

THE DECAY OF INVECTIVE

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THE above title is likely, I have found, to evoke a somewhat groundless scepticism on the part of those unreflecting spirits who have failed to mark the manner in which invective has languished of recent years. To confound this attitude at the outset, let me offer for comparison two examples of verbal protest, one drawn from an earlier and more violent period, the other from our own degenerate age.

Toward the middle of the past century the Conservative party in England was invaded, strange as it may seem, by a spirit of dissension. The cause lay in the fact that Sir Robert Peel was showing an alarming tendency to adopt certain doctrines which had enjoyed the adherence of all reputable economists for at least half a century. It was natural that so revolutionary a course should arouse violent protest. That protest found its most effective exponent in Disraeli; and here are some of the amenities which the rising young Tory, so recently converted from Radicalism, extended toward his leader:

The position of the Rt. Hon. gentleman is clear and precise. The Rt. Hon. gentleman caught the Whigs bathing, and walked away with their clothes. He has left them in the full enjoyment of their liberal position, and he is himself a strict conservative of their garments. . . . When I examine the career of this minister, I find that between thirty and forty years. . . . that Rt. Hon. gentleman has traded on the intelligence and ideas of others. His life has been a great appropriation clause. Search the Index of Beatson, from the days of the Conqueror to the termination of the last reign, there is no statesman who has committed political petty larceny on so great a scale. . . . I have that confidence in the common sense of our countrymen, that I believe they will not long endure this huckstering tyranny of the Treasury bench—these political pedlars that bought their party in the cheapest market, and sold us in the dearest. . . . Dissolve, if you please, the Parliament you have betrayed, and appeal to the people, who, I believe, mistrust you. For me there remains this at least—the opportunity of expressing publicly the belief that a Conservative government is an organized hypocrisy.

Turn to this century. Since the war we have seen dissension appear, not merely in the Conservative party, where it has now

become chronic, but in the Liberal ranks as well. A short time ago that dissension was openly expressed by Earl Grey. Harken to the measured if somewhat querulous words of the elder statesman:

It is absolutely necessary for me to declare that, when the next election comes, if things are as they are to-day with regard to the leadership, the Liberal council must fight, not under that leadership, but under its own organization and its own fund. . . . Mr. Lloyd George has not always been the leader of the Liberal party. After the "Coupon Election" he was the hero of the Conservative party, and within four years the cleavage caused in the Conservative party was one between great admiration and deep distrust. Precisely the same thing has happened in the Liberal party; the cleavage is of the same nature, and as deep. That is the position in which we are placed. We have no confidence in the leadership, and that is the situation as regards the leadership.

That is what I mean by the decay of invective.

Mr. Hugh Kingsmill, in his recent anthology of "Invective and Abuse," describes invective as any direct verbal attack. The definition appears to me a little narrow. Personal abuse flourishes in all ages; personal grievances have an unfailing way of finding expression in terms which may seem intemperate to the victim, but which the author is prone to regard as mild and inadequate in their restraint. But invective at its highest passes from this personal plane. It becomes a talent for indignation over the most abstract and irrelevant issues; an habitual resort to abuse as a weapon of controversy; and, in its final flower, a complete divorce from any suggestion of humour. Of such a product only a robust and vigorous age is capable.

There are certain conditions which favour the development of this happy and satisfactory art. The first is a thorough familiarity with the Bible. Jehovah thundering out of Sinai, in the rolling periods of the Authorized Version, or the major prophets calling for the destruction of the Lord's enemies—who are incidentally their own—can provide a classic model for all who wish to see their adversaries cast down. A truly successful piece of invective will often bear a close relation to the imprecatory Psalms.

A second indispensable requisite is an unshaken conviction of virtue. It is not enough to believe that your views are right; you must also be firmly convinced that their triumph alone can avert a world-wide moral catastrophe. In such a case your opponents are not merely mistaken; they are the direct and malevolent agents of all the powers of evil. There are few more effective spurs

to acerbity in controversy than a rooted belief that your adversary is the incarnation of original sin.

