they are morally worse or better depends on whether humanity as a whole is proceeding towards heaven or hell. When humanity is going to hell, the poor are always nearest to heaven.

Dickens was a mob—and a mob in revolt; he fought by the light of nature; he had not a theory, but a thirst. If any one chooses to offer the cheap sarcasm that his thirst was largely a thirst for milk-punch, I am content to reply with complete gravity and entire contempt that in a sense this is perfectly true. His thirst was for things as humble, as human, as laughable as that daily bread for which we cry to God. He had no particular plan of reform; or, when he had, it was startlingly petty and parochial compared with the deep, confused clamour of comradeship and insurrection that fills all his narrative. It would not be gravely unjust to him to compare him to his own heroine, Arabella Allen, who "didn't know what she did like," but who (when confronted with Mr. Bob

Sawyer) "did know what she didn't like." Dickens did know what he didn't like. He didn't like the Unrivalled Happiness which Mr. Roebuck praised; the economic laws that were working so faultlessly in Fever-Alley; the wealth that was accumulating so rapidly in Bleeding Heart Yard. But, above all, he didn't like the *mean* side of the Manchester philosophy: the preaching of an impossible thrift and an intolerable temperance. He hated the implication that because a man was a miser in Latin he must also be a miser in English. And this meanness of the Utilitarians had gone very far—infecting many finer minds who had fought the Utilitarians. In the *Edinburgh Review*, a thing like Malthus could be championed by a man like Macaulay.

The twin root facts of the revolution called Dickens are these: first, that he attacked the cold Victorian compromise; second, that he attacked it without knowing he was doing it—certainly without knowing that other people were doing it. He was attacking

something which we will call Mr. Gradgrind. He was utterly unaware (in any essential sense) that any one else had attacked Mr. Gradgrind. All the other attacks had come from positions of learning or cultured eccentricity of which he was entirely ignorant, and to which, therefore (like a spirited fellow), he felt a furious hostility. Thus, for instance, he hated that Little Bethel to which Kit's mother went: he hated it simply as Kit hated it. Newman could have told him it was hateful, because it had no root in religious history; it was not even a sapling sprung of the seed of some great human and heathen tree: it was a monstrous mushroom that grows in the moonshine and dies in the dawn. Dickens knew no more of religious history than Kit; he simply smelt the fungus, and it stank. Thus, again, he hated that insolent luxury of a class counting itself a comfortable exception to all mankind; he hated it as Kate Nickleby hated Sir Mulberry Hawke—by instinct. Carlyle could have told him

that all the world was full of that anger against the impudent fatness of the few. But when Dickens wrote about Kate Nickleby, he knew about as much of the world—as Kate Nickleby. He did write *The Tale of Two Cities* long afterwards; but that was when he *had* been instructed by Carlyle. His first revolutionism was as private and internal as feeling sea-sick. Thus, once more, he wrote against Mr. Gradgrind long before he created him. In *The Chimes*, conceived in quite his casual and charitable season, with the *Christmas Carol* and the *Cricket on the Hearth*, he hit hard at the economists. Ruskin, in the same fashion, would have told him that the worst thing about the economists was that they were not economists: that they missed many essential things even in economics. But Dickens did not know whether they were economists or not: he only knew that they wanted hitting. Thus, to take a last case out of many, Dickens travelled in a French railway train, and noticed that this eccentric

nation provided him with wine that he could drink and sandwiches he could eat, and manners he could tolerate. And remembering the ghastly sawdust-eating waiting-rooms of the North English railways, he wrote that rich chapter in *Mugby Junction*. Matthew Arnold could have told him that this was but a part of the general thinning down of European civilisation in these islands at the edge of it; that for two or three thousand years the Latin society has learnt how to drink wine, and how not to drink too much of it. Dickens did not in the least understand the Latin society: but he did understand the wine. If (to prolong an idle but not entirely false metaphor) we have called Carlyle a man who saw and Arnold a man who knew, we might truly call Dickens a man who tasted, that is, a man who really felt. In spite of all the silly talk about his vulgarity, he really had, in the strict and serious sense, good taste. All real good taste is gusto—the power of appreciating the presence—or

the absence—of a particular and positive pleasure. He had no learning; he was not misled by the label on the bottle—for that is what learning largely meant in his time. He opened his mouth and shut his eyes and saw what the Age of Reason would give him. And, having tasted it, he spat it out.

