, of being adrift in an unordered world.

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Poetry, fiction and the drama all alike reflect the new spirit thus introduced into English literature. It is generally conceded that to-day there are no really great poets—that no poetry of the first order is being written. Nor is this fact extraordinary, for the spirit of materialism which produces excellent satire has never yet produced great poetry. He who marches along with his eyes

bent on the ground, now delving in the dust, now lifting the stones to peer at the loathsome animal life beneath them, must miss the vision of the blue sky, the glory of the distant hills! In this respect a resemblance may be traced to the eighteenth century which was rich in prose and satire, but poor in the highest poetical inspiration.

It is always difficult to limit a period. Some of the most distinguished authors of our own day were formed under the influences of the nineteenth century, and though reckoned as belonging to the twentieth are, in reality, Victorian in thought and expression. Thus it is with Rudyard Kipling who in 1885 sprang into fame with unequalled suddenness. He wrote of the India he knew, he sang of the empire he loved and of those who had made her great; especially was he the poet of humble Tommy Atkins. His theme and his style caught the people's fancy, his popularity was immense. But he has ceased to develop. He has had no new message for a new day, and must be regarded rather as a survivor of the past than as a typical figure of the twentieth century. Bridges too, Poet-Laureate though he be, belongs to an earlier epoch. Always aloof in feeling, content, it seems, to enjoy his art in seclusion, he has slipped more and more into the shadows until to-day he is scarcely more than a name. Fine and delicate is his work, full of graceful pictures of nature, but quite detached from this strange disordered century. Nor is Sir William Watson more in harmony with the times. There is depth of thought in the work of this fine poet, much felicity in its expression, but it is clear that he is himself conscious of the difference between himself and his contemporaries of the modern school. With Bridges and Watson must be placed Alfred Noyes, and also dear Austin Dobson, whose delicate, melodious verse scarcely belongs even to the nineteenth century; in thought and interest Dobson was a survivor of the eighteenth century. Prior was his model, and Prior himself never surpassed the charm of Dobson's most perfect poems.

Strange indeed it is to find the typical poet of our own time in the oldest living man of letters. Of Thomas Hardy the novelist there is no need to speak here, for his works of fiction all belong to the Victorian era; but his poetical works are all of the twentieth century, with the exception of a few very early verses. *Poems of the Past and Present* appeared in 1901; *The Dynasts*, 1904-1908; *Time's Laughing-Stocks*, 1909; and in the collected *Poems* of 1923 we find, besides his poems of the war, some still more recent verse. The qualities which distinguish Hardy's novels are also present in his poems. Polish of style, beauty of phrasing, sensitiveness to nature in all her varied moods, the icy detachment with which

he regards the creatures of his imagination and which forbids the reader entertaining any warmer feeling—all these are present alike in both. Another peculiarity, more striking in poetry than in prose where one can say so much more without being redundant, is the extreme economy in his wording which does much to intensify the feeling of atmosphere. The little poem entitled *In the British Museum* illustrates this point. Here is utmost simplicity, not one verse, not one word more than necessary; yet how clear are the pictures that flash upon the mental eye—the rugged labourer pausing fascinated by the great stone brought from the Areopagus, then the picture *he* saw of the small gaunt man, Paul the Apostle, standing by that self-same stone in old Athens and uttering his message to the wondering crowd. But were there ever sadder, more cynical poems than those of Hardy? All the pessimism of the twentieth century, all its bitter sense of life's futility, all its satire, making mock of men's honour and women's virtue, breathe through them, casting a chill over the reader who realizes the sincerity of the poet when he says he never cared for life, nor sought in it much more than he could find.