In addition I would suggest, though more tentatively, that invective is likely to flourish at its highest among a generation of heavy eaters. It would be hard to find a more potent cause of bitterness of spirit than that constant nemesis of the gourmand,—the chronic indigestion. In that accurate and exhaustive treatise, *The Anatomy of Melancholy*, Burton gives a precise list of the various kinds of food whose use has such a result. Beef, pork, goat, venison, hare, fowl, fish, milk and all its products—these must be avoided if a healthy mind is desired. But let no vegetarian take comfort. Bread is suspect. Roots, “as onions, turnips, carrots, radishes, parsnips”, are condemned. “Amongst herbs to be eaten,” he says, “I find gourds, cucumbers, melons disallowed, but especially cabbage.” Remember the complaint of Ambassador Page—“In this aquarium in which we live (it rains every day) they have only three vegetables, and two of them are cabbages”—remember this, and you have some explanation of English vigour in controversy. Drinks share equally in the condemnation; only beer is dubiously exempt, and that doubtless from prejudice on the part of the author. Thus, if a man would eat and drink, it is almost impossible to avoid melancholy, which is certain to deepen to a noble rage as his appetite expands. But I have not been able to pursue my investigation of this fascinating theme to the point where I can present definite evidence. I therefore suggest it as a line of study to any who may be interested in the gastronomic interpretation of literature.

II

All these conditions were characteristic of the spacious days of Queen Elizabeth, and of the Puritan age which followed. It was an age when Englishmen held a supreme confidence in their own worth—such confidence as was expressed by Milton’s words: “When God is beginning a new and great period in His Church, what does he then but reveal Himself to His servants, and, as His manner is, first to His Englishmen?” It was an age filled with acute controversies which forbade any suspicion of tolerance on either side. Above all, it was an age supremely Biblical in its tone. The appeal of the Puritans to the Bible as an ultimate standard was accompanied by the adoption of the Old Testament as a model for the language of dispute. And even more important, the preeminence of religion as a subject of controversy provided the Puritan with a final and universal object for his bitterest attacks—Rome, the scarlet woman on her seven hills, the handmaid

of Antichrist, against whom even the unexpurgated vigour of Elizabethan English seemed inadequate as a weapon of abuse. And so, in an age which produced the cold simplicity of Bacon's essays and the balanced moderation of Hooker's style, there appeared also the vehemence of Cartwright, the scurrility of Martin Marprelate, and the splendid savagery of Milton's prose.

The result was a vigorous directness of language that has never since been matched. Take even so measured a document as an Elizabethan statute, and you will find it marked by this same quality. Here is the preamble of an Act Against Popish Recusants passed in 1593:

For the better discovering and avoiding of all such traitrous and most dangerous conspiracies and attempts as are daily devised and practised against our most gracious Sovereign Lady the Queen's Majesty and the happy state of this common weal by sundry wicked and seditious persons, who terming themselves Catholics and being indeed spies and intelligencers, not only for her Majesty's foreign enemies but also for rebellious and traitrous subjects. . . . and hiding their most detestable and devilish purposes under a false pretext of religion and conscience do secretly wander and shift from place to place within this realm to corrupt and seduce her Majesty's subjects and to stir them to sedition and rebellion: Be it ordained and enacted. . . .

In direct religious controversy there is naturally a still more definite acerbity, especially on the side of the Puritans. Take, for example, Barrow's *Brief Discovery of the False Church*. After discussing the various divisions which followed the Apostolic period, he goes on:

But Satan having yet a further reach, ceased not here, but still contended to set up one chief, until at length the lot rested upon the See of Rome where the Papacy became the very throne of Antichrist, where he sitteth in his exaltation, to whom the key of the bottomless pit was given; which being by him set wide open, the smoke of his canons, devices, trumperies and abominations darkened the sun, poisoned the air; the locusts and scorpions that came out of this pit and out of this smoke, the multitudes and swarms of monks, friars, canons, vagrant and mendicant preachers, so pestered and poisoned every tree, so stung and envenomed every conscience, that they could bear no fruit, neither brook any wholesome doctrine.

Or there is this passage from the Marprelate tracts, directed this time, not against Rome in the first instance, but against her supposed ally, the Established Church:

Therefore our L. Bps. with the rest of that swinish rabble are petty Antichrists, petty popes, proud prelates, intolerable withstanders of reformation, enemies of the gospel, and most covetous wretched priests. . . . Is it any marvel that we have so many swine, dumb dogs, non-residents, with their journeymen the hedge priests, so many lewd livers, as thieves, murderers, adulterers, drunkards, cormorants, rascals, so many ignorant and atheistical dolts, so many covetous popish Bps. in our ministry, and so many and so monstrous corruptions in our church, and yet likely to have no redress; seeing our impudent, shameless, and wainscot-faced bishops, like beasts, contrary to the knowledge of all men and against their own consciences, dare in the ears of her Majesty affirm all to be well where there is nothing but sores and blisters? Nay, says my L. of Winchester (like a monstrous hypocrite, for he is a very dunce, not able to defend an argument. . . . for his face is made of seasoned wainscot, and will lie as fast as a dog can trot) I have said it, I do say it, and I have said it. And, say I, you shall one day answer it. I would wish you to leave this villainy and the rest of your devilish practices against God and His saints, lest you answer it where your peevish and choleric simplicity will not excuse you.