I am constrained to consider Dickens here among the fighters; though I ought (on the pure principles of Art) to be considering him in the chapter which I have allotted to the story-tellers. But we should get the whole Victorian perspective wrong, in my opinion at least, if we did not see that Dickens was primarily the most successful of all the onslaughts on the solid scientific school; because he did not attack from the standpoint of extraordinary faith, like Newman; or the standpoint of extraordinary inspiration, like Carlyle; or the standpoint of extraordinary detachment or serenity, like Arnold; but from the standpoint of quite ordinary and quite hearty dislike. To give but one instance

more, Matthew Arnold, trying to carry into England constructive educational schemes which he could see spread like a clear railway map all over the Continent, was much badgered about what he really thought was *wrong* with English middle-class education. Despairing of explaining to the English middle class the idea of high and central public instruction, as distinct from coarse and hole-and-corner private instruction, he invoked the aid of Dickens. He said the English middle-class school was the sort of school where Mr. Creakle sat, with his buttered toast and his cane. Now Dickens had probably never seen any other kind of school—certainly he had never understood the systematic State Schools in which Arnold had learnt his lesson. But he saw the cane and the buttered toast, and he *knew* that it was all wrong. In this sense, Dickens, the great romanticist, is truly the great realist also. For he had no abstractions: he had nothing except realities out of which to make a romance.

With Dickens, then, re-arises that reality with which I began and which (curtly, but I think not falsely) I have called Cobbett. In dealing with fiction as such, I shall have occasion to say wherein Dickens is weaker and stronger than that England of the eighteenth century: here it is sufficient to say that he represents the return of Cobbett in this vital sense; that he is proud of being the ordinary man. No one can understand the thousand caricatures by Dickens who does not understand that he is comparing them all with his own common sense. Dickens, in the bulk, liked the things that Cobbett had liked; what is perhaps more to the point, he hated the things that Cobbett had hated; the Tudors, the lawyers, the leisurely oppression of the poor. Cobbett's fine fighting journalism had been what is nowadays called "personal," that is, it supposed human beings to be human. But Cobbett was also personal in the less satisfactory sense; he could only multiply monsters who were exaggerations

of his enemies or exaggerations of himself. Dickens was personal in a more godlike sense; he could multiply persons. He could create all the farce and tragedy of his age over again, with creatures unborn to sin and creatures unborn to suffer. That which had not been achieved by the fierce facts of Cobbett, the burning dreams of Carlyle, the white-hot proofs of Newman, was really or very nearly achieved by a crowd of impossible people. In the centre stood that citadel of atheist industrialism: and if indeed it has ever been taken, it was taken by the rush of that unreal army.

CHAPTER II

THE GREAT VICTORIAN NOVELISTS

THE Victorian novel was a thing entirely Victorian; quite unique and suited to a sort of cosiness in that country and that age. But the novel itself, though not merely Victorian, is mainly modern. No clear-headed person wastes his time over definitions, except where he thinks his own definition would probably be in dispute. I merely say, therefore, that when I say "novel," I mean a fictitious narrative (almost invariably, but not necessarily, in prose) of which the essential is that the story is not told for the sake of its naked pointedness as an anecdote, or for the sake of the irrelevant landscapes and visions that can be caught up in it, but for the sake of some study of the difference between human beings. There are several things that

make this mode of art unique. One of the most conspicuous is that it is the art in which the conquests of woman are quite beyond controversy. The proposition that Victorian women have done well in politics and philosophy is not necessarily an untrue proposition; but it is a partisan proposition. I never heard that many women, let alone men, shared the views of Mary Wollstonecraft; I never heard that millions of believers flocked to the religion tentatively founded by Miss Frances Power Cobbe. They did, undoubtedly, flock to Mrs. Eddy; but it will not be unfair to that lady to call her following a sect, and not altogether unreasonable to say that such insane exceptions prove the rule. Nor can I at this moment think of a single modern woman writing on politics or abstract things, whose work is of undisputed importance; except perhaps Mrs. Sidney Webb, who settles things by the simple process of ordering about the citizens of a state, as she might the servants in a kitchen. There has been, at

any rate, no writer on moral or political theory that can be mentioned, without seeming comic, in the same breath with the great female novelists. But when we come to the novelists, the women have, on the whole, equality; and certainly, in some points, superiority. Jane Austen is as strong in her own way as Scott is in his. But she is, for all practical purposes, never weak in her own way—and Scott very often is. Charlotte Brontë dedicated *Jane Eyre* to the author of *Vanity Fair*. I should hesitate to say that Charlotte Brontë's is a better book than Thackeray's, but I think it might well be maintained that it is a better story. All sorts of inquiring asses (equally ignorant of the old nature of woman and the new nature of the novel) whispered wisely that George Eliot's novels were really written by George Lewes. I will cheerfully answer for the fact that, if they had been written by George Lewes, no one would ever have read them. Those who have read his book on Robespierre