The same pessimistic feeling darkens John Masefield's earlier work. *The Everlasting Mercy* and *The Widow in the Bye Street* are gloomy poems. But Masefield has known life in many countries and under varied aspects, and these experiences have found a voice in his stirring sea-songs. Yet it was a surprise to many readers when he produced those lively epics of the fox-hunt and the race-course, *Reynard the Fox* and *Right-Royal*. When *Reynard* appeared, the chorus of praise that greeted it seemed almost too enthusiastic; for the jog-trot lines in the early part of the poem are filled with homely images expressed in homely language, the rhythm is sometimes imperfect, the rhymes faulty. But as the narrator warms to his subject, the work glows with life and spirit. The reader finds himself racing breathlessly with the unlucky Reynard, and shares his triumph and relief when in the end he outwits his pursuers. The merits of the poem are the liveliness of the narrative and the brilliance of its pen-pictures; such as those of Charles Copse and Sir Peter Bynde, so reminiscent of Caldecott's gay hunting scenes. There are also occasional passages of rare beauty, such as that beginning,

He thought as he ran of his old delight.

or

After an hour no riders came.

All that is said of *Reynard* applies equally to *Right Royal*, but with greater force, as one must needs feel more sympathy with a

noble horse making its supreme effort than with an ignoble creature like the wretched fox.

Walter De La Mare lives in a very different world from that of Hardy—a world of strange enchantment, of witches, fairies and ghosts; of haunted houses and mysterious riders; a world also of quite simple ordinary things, such as crimson sunsets and twinkling stars; trim old gardens with bees humming among the flowers; dear old ladies sleeping in the sunshine, and little children playing on the green. Yet here again, as with Hardy—it is the twentieth century note—one is struck with the terseness of expression, the sense of atmosphere in his work which somehow makes it very subtle in spite of its apparent simplicity. Read *The Listeners*—how the stillness of the night presses upon one here, the stillness of the empty house which seems to reel beneath the rude summons of the traveller! How clearly one sees—as the traveller cannot see—the ghostly company within, peering through the shutters, fluttering on the threshold, touching the latch with vague shadowy hands! Is De La Mare, then, a great poet? By no means; merely a very charming and distinguished one. His fancy is too light, his field too limited, his vision scarcely deep enough. But then, again, none of his contemporaries can be ranked above him. The truly great poet who shall interpret the twentieth century as Wordsworth, Tennyson and Browning interpreted the nineteenth has yet to appear.

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The fiction of the twentieth century is more remarkable for its quantity than for its quality. Never before was there so much good writing—clear, competent and workmanlike—but never were there so few really good stories; yet is not that the main object of a novel—to tell a good story? *Punch* thinks so, at all events, and thinks that the present-day authors need to be reminded of the fact; for he remarked the other day that “According to Mr. Max Pemberton the art of story-writing is to tell a story—it is certainly a good idea, and one which our novelists might try.” It is because Mr. Charles Garvice and Miss Ethel Dell, in spite of their literary imperfections, can tell a capital story, full of life and incident, that their books are among the best sellers.

And now approaches a great portentous shadow—the shadow cast by that exuberant personage, Mr. H. G. Wells! What a man he is—for boundless vitality and varied gifts quite the most extraordinary character of the day. In himself he sums up most of the tendencies of his time. He is a consistent and tireless champion of revolt, ever in the forefront of the attack against all established

conventions and ideals. Neither Ibsen nor Tolstoi has been more revolutionary in his teaching, or exceeded Mr. Wells's burning passion as he denounces the old order he is determined to destroy. As a psychologist, he delights in exploring the human mind; more than half the tale he has to tell belongs to the realm of the intellect only. For a time he posed as a sceptic, but better counsels have prevailed, and, as the rather shocking little couplet puts it:

The creed of Mr. Wells has now been stated,
God is—but greatly overrated.

He does not, however, share the pessimism of Mr. Hardy; he is cast in another mould. He sees clearly that the world is in a perilous condition, but is by no means inclined to despair. As a notable housewife thrills at the thought of pulling her house to pieces and re-arranging it at the great spring cleaning, so Mr. Wells thrills at the thought of pulling society to pieces and remaking it just as it should be. He never seems troubled by any doubts as to his ability to construct a world much better than the existing one; unfortunately, he forgets that human nature has a great deal to do with human misery, and that he is quite powerless to change human nature.