Such was the sublime temper produced by the driving power of an intense religious conviction. But that intensity, when it reached its peak with the Commonwealth, was soon ruined by its very triumph. The Revolution leading to that climax had begun as a struggle between King and Parliament; it had developed into an attempt to rule resentful sinners by self-appointed saints; it had ended as a military despotism. Cromwell was shocked and concerned to discover how few saints were fit to rule, and how stubbornly Englishmen clung to their old manly vices in defiance of their Puritan mentors. When Cromwell died, the nation turned with a sigh of relief to the broader path as exemplified by Charles II; and for a considerable time thereafter, sainthood was in almost total eclipse.

In its place came the cool scepticism of the eighteenth century—a spirit fatal to invective in its highest form. I do not mean that invective disappeared entirely. There are passages in Dryden and Swift, in Bolingbroke and Wilkes, whose abuse is as direct as could be desired. But abuse was no longer the normal weapon of controversy. Irony and satire took its place, and to the bludgeoning vituperation of turbulent times there succeeded the polished malice of a more stable and cultivated age. It was with the rapier of wit that Pope attacked his rivals—a weapon no less deadly than the battle-axe of a Puritan like Prynne.

But by the end of the eighteenth century a change was again approaching. By that time the national life was itself in the grip

of changes that were fundamental and vital. And the first of these was the Industrial Revolution.

It is unnecessary to emphasize the immensity of this change. I simply want to notice its effect on the literature of controversy. It brought together in urban centres the proletariat which had hitherto been widely dispersed. It developed, through new demands and new contacts, a mental alertness and a consciousness of general issues which had hitherto been absent. And so it created a new and accessible audience that tempted controversialists to turn from the narrow circle of a cultivated class and address themselves to the new industrial public. To this public the restraint of irony made far less appeal. It was less appreciative of a well-turned phrase, or the deadly sting of satire. In its temper it more closely resembled the robust audience of the Puritans, and epithets rather than epigrams were the weapons most likely to arouse its enthusiasm.

But the nation was not merely in the throes of a tremendous economic and social transformation. The straining bounds of England had to hold John Wesley as well.

The Methodist movement was the revolt of the natural Englishman against the tyranny of common sense. The early eighteenth century offered little focus for the higher emotions of the average sensual man, little that could rouse him to indignation or enthusiasm. The Church had fallen into rationalism. Dissent had fallen into complacency. The flag was not a symbol of loyalty, nor the king an object of reverence. Even the Pope showed a disconcerting tendency to mind his own affairs. Causes into which a man could fling himself, casting wisdom to the winds and striking out with a splendid disregard of justice or of understanding, were far to seek. In the half century preceding the accession of George III, the natural crusader that dwells in every English heart came nigh to perishing from sheer emotional starvation.

Into this void came Wesley, and the repressed emotional gusto of the English nature burst forth in full vigour at his touch. He was a deliverer who provided an escape from the necessity of thought, and his divorce of faith from reason rallied all the enthusiasm of a people unsatisfied by the coldness of a reasonable world. Conviction of sin, conversion, assurance—the emotional outlet provided by these religious necessities was like dew upon the thirsty land. In Methodism its adherents found a life of rich and unimpaired irrationality.

The results were a little curious. At the root of the movement lay the emphasis on the salvation of the individual soul. The future life became of primary importance, the present life a period

of arduous probation whose necessity was undoubted but somewhat obscure. But it followed that the more satisfactorily that probation was accomplished, the greater the reward in Paradise. Thus it was incumbent upon all true believers to use their talents to the uttermost—and, as it happened, these talents seemed to lie chiefly in the economic sphere. And so, as Halévy says, “there came into existence a class of austere men, hard workers and greedy of gain, who considered it their two-fold duty to make a fortune in business and to preach Christ crucified.” By a curious paradox, the insistence on the future life resulted in a tremendous concern for the things of this world. Life was real; life was earnest; and the admonition to “Work while the dew is sparkling, Work ’mid springing flowers,” seemed a merited rebuke to the incorrigible levity alike of nature and of man.