will have no doubt about my meaning. I am no idolater of George Eliot; but a man who could concoct such a crushing opiate about the most exciting occasion in history certainly did not write *The Mill on the Floss*. This is the first fact about the novel, that it is the introduction of a new and rather curious kind of art; and it has been found to be peculiarly feminine, from the first good novel by Fanny Burney to the last good novel by Miss May Sinclair. The truth is, I think, that the modern novel is a new thing; not new in its essence (for that is a philosophy for fools), but new in the sense that it lets loose many of the things that are old. It is a hearty and exhaustive overhauling of that part of human existence which has always been the woman's province, or rather kingdom; the play of personalities in private, the real difference between Tommy and Joe. It is right that womanhood should specialise in individuals, and be praised for doing so; just as in the Middle Ages she specialised in

dignity and was praised for doing so. People put the matter wrong when they say that the novel is a study of human nature. Human nature is a thing that even men can understand. Human nature is born of the pain of a woman; human nature plays at peep-bo when it is two and at cricket when it is twelve; human nature earns its living and desires the other sex and dies. What the novel deals with is what women have to deal with; the differentiations, the twists and turns of this eternal river. The key of this new form of art, which we call fiction, is sympathy. And sympathy does not mean so much feeling with all who feel, but rather suffering with all who suffer. And it was inevitable, under such an inspiration, that more attention should be given to the awkward corners of life than to its even flow. The very promising domestic channel dug by the Victorian women, in books like *Cranford*, by Mrs. Gaskell, would have got to the sea, if they had been left alone to dig it. They might have made domesticity

a fairyland. Unfortunately another idea, the idea of imitating men's cuffs and collars and documents, cut across this purely female discovery and destroyed it.

It may seem mere praise of the novel to say it is the art of sympathy and the study of human variations. But indeed, though this is a good thing, it is not universally good. We have gained in sympathy; but we have lost in brotherhood. Old quarrels had more equality than modern exonerations. Two peasants in the Middle Ages quarrelled about their two fields. But they went to the same church, served in the same semi-feudal militia, and had the same morality, whichever might happen to be breaking it at the moment. The very cause of their quarrel was the cause of their fraternity; they both liked land. But suppose one of them a teetotaler who desired the abolition of hops on both farms; suppose the other a vegetarian who desired the abolition of chickens on both farms: and it is at once apparent that a quarrel of quite

a different kind would begin; and that in that quarrel it would not be a question of farmer against farmer, but of individual against individual. This fundamental sense of human fraternity can only exist in the presence of positive religion. Man is merely man only when he is seen against the sky. If he is seen against any landscape, he is only a man of that land. If he is seen against any house, he is only a householder. Only where death and eternity are intensely present can human beings fully feel their fellowship. Once the divine darkness against which we stand is really dismissed from the mind (as it was very nearly dismissed in the Victorian time) the differences between human beings become overpoweringly plain; whether they are expressed in the high caricatures of Dickens or the low lunacies of Zola.

This can be seen in a sort of picture in the Prologue of the *Canterbury Tales;* which is already pregnant with the promise of the English novel. The characters there are

at once graphically and delicately differentiated; the Doctor with his rich cloak, his careful meals, his coldness to religion; the Franklin, whose white beard was so fresh that it recalled the daisies, and in whose house it snowed meat and drink; the Summoner, from whose fearful face, like a red cherub's, the children fled, and who wore a garland like a hoop; the Miller with his short red hair and bagpipes and brutal head, with which he could break down a door; the Lover who was as sleepless as a nightingale; the Knight, the Cook, the Clerk of Oxford. Pendennis or the Cook, M. Mirabolant, are nowhere so vividly varied by a few merely verbal strokes. But the great difference is deeper and more striking. It is simply that Pendennis would never have gone riding with a cook at all. Chaucer's knight rode with a cook quite naturally; because the thing they were all seeking together was as much above knighthood as it was above cookery. Soldiers and swindlers and bullies and outcasts, they

were all going to the shrine of a distant saint. To what sort of distant saint would Pendennis and Colonel Newcome and Mr. Moss and Captain Costigan and Ridley the butler and Bayham and Sir Barnes Newcome and Laura and the Duchess d'Ivry and Warrington and Captain Blackball and Lady Kew travel, laughing and telling tales together?