But it is as a literary artist that Mr. Wells must be considered, and if it be true that the prime requisite of a novelist is to tell a good story, Mr. Wells as a literary artist is a failure. He has a clear and pleasant style, his dialogue is easy and natural, his characters on first acquaintance interesting and convincing, and the narrative sets off at a swinging pace which promises a successful journey. Unfortunately, before very long Mr. Wells the social reformer and Mr. Wells the educator appear, and taking Mr. Wells the novelist by the arms lead him off the highroad into a path of their own choosing, down which they dash with passionate energy while the poor story limps after as best it may. With Mr. Wells there is always the chance that, instead of the story one's primitive taste desires, one may be handed a tract on education, a discussion on theology, or an onslaught on the existing social order. This habit is growing on him; he has attempted to justify it, but is it, therefore, justifiable? His early work, which was much his best, was comparatively free from it; of a recent work, *The World of William Clissold*, a reviewer says that "The autobiography includes a 'History of Toil', a pocket monograph on 'Money', and an interesting comparison between Feudalism and Capitalism." As a result of this discursiveness, many people find him tiresome. This is a pity, for could he only separate fiction from propaganda both

would gain immeasurably. Untrammelled by a story as, for instance, in his little book *New Worlds for Old*, Mr. Wells is the most lucid and agreeable of writers, packing much good sense into a concise and readable volume.

Are Mr. Britling and Mr. Clissold really Mr. Wells very thinly disguised? And, if so, what are *Mrs.* Wells's views on the matter? What a satisfaction it is to know that while the great H. G. is pouring out an inexhaustible stream of books in which he is doing his best to upset the universe, his wife and his son, living quietly, in the shadow of his greatness, are collaborating in the gayest, most humorous little sketches! There is nothing revolutionary in these unambitious essays; they are merely episodes from everyday life; but it is quite clear that those who wrote them are not of the stuff to be browbeaten or overawed even by the masterful genius whose name they bear.

Mr. Galsworthy has much the same outlook on life as Mr. Wells, but it is coloured by a different temperament. He too believes that the world is all wrong, that the present social order must be destroyed before there can be any improvement; but the realization, instead of inciting him to action, only fills him with gloom and uncertainty. He sets his problem out before the reader, and then contemplates it in despair. He has no solution to offer, he sees no way out of the difficulty. At the same time he is more of an artist than Mr. Wells; his stories mean more to him; they possess him and carry him along with them as no story of Mr. Wells has ever had the power to do. Take, for example, *The Freelanders*, a novel based on the favourite theme of the twentieth century—social inequality and social injustice. A young man, one of the privileged class, filled with rage against this injustice, ranges himself beside one of its victims, thereby involving himself in great difficulties from which he is extricated through family influence only. He is married to the girl he loves (who sympathizes with him), and they are packed off to Australia there to acquire common sense. Thus Galsworthy states his problem, offers no solution, and ends by evading the question. It is rather a painful story, but it is evident that it deeply interested its author. It contains occasional passages of great beauty, especially those describing the English countryside, and some excellent character drawing. There is much charm in the contrasted figures of the dainty little Victorian grandmother, appealing even in her inconsequent prattle, and her robust young granddaughter, so intolerant of conventions, so self-absorbed and obstinate, yet with an old-fashioned heart full of old-fashioned affections beating passionately beneath the hard modern exterior.

The Forsyte Saga is perhaps Galsworthy's most notable achievement, but one cannot help wishing that he had been content with the original saga and not continued with *The White Monkey* and *The Silver Spoon*, which cannot have added to his reputation. All such continuations are irresistibly reminiscent of those interminable classics of one's childhood,—*The Elsie Books*, in which one reads of *Elsie*, *Elsie's Children*, *Grandmother Elsie* and, finally, *Elsie in Paradise*. Mr. Galsworthy has already told of Grandfather Soames. It is not probable that he will ever represent Soames in Paradise, as he would scarcely recognize the existence of such a place, but in a recent magazine he removed Soames to Washington, which, no doubt, he thought would do as well.