Not only, then, was the public widened; its nature was radically changed. From a select class interested in the polished expression of ideas, it became a varied audience moved directly by emotion. It wanted no trifling with serious themes; it wanted high-sounding ideals, expressed in lofty phrases and animated by a righteous indignation. And the growth of this demand brought inevitably the rise of a type of writing and oratory suited to these new conditions.

One sees it foreshadowed in Junius. It is not dominant; the spirit of the eighteenth century is still paramount, and irony is still its most effective expression. But Junius’s “measured malignity of slander” holds a foretaste of the unmeasured fury of invective yet to come; and in his letter to Grafton—“the pillow upon which I am determined to rest all my resentment”—he shows what the age of George III could do in the way of direct abuse:

Let me be permitted to consider your character and conduct merely as a subject of curious speculation.—There is something in both which distinguishes you, not only from all other ministers, but all other men. It is not that you do wrong by design, but that you should never do right by mistake. It is not that your indolence and your activity have been equally misapplied, but that the genius of your life should have carried you through every possible change and contradiction of conduct without the momentary imputation or colour of a virtue; and that the wildest spirit of inconsistency should never once have betrayed you into an honourable action. . . . You may look back with pleasure to an illustrious pedigree in which heraldry has not left a single good quality upon record to insult or upbraid you. You have better proofs of your descent, my Lord, than the register of a marriage, or any troublesome inheritance of reputation. Charles the First lived and died a hypocrite. Charles the Second was a hypocrite

of another sort, and should have died upon the same scaffold. At the distance of a century, we see their different characters happily revived and blended in your Grace. Sullen and severe without religion, profligate without gaiety, you live like Charles the Second, without being an amiable companion, and for aught I know may die as his father did, without the reputation of a martyr.

The transition is still more apparent in Burke. With him the spirit of the eighteenth century makes its last desperate stand against the chaos of the modern world. It is a gallant stand, but it is vain, and Burke's own style is witness to its vanity. The balance, the wit, the ordered judgment, all are there; but with them is a pictorial richness, a moral fervour, an emotional appeal, the language of a new and a more serious age. And so Burke was doomed to die defeated, leaving his ideas to be rejected by the nineteenth century, and his style to be the model for a new flood of parliamentary eloquence.

By 1815 the transition is complete. England has become industrialized. England has become evangelical. England has emerged triumphant from her struggle with Napoleon, and her triumph has resulted in a firmly rooted belief that everything peculiarly English is the result of divine inspiration. It is the dawn of an age of tremendous faith for which only the language of Methodism is an adequate medium of expression, an age in which England, led by God and Queen Victoria, crusades with undaunted valour against the powers of darkness abroad throughout the world. The iniquity of the Corn Laws and the iniquity of the Turks are denounced with the same religious fervour. The conditions responsible for Bright and Gladstone are already fully in existence.

III

English invective in the nineteenth century may be divided into three classes: political invective, literary invective, and the invective of Thomas Carlyle. With this last I do not intend to deal specifically. I take the more credit for this restraint because Carlyle, of all men, most perfectly bears out my theory as to the conditions under which invective flourishes. He was certainly not a man who lacked faith in his own idea. I have never heard that he was especially charitable in imputing noble motives to those who contradicted him. He was preeminently Biblical in his affinity with the robust style of the major prophets; he traced back spiritually to those grim Calvinist divines who shook sinners over

the mouth of the Pit, and bade them behold how terrible it was to fall alive into the hands of an angry God. Even on the gastronomic side it would be possible to trace a certain connection between his violence and his dyspepsia. But since all these facts make him too obvious a figure to be a sporting choice, let us look abroad and see whether other and gentler Victorians were not occasionally able to chastise with verbal scorpions.

In considering English political invective, it is perhaps unfair to start with an Irishman. Climate, circumstances and temperament have united to endow the members of that race with a talent for vituperation remarkable in its fluency. But the career of Daniel O'Connell is essentially a part of English politics, as his speeches are a part of English political literature. There has been no more masterly summary of Peel than O'Connell's single sentence: "His smile was like a silver plate on a coffin." Here is his reply to an attack by Peel's young adversary, Disraeli:

He calls me a traitor. My answer to that is, that he is a liar. He is a liar in action and in words. His life is a living lie. He is a disgrace to his species. What state of society must that be that could tolerate such a creature—having the audacity to come forward with one set of principles at one time, and obtain political assistance by reason of those principles, and at another to profess diametrically the reverse? He is the most degraded of his species and kind; and England is degraded in tolerating a miscreant of his abominable, foul and atrocious nature. If there were harsher terms in the British language I should use them. . . . He possesses just the qualities of the impenitent thief who died upon the Cross, whose name, I verily believe, must have been Disraeli. For aught I know, the present Disraeli is descended from him, and, with the impression that he is, I now forgive the heir-at-law of the blasphemous thief who died upon the Cross.