The growth of the novel, therefore, must not be too easily called an increase in the interest in humanity. It is an increase in the interest in the things in which men differ; much fuller and finer work had been done before about the things in which they agree. And this intense interest in variety had its bad side as well as its good; it has rather increased social distinctions in a serious and spiritual sense. Most of the oblivion of democracy is due to the oblivion of death. But in its own manner and measure, it was a real advance and experiment of the European mind, like the public art of the Renaissance or the fairyland of physical science explored

excellent.

in the nineteenth century. It was a more unquestionable benefit than these: and in that development women played a peculiar part, English women especially, and Victorian women most of all.

It is perhaps partly, though certainly not entirely, this influence of the great women writers that explains another very arresting and important fact about the emergence of genuinely Victorian fiction. It had been by this time decided, by the powers that had influence (and by public opinion also, at least in the middle-class sense), that certain verbal limits must be set to such literature. The novel must be what some would call pure and others would call prudish; but what is not, properly considered, either one or the other: it is rather a more or less business proposal (right or wrong) that every writer shall draw the line at literal physical description of things socially concealed. It was originally merely verbal; it had not, primarily, any dream of purifying the topic or the

moral tone. Dickens and Thackeray claimed very properly the right to deal with shameful passions and suggest their shameful culminations; Scott sometimes dealt with ideas positively horrible—as in that grand Glenallan tragedy which is as appalling as the *Œdipus* or *The Cenci*. None of these great men would have tolerated for a moment being talked to (as the muddle-headed amateur censors talk to artists to-day) about "wholesome" topics and suggestions "that cannot elevate." They had to describe the great battle of good and evil and they described both; but they accepted a working Victorian compromise about what should happen behind the scenes and what on the stage. Dickens did not claim the license of diction Fielding might have claimed in repeating the senile ecstasies of Gride (let us say) over his purchased bride: but Dickens does not leave the reader in the faintest doubt about what sort of feelings they were; nor is there any reason why he should. Thackeray would not have described the toilet details

of the secret balls of Lord Steyne: he left that to Lady Cardigan. But no one who had read Thackeray's version would be surprised at Lady Cardigan's. But though the great Victorian novelists would not have permitted the impudence of the suggestion that every part of their problem must be wholesome and innocent in itself, it is still tenable (I do not say it is certain) that by yielding to the Philistines on this verbal compromise, they have in the long run worked for impurity rather than purity. In one point I do certainly think that Victorian Bowdlerism did pure harm. This is the simple point that, nine times out of ten, the coarse word is the word that condemns an evil and the refined word the word that excuses it. A common evasion, for instance, substitutes for the word that brands self-sale as the essential sin, a word which weakly suggests that it is no more wicked than walking down the street. The great peril of such soft mystifications is that extreme evils (they that are abnormal

even by the standard of evil) have a very long start. Where ordinary wrong is made unintelligible, extraordinary wrong can count on remaining more unintelligible still; especially among those who live in such an atmosphere of long words. It is a cruel comment on the purity of the Victorian Age, that the age ended (save for the bursting of a single scandal) in a thing being everywhere called "Art," "The Greek Spirit," "The Platonic Ideal" and so on—which any navvy mending the road outside would have stamped with a word as vile and as vulgar as it deserved.

This reticence, right or wrong, may have been connected with the participation of women with men in the matter of fiction. It is an important point: the sexes can only be coarse separately. It was certainly also due, as I have already suggested, to the treaty between the rich *bourgeoisie* and the old aristocracy, which both had to make, for the common and congenial purpose of keeping

the English people down. But it was due much more than this to a general moral atmosphere in the Victorian Age. It is impossible to express that spirit except by the electric bell of a name. It was latitudinarian, and yet it was limited. It could be content with nothing less than the whole cosmos : yet the cosmos with which it was content was small. It is false to say it was without humour : yet there was something by instinct unsmiling in it. It was always saying solidly that things were "enough"; and proving by that sharpness (as of the shutting of a door) that they were not enough. It took, I will not say its pleasures, but even its emancipations, sadly. Definitions seem to escape this way and that in the attempt to locate it as an idea. But every one will understand me if I call it George Eliot.