Two masters strive for the control of Arnold Bennett's pen, the genius of romanticism and the genius of realism. With the one he soars away on the wings of fancy; with the other he plods the dull paths of ordinary life. In *Deury the Audacious* Mr. Bennett mounts to the world of romance; in *Clayhanger* he sinks to drab realism. He does not seem greatly concerned with social problems, and in that respect is scarcely typical of the twentieth century; one could not accuse him of having any particular philosophy of life. He is mainly interested in character. But he too is a rebel against convention. Hitherto every hero of romance has been represented as the soul of honour and honesty. But Deury, Mr. Bennett's romantic hero, possesses no such old-fashioned virtues. He owes his rise in life chiefly to his smartness, which includes an occasional deviation from ways of truthfulness and honesty. Mr. Bennett's style is pleasant and easy, and he somehow leaves the impression on the reader of his possessing a great store of common sense.

Archibald Marshall and Hugh Walpole share the distinction of being considered the modern Anthony Trollope, although they are not in the least like each other, and still less like the great Victorian. Mr. Marshall writes of English country life; Mr. Walpole has a special fancy for English cathedral towns. Mr. Marshall's novels are quiet, pleasant books. A reviewer in the *London Times* remarked that they were just the reading for old ladies to carry with them when they went for an airing in their bath chairs; but this criticism is rather too severe. They are certainly not exciting, but they contain some interesting characters, and are fragrant with reminiscences of the beautiful English countryside. Mr. Walpole is a much stronger writer than Mr. Marshall. The lights in his pictures are brighter, the shadows darker and heavier. He has humour, too, and he needs it, for he has a fancy

for dealing with ugly things, and insisting on their ugliness in a way that would be unbearable if it were not for his lighter touches. How ugly and repellent is his portrait of the saturnine mother in *The Green Mirror*; how sordid and ugly the surroundings and the histories of *The Old Ladies!* How he insists on ugliness even in his child story of *Jeremy*—the morbidly sensitive little boy who was constantly antagonized by the want of beauty in his little sister, an affectionate child who longed to please him!

But ugliness, it seems, is one of the special contributions the twentieth century has made to literature and art. The Victorians cherished the wholesome belief that the main object of art was to add beauty to life, and so to raise it to a higher plane; but now, as Sir Johnston Forbes-Robertson said the other day, people are being inspired by a different spirit "which affects not only painting but sculpture and literature, and is really the cult of the ugly: "not only of the ugly, but positively of indecency." One's mind wanders instinctively to Epstein's monstrous bas-relief of "Rima" which now disfigures the bird-sanctuary in Hyde Park, (and of which, perhaps, Sir Johnston was thinking), of Stravinsky's hideous *Pagan Spring Festival* in which the ear listens vainly for one passage of true music, or of O'Neill's powerful but repulsive dramas in which there is not one touch of beauty to redeem the sordid ugliness of the whole. Viscount Burnham was equally severe when he said that one "only has to read any of the great novelists of to-day to find that they give themselves a liberty of expression and a choice of subjects which possibly might find some precedent in the coarseness of an earlier age, but is strangely at variance with the standards of Victorian times."

Unfortunately these rebels against the canons of the past are too often most highly gifted. Miss May Sinclair and Miss Rose Macaulay, for example, possess wit and penetration, which, united to a charming style, have placed them in the front rank of modern novelists; but the ugliness and unpleasantness of much of their work has made it unreadable to the fastidious taste. The reviewer in *Punch* has said of one of Miss Sinclair's novels that it read like an exceedingly good translation of a disagreeable French novel; and of Miss Macaulay's *Crewe Town* he says:

If the main object of the satirist is to bring human nature into contempt, which I beg leave to doubt, Miss Rose Macaulay is getting, as the thimble-hunters say, "warm" . . . Hardly one of her characters but falls childishly short of the common stature . . . you are presented with savagery and decadence as though they were the whole corpus of life's choice.