But if O'Connell could strike with vigour when assailed, he had to take many a lusty blow in return. Perhaps the high spot in his conflict with the English is touched by the lines which the *Times* addressed to him under the heading of "The Whig Missionary of 1835":

Scum condensed of Irish bog!
 Ruffian, coward, demagogue!
 Boundless liar, base detractor!
 Nurse of murders, treason's factor. . . .
 Every dog shall have his day,
 This is thine of brutish sway.
 Mounted on a Premier's back,
 Lash the Ministerial pack;
 Though thy hand had stabbed their mother,

They would fawn and call thee brother.
 By their leave pursue thy calling,
 Rend thy patriot lungs with bawling;
 Spout thy filth, effuse thy slime,
 Slander is in thee no crime. . . .
 Who would sue a convict liar?
 On a poltroon who would fire?
 Then grant the Monster leave to roam,
 Let him slaver out his foam;
 Only give him length of string,
 He'll contrive himself to swing.

There appears to be some suspicion that Disraeli was responsible for this doggerel. That, I think, is doubtful. But Disraeli could be as unsparing as any man in politics. Considering his attacks on Peel, it is hardly to be expected that the Whig leaders would fare any better at his hands. Here is the way he deals with "that aged charlatan," Palmerston:

You owe the Whigs great gratitude, my Lord, and therefore I think you will betray them. Your lordship is like a favourite footman on easy terms with his mistress. Your dexterity seems a happy compound of the smartness of an attorney's clerk and the intrigue of a Greek of the lower empire.

Toward Lord John Russell he is even more severe:

If a traveller were informed that such a man was leader of the House of Commons, he may begin to comprehend how the Egyptians worshipped an Insect. . . . You are now exhaling upon the Constitution of your country all that long-hoarded venom and all those distempered humours that have for years accumulated in your petty heart and tainted the current of your mortified life.

But of all targets for the shafts of invective, the most tempting was Gladstone. There was something peculiarly exasperating about his conscious rectitude, something infuriating in his refusal to admit a fault in the face of the most palpable evidence. He could explain his inexplicable conduct in long parenthetical sentences which may indeed have parsed, but which ended by leaving confusion worse confounded. He could escape from an apparently inescapable charge of inconsistency up the back alley of a forgotten qualifying clause. Disraeli once alluded to him as "one who has left the Cabinet for some reason not given, and might join it again in circumstances equally obscure." It was a view shared by a large number of his irate contemporaries.

It is in human nature to rejoice secretly in the discomfiture of the righteous. Such is the attitude which finds expression in

the *Pall Mall Gazette* of 1868, on the occasion when Disraeli succeeded Derby as Prime Minister. The article can not itself be classed as invective, but its glee shows a spirit likely to be in sympathy with Gladstone's more direct assailants:

One of the most grievous and constant puzzles of King David was the prosperity of the wicked and the scornful, and the same tremendous moral enigma has come down to our own days. . . . Like the Psalmist, the Liberal leader may well protest that verily he has cleansed his heart in vain and washed his hands in innocency; all day long he has been plagued by Whig Lords and chastened every morning by Radical manufacturers; as blamelessly as any curate he has written about *Ecce Homo*; and he has never made a speech, even in the smallest country town, without calling out with David, How foolish I am, and how ignorant! For all this, what does he see? The scorner, who shot out the lip and shook the head at him across the table of the House of Commons last session, has now more than heart could wish; his eyes, speaking in an Oriental manner, stand out with fatness; he speaketh loftily, and pride compasseth him about as a chain. That the writer of frivolous stories about *Vivian Grey* and *Coningsby* should grasp the sceptre before the writer of beautiful and serious things about *Ecce Homo*—the man who is epigrammatic, flashy, arrogant, before the man who never perpetrated an epigram in his life, is always fervid, and would as soon die as admit that he has a shade more brain than his footman—the Radical corrupted into a Tory before the Tory purified and elevated into a Radical—is not this enough to make an honest man rend his mantle and shave his head and sit down among the ashes inconsolable?

Other contemporaries dealt still less gently with the great man. Here, for example, is Carlyle's description of him:

Gladstone appears to me one of the contemptiblest men I ever looked on. A poor Ritualist; almost spectral kind of phantasm of a man. Nothing in him but forms and ceremonies and outside wrappages; incapable of seeing veritably any fact whatever, but seeing, crediting, and laying to heart the mere clothes of the fact, and fancying that all the rest does not exist. Let him fight his own battle, in the name of Beelzebub the god of Ekron, who seems to be his god. Poor phantasm!

Disraeli's characterization of his rival as "a sophisticated rhetorician, inebriated with the exuberance of his own verbosity," is, of course, well known. It was evoked by the pamphlet on Bulgarian Atrocities of which Disraeli said: "The document is passionate and not strong; vindictive and ill written—that of course. Of all Bulgarian horrors, perhaps the greatest." He amplifies his criticism in his correspondence of this period; and as a final summary we may, I think, take this passage from a letter to Lord Derby:

Posterity will do justice to that unprincipled maniac Gladstone—extraordinary mixture of envy, vindictiveness, hypocrisy and superstition; and with one commanding characteristic—whether preaching, praying, speechifying or scribbling—never a gentleman!

And, finally, there is the opinion of Majesty herself. Whether the Queen ever actually complained that Gladstone addressed her as if she were a public meeting, the epigram is an accurate expression of their relations. Such a state of affairs was very tedious; and still more tedious was Gladstone's unbridled opposition to her favourite minister on grounds which seemed, to use her words, "mawkish sentimentality for people who hardly deserve the name of real Christians, as if they were more God's creatures than every other nation abroad." When the scandalous Midlothian "pilgrimage of passion" culminated, to her indignation, in Gladstone's victory, her exclamations flowed one after another:

The sort of mad and unreasoning *flow* of Liberal success is so unnatural that I feel certain it can't last. . . . Of course I shall not take any notice of Mr. Gladstone, who has done so much mischief. Indulgence and forbearance after such disgraceful and unpatriotic attacks would not be right. . . . I consider him to be the cause of all the mischief that brought on the Russian war, and that he has done everything he could to vilify and weaken the government in the times of the greatest difficulty.

Such being the spirit of political controversy, we may readily believe that Dickens used no more than his memories of the more typical political pronouncements when he included in the *Pickwick Papers* the editorial of the virtuous Mr. Potts, editor of the esteemed *Eatanswill Gazette*:

A reptile contemporary has recently sweltered forth his black venom in the vain and hopeless attempt of sullyng the fair fame of our distinguished and excellent representative, the Honourable Mr. Slumkey. . . . Our reptile contemporary. . . . has made himself merry at the expense of a superbly embossed plated coal-scuttle, which has been presented to that glorious man by his enraptured constituents, and toward which, the nameless wretch insinuates, the Honourable Mr. Slumkey himself contributed, through a confidential friend of his butler's, more than three-fourths of the whole sum subscribed. Why, does not the crawling creature see, that even if this be the fact, the Honourable Mr. Slumkey appears in a still more radiant light than before? But such is the wretched trickery of hole-and-corner Buffery. These are not its only artifices. Treason is abroad. We boldly state, now that we are goaded to the disclosure, that secret preparations are at this moment in progress for a Buff ball. . . . Does our fiendish contemporary wince? Let him writhe in impotent malice, as we pen the words, WE WILL BE THERE.

IV

All this would seem to indicate a sad lack of mutual esteem among Victorian politicians, and a most shocking rudeness in the general tone of political controversy. From such persistent impoliteness it will surely be a relief to turn to the sweetness and light of Victorian literature, to the generous recognition which artists have traditionally shown toward the work of their fellow-craftsmen.

Yet even here the serenity is occasionally troubled. There is, for instance, the reception of *Endymion* by the critics, and the retaliation on the critics in *Adonais*. Even this slashing condemnation left the critics unrepentant, if we may judge from this reply in *Blackwood's*:

We are not now to defend a publication so well able to defend itself. But the fact is that the *Quarterly*, finding before it a work at once silly and presumptuous, full of the servile slang that Cockaigne dictates to its servitors, and the vulgar indecorums which the Grub Street Empire rejoiceth to applaud, told the truth of the volume, and recommended a change of manners and masters to the scribbler. Keats wrote on; but he wrote *indecently*, probably in the indulgence of his social propensities.