It is a relief to turn from such novelists to the work of three minor writers, who, though quite modern in their attitude to life, have preserved something of the grace and charm of an older day. Mr. W. J. Locke has much of the unconventionality and plainness of speech so typical of the time, but none of its pessimism. His books are full of sunshine and gaiety; his characters seem to wander in a new Forest of Arden in whose magical air troubles and vicissitudes are powerless to depress. Yet he is no mere sentimentalist. He has much originality, and a whimsical twist in his invention which give zest and piquancy to his narratives—as, for instance, the singular outcome of the Beloved Vagabond's old love-story. Mr. Wodehouse pays his tribute to the time in his diverting satires on society. He laughs gently at the follies of mankind, but as one critic says, he does not forget that "People who live in glass houses should not throw stones", and that most of us live in glass houses. Read his tale of Bertie Wooster's experiences with Comrade Butt if you want the funniest skit possible on the socialists; yet the acid does not bite, and that is the best of Mr. Wodehouse, he is always good-humoured, always the gentleman. Mr. W. W. Jacobs takes his readers into very different society, and the people he introduces—captains, mates, A. Bs, night-watchmen and the like—might be termed low. Yet Mr. Jacobs, too, is a gentleman; and rough though his characters be, they are never offensive. Much greater writers than he are not half so particular about their language, and make use of profanity without even the disguise of a dash; but though Mr. Jacobs will tell his readers that the language old Sam used to Ginger Dick was "something 'orrid", he kindly leaves the actual words to the imagination.

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The drama of the past twenty-five years—what have its numerous critics left for one to say about it? Like poetry and fiction, and perhaps in an even greater degree, the drama has been affected by the subtle revolution that has taken place in the thought of the people. Formerly the favourite plays were romances and melodramas. Few of these survive to-day; fewer still, if one is to believe the critics, will be remembered fifty years hence. They were plays of the heart; they appealed constantly and unashamedly to the emotions. The influence of Ibsen and the spread of the new psychology have altered the whole colour and spirit of the serious drama, and to-day realism has usurped the place of romanticism and the appeal is all to the intellect. If the realists are all rather too fond of preaching, if their plays contain more

propaganda than action, while the characters too often are merely the mouthpieces of their creators, that is the price that must be paid for setting the intellect above the heart.

As the colossal figure of Mr. Wells dominates twentieth century fiction, so the enigmatic personality of Mr. Shaw dominates twentieth century drama. Whether one like him or not, whether he attracts or repels, there is no evading the fact that he is, by common consent, reckoned the greatest of living playwrights. Full of life and wit, he dazzles you, shocks you, makes you laugh by turns. He has every gift but heart and feeling; lacking these, though always brilliant, he is cold as steel and often repellent. Does anyone really understand Mr. Shaw? Does he really understand himself? Does he not so constantly mock at the world and play tricks on it that he ends by bewildering himself? He is a born iconoclast, and would gladly pull the universe to pieces, but it is doubtful if, like Mr. Wells, he would have any notion how to put it together again; or if, indeed, he would have any wish to do so. His ideas mean so much more to him than his story that his characters often become mere abstractions, all talking very much alike and very much like Mr. Shaw, brilliantly, wittily, but, truth to tell, sometimes in the end a little tiresomely too. As one critic says. "This remarkable writer is not, in the stricter sense, a creative artist at all. The sharp contemporaneousness and vividness of his best settings deceives us. His plays are the theatre of the analytic intellect, not the drama of man. They are a criticism of life, not in the sense of Arnold, but in the plain and literal one."

In *Saint Joan* Mr. Shaw has reached the high-water mark of his genius, and produced what future generations will declare to be his masterpiece. This success is due partly to the fact that he has borrowed his story, but even more to the fact that he has for once forgotten himself in the telling—not wholly, perhaps; there are many typical Shavian passages, the mischievous use of many crude modern words and phrases which bring one back with a rude jerk from those far-off days, and these must be considered blemishes in a great work of art. Still one feels that Mr. Shaw is conscious, that he is in the presence of a great tragedy, a great mystery, and is almost awed as he gazes on it.

Some critics affirm that Mr. Galsworthy is the greatest of modern English dramatists. He has the ability to construct a plot and to create character. "His dialogue", says one critic, "is the best dramatic dialogue in the language" . . . "He has dignity, restraint and insight." Yes, this praise is well-deserved, but he has grave defects as well. The playwright Galsworthy, like the

novelist Galsworthy, is harassed by the realization of social problems which he is powerless to solve. Each play is a piece of social propaganda, and propaganda is no more the *main* business of a play than it is of a novel. Had Galsworthy a keener sense of humour, he would perhaps be conscious of this defect in his work himself, but in that case he would write a different kind of play altogether.

The dramatists of this modern school, Galsworthy, Granville Barker, Masefield, O'Neill, and most of the lesser lights all write in a monotone, and that tone is one of gloom. (Shaw, too, is equally wanting in relief, but he uses a different tone). They have forgotten that one important element in a work of art of any kind is contrast. Think how the skilful treatment of light and shade adds to the beauty of a picture. Think how the variations on the motif in a piece of music, or the introduction of a subordinate motif to contrast with the principal one, adds to the beauty of a composition. The same thing holds true in the drama. This point may be illustrated by a reference to Shakespeare, although it seems almost irreverent to place him beside these moderns. There is not in the whole range of the drama a more terrible play than *King Lear*. It has its sordid passages, it sounds the depths of human infamy; as a whole, it would be too horrible to contemplate if it were not for the character of Cordelia. She comes like a ray of purest light illumining the gross darkness, or like a strain of lyric sweetness in the midst of fiendish discord. One rests, as it were, on her, and so gathers strength to finish the story. It is this contrast which gives the play its beauty; it is the want of this contrast that makes these modern plays so monotonous and even repellent.

There is one playwright of the period who, like Shakespeare, in a faint, far-away degree, is not for our time only but for all time. For Barrie, in addition to his many lesser gifts, such as wit and humour, possesses the peerless gift of imagination, the chief attribute of creative genius. The other playwrights have busied themselves in copying life as they saw it, laying special emphasis on its problems. As the problems of one generation differ from those of another, they have consciously or unconsciously written for their own day only. But the realm of the imagination is bounded by neither past nor present; it is the one universal realm, and Barrie has made it his own. Here he creates those varied characters, odd, charming, whimsical or amusing, and weaves those fantastic plots, all unlike anything else in our English drama. Half laughing, half sighing, he holds the mirror up to life, but

casts over it, as he does so, some strange enchantment that transforms the reflection into a pattern of grace and beauty.

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There is no time left for the discussion of other departments of English literature, such as essays, memoirs and biographies. Of the last two an endless stream has issued from the press during the past few years, some famous and some infamous, some keeping steadfastly to the old traditions of dignity and reticence, and some typically modern in their unrestraint and plainness of speech. For the most part, being of an ephemeral nature, they have met an early death. But there are others that the world will never willingly let die, such as Lord Grey's *Twenty-five Years*, the *Life of Sir William Osler*, the vivid and impassioned *Letters* of Walter Page, and Lord Morley's calm and meditative *Recollections*. No period has been richer in works of this kind than our own. Of essays, too, one may say the same. Where can one find writing more graceful and charming than that of Sir Arthur Quiller-Couch or Mr. E. V. Lucas or Mr. Chesterton?

Thus if the present age cannot quite compete with the Victorian era, if it has no poets like Browning and Tennyson, no novelists like Dickens or Thackeray, it has at least some redeeming features that offer hope for the future. When the pendulum swings back to normal again, and writers and readers grow tired of revolt since it is no longer a novelty; when it becomes realized that spirit and not matter is the true source of inspiration, and that there is beauty as well as dignity in restraint—then, but not till then, will English literature once more put forth its fairest blossoms.