So little had Shelley's protest worked a change in critic breasts, that the successors of Keats were treated with a harshness fully as great. Here is a passage from "The Fleshly School of Poetry," in which Robert Buchanan launches a robust and wholesale attack on his degenerate contemporaries:

All that is worst in Mr. Swinburne belongs to Baudelaire. The offensive choice of subject, the obtrusion of unnatural passion, the blasphemy, the wretched animalism, are all taken intact out of the *Fleurs du Mal*. Pitiful! that any sane man, least of all an English poet, should think this dunghill worthy of importation! In the sweep of a single poem, the weird and doubtful *Vivien*, Mr. Tennyson has concentrated all the epicene force which, wearisomely expended, constitutes the characteristics of the writers under consideration; and if in *Vivien* he has indicated for them the bounds of sensualism in art, he has in *Maud* afforded distinct precedent for the hysteric tone and overloaded style which is now so familiar to readers of Mr. Swinburne. . . . I close Mr. Swinburne's volumes. I try to gather some thought, some light, from what I have been reading. I find my mind jaded, my whole body sick and distressed, a dull pain lurking in the region of the medulla oblongata. I try to picture up Mr. Rossetti's poetry, and. . . . I hear only the ravings of an affected lover, indecent for the most part, and often blasphemous. I attempt to describe Mr. Swinburne; and lo! the Bacchanal screams, the sterile Dolores sweats, serpents dance, men and women wrench, wriggle, and foam in an endless alliteration of heated and meaningless words, the

veriest garbage of Baudelaire flowered over with the epithets of the Della Cruscan.

One might expect the gentle Swinburne, after such an assault, to go the way of the gentle Keats. But the gentleness of Swinburne had decided limitations. He could on occasion lash out with a bitterness worthy of the *Quarterly* itself. Take this passage, in which he puts Whitman in his place:

Under the dirty clumsy paws of a harper whose plectrum is a much-rake, any tune will become a chaos of discords, though the motive of the tune should be the first principle of nature—the passion of man for woman or the passion of woman for man. And the unhealthily demonstrative and obtrusive animalism of the Whitmaniad is as unnatural as even the filthy and inhuman asceticism of Simeon Stylites. . . . Mr. Whitman's Eve is a drunken apple-woman, indecently sprawling in the slush and garbage of the gutter amid the rotten refuse of her overturned fruitstall; Mr. Whitman's Venus is a Hottentot wench under the influence of adulterated rum. Cottyto herself would repudiate the ministrations of such priestesses as these.

Nor was Swinburne averse from addressing his subject directly. He once took umbrage at certain remarks of Emerson's, and wrote that gentleman a letter. Failing to receive a reply, he wrote again, in language, as he assured Edmund Gosse, of the strictest reserve. Here follows an example of his perfect moderation:

A foul mouth is so ill-matched with a white beard that I would gladly believe the newspaper-scribes alone responsible for the bestial utterances, which they declare to have dropped from a teacher whom such disciples as these exhibit to our disgust and compassion as performing on their obscene platform the last tricks of tongue now possible to a gap-toothed and hoary-headed ape, carried at first into notice on the shoulders of Carlyle, and who now in his dotage spits and chatters from a dirtier perch of his own finding and fouling.

And one more passage from a later writer I must quote; for though it embraces a wider range, its invective springs from the indignation of an affronted literary conscience.

Toward the end of the century, when Barrie was giving a new vogue to the adjective "whimsical", and the Kail-yard School of novels was at its height, there appeared in London a most outspoken book. It was published—very wisely—anonously; it was encased in a bright tartan cover; and its title was *The Unspeakable Scot*.

Now the Scot in England has never made himself wholly welcome. Dr. Johnson's remarks on the race have become classic. The unpopularity of the Earl of Bute was an early and a grave

obstacle to the success of George III. And in 1783 an indignant Anglo-Saxon wrote to Lord George Gordon:

How dare you in your base letter (to Shelburne) continually place Scotland before England? One million of beggars without breeches before seven millions of wealthy Englishmen; or your ragged barren mountains and heaths in the scale against England's fertile plains! Do you not know that, when the creation was finished, the clippings, the shreds of the elements were thrown together, which make up the present beggarly Scotland?

A century had not dimmed these sentiments, but only elaborated them. Here is how Crosland, author of the volume in question, deals with the sturdy northern race:

Your proper child of Caledonia believes in his rickety bones that he is the salt of the earth. Prompted by a glozing pride, not to say a black and consuming avarice, he has proclaimed his saltiness from the house-tops in and out of season, unblushingly, assiduously, and with results which have no doubt been most satisfactory from his own point of view. There is nothing creditable to the race of men, from filial piety to a pretty taste in claret, which he has not sedulously advertised as a virtue peculiar to himself. This arrogation has served him passing well. He is the one species of human animal that is taken by all the world to be fifty per cent. cleverer and pluckier and honester than the facts warrant. He is the daw with the peacock's tail of his own painting. He is the ass who has been at pains to cultivate the convincing roar of a lion. . . . He is the bandy-legged lout from Tullietudlescleugh who, after a childhood of intimacy with the cesspool and the crablouse, drops his threadbare kilt and comes south in a slop suit to instruct the English in the arts of civilization and the English language. Soon, forby, shall he be living in "chambers" and writing idiot books.

V

In the face of these random examples of the rich and abusive eloquence of former centuries, I admit that I for one am moved to envy of the men and the times capable of such hearty abandon. For it is not in our modern age to emulate such spirit. We are too little assured of our own worth to bear to see it aspersed. We are too ready to invoke the law of libel as a substitute for the effective counterblast of which we are incapable. We are too closely packed together in this machine society to withstand the disruptive force of controversy on such a plane. To such a society invective would be as dangerous as truth.

And besides, there is the effect of the war. So many of the old foundations were shaken by that catastrophe, so many of us lost

faith in the serene doctrine that "whatever is, is best", that it has been hard to speak with the old firm tone of complete assurance. It is true that a few voices still attempt to carry on the great tradition. A few strong protests are occasionally made against the trend of modern life. But it would be hard to find any that can match Disraeli's indictment of the England of his day:

If a spirit of rapacious covetousness, desecrating all the humanities of life, has been the besetting sin of England for the last century and a half, since the passing of the Reform Act the altar of Mammon has blazed with triple worship. To acquire, to accumulate, to plunder each other by virtue of philosophic phrases, to propose a Utopia to consist only of Wealth and Toil, this has been the breathless business of enfranchised England for the last twelve years, until we are startled from our voracious strife by the wail of intolerable serfage.

Or as a still higher standard, consider the passage in which Burton turns aside from a discussion of love-melancholy to berate the evils of his times:

He that shall examine this iron age wherein we live, where love is cold, justice fled with her assistants, virtue expelled, where vice abounds, the devil is loose, and see one man vilify and insult over his brother, as if he were an innocent or a block, oppress, tyrannize, prey upon, torture him, vex, gall, torment and crucify him, starve him, where is charity? He that shall see men so unspeakable in their lusts, unnatural in malice, such bloody designments, Italian blaspheming, Spanish renouncing, may well ask, where is charity? When we see and read of such cruel wars, tumults, bloody battles, so many murders and massacres, where is charity? Or see professed divines, holy men, to make the trumpet of the Gospel the trumpet of war, a company of hell-born Jesuits, and fiery spirited friars; as so many fire-brands set all the world by the ears and by their bloody inquisitions that, in thirty years, Bale saith, consumed 39 princes, 148 earls, 235 barons, 14,755 commons, worse than those ten persecutions, may justly doubt, where is charity.

And as for the state of the modern generation, who in these days has approached the vigour of Prynne—and even this is expurgated:

Pity it is to see how many ingenious youths and girls . . . (as if they were born for no other purpose but to consume their lives in lascivious dalliance, plays and pastimes, or in pampering, in adorning those living carcasses of theirs, which will turn to rottenness and worms-meat ere long, and to condemn their poor neglected souls) casting by all honest studies, all care of Heaven, do in this idle age of ours most prodigally, most sinfully riot away the cream and flower of their years in playhouses, in dancing-schools, taverns,

dice-houses, tobacco-shops, bowling-alleys, and such infamous places as is a shame for pagans, much more for Christians, to approve. . . . Whereas the dissoluteness of our lascivious, impudent, rattlepated gadding females now is such as if they had purposely studied to appropriate to themselves King Solomon's memorable character of a woman with impudent face, a subtle heart; they are loud and stubborn; their feet abide not in their houses; they are now without, now in the streets, and lie in wait at every corner; being never well pleased nor contented but when they are wandering abroad to plays and public shows, from which nature itself. . . . hath sequestered all women.

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The truth is, we are a world grown tired. Our elders who have carried the burden have begun to ask, What profit? They are succumbing, even they, to that deadliest of all worldly vices, an open mind. And the result is a return to the satire and irony behind which scepticism finds its refuge. Even when there are flashes of the old spirit among the louder of our prophets, even then their actions seem but spasmodic gestures, their language but a feeble echo of a greater and more unquestioning past. For the great voices are falling slowly silent; the great days of invective are no more; and we can only look back with a wistful regret to the heyday of a once great art of which our own age has kept only the last vestiges in decay.