I begin with this great woman of letters for both the two reasons already mentioned. She represents the rationalism of the old Victorian Age at its highest. She and Mill

are like two great mountains at the end of that long, hard chain which is the watershed of the Early Victorian time. They alone rise high enough to be confused among the clouds —or perhaps confused among the stars. They certainly were seeking truth, as Newman and Carlyle were; the slow slope of the later Victorian vulgarity does not lower their precipice and pinnacle. But I begin with this name also because it emphasises the idea of modern fiction as a fresh and largely a female thing. The novel of the nineteenth century was female; as fully as the novel of the eighteenth century was male. It is quite certain that no woman could have written *Roderick Random*. It is not quite so certain that no woman could have written *Esmond*. The strength and subtlety of woman had certainly sunk deep into English letters when George Eliot began to write.

Her originals and even her contemporaries had shown the feminine power in fiction as well or better than she. Charlotte Brontë,

understood along her own instincts, was as great; Jane Austen was greater. The latter comes into our present consideration only as that most exasperating thing, an ideal unachieved. It is like leaving an unconquered fortress in the rear. No woman later has captured the complete common sense of Jane Austen. She could keep her head, while all the after women went about looking for their brains. She could describe a man coolly; which neither George Eliot nor Charlotte Brontë could do. She knew what she knew, like a sound dogmatist : she did not know what she did not know—like a sound agnostic. But she belongs to a vanished world before the great progressive age of which I write.

One of the characteristics of the central Victorian spirit was a tendency to substitute a certain more or less satisfied seriousness for the extremes of tragedy and comedy. This is marked by a certain change in George Eliot; as it is marked by a certain limitation or moderation in Dickens. Dickens was the

People, as it was in the eighteenth century and still largely is, in spite of all the talk for and against Board School Education: comic, tragic, realistic, free-spoken, far looser in words than in deeds. It marks the silent strength and pressure of the spirit of the Victorian middle class that even to Dickens it never occurred to revive the verbal coarseness of Smollett or Swift. The other proof of the same pressure is the change in George Eliot. She was not a genius in the elemental sense of Dickens; she could never have been either so strong or so soft. But she did originally represent some of the same popular realities: and her first books (at least as compared with her latest) were full of sound fun and bitter pathos. Mr. Max Beerbohm has remarked (in his glorious essay called *Ichabod*, I think), that Silas Marner would not have forgotten his miserliness if George Eliot had written of him in her maturity. I have a great regard for Mr. Beerbohm's literary judgments; and it may be so. But

if literature means anything more than a cold calculation of the chances, if there is in it, as I believe, any deeper idea of detaching the spirit of life from the dull obstacles of life, of permitting human nature really to reveal itself as human, if (to put it shortly) literature has anything on earth to do with being *interesting*—then I think we would rather have a few more Marners than that rich maturity that gave us the analysed dust-heaps of *Daniel Deronda.*

In her best novels there is real humour, of a cool sparkling sort; there is a strong sense of substantial character that has not yet degenerated into psychology; there is a great deal of wisdom, chiefly about women; indeed there is almost every element of literature except a certain indescribable thing called *glamour;* which was the whole stock-in-trade of the Brontës, which we feel in Dickens when Quilp clambers amid rotten wood by the desolate river; and even in Thackeray when Esmond with his melan-

choly eyes wanders like some swarthy crow about the dismal avenues of Castlewood. Of this quality (which some have called, but hastily, the essential of literature) George Eliot had not little but nothing. Her air is bright and intellectually even exciting; but it is like the air of a cloudless day on the parade at Brighton. She sees people clearly, but not through an atmosphere. And she can conjure up storms in the conscious, but not in the subconscious mind.

It is true (though the idea should not be exaggerated) that this deficiency was largely due to her being cut off from all those conceptions that had made the fiction of a Muse; the deep idea that there are really demons and angels behind men. Certainly the increasing atheism of her school spoilt her own particular imaginative talent : she was far less free when she thought like Ladislaw than when she thought like Casaubon. It also betrayed her on a matter specially requiring common sense; I mean sex. There is nothing that is so pro-

foundly false as rationalist flirtation. Each sex is trying to be both sexes at once; and the result is a confusion more untruthful than any conventions. This can easily be seen by comparing her with a greater woman who died before the beginning of our present problem. Jane Austen was born before those bonds which (we are told) protected woman from truth, were burst by the Brontës or elaborately untied by George Eliot. Yet the fact remains that Jane Austen knew much more about men than either of them. Jane Austen may have been protected from truth: but it was precious little of truth that was protected from her. When Darcy, in finally confessing his faults, says, "I have been a selfish being all my life, in practice *though not in theory*," he gets nearer to a complete confession of the intelligent male than ever was even hinted by the Byronic lapses of the Brontës' heroes or the elaborate exculpations of George Eliot's. Jane Austen, of course, covered an infinitely smaller field than any

of her later rivals; but I have always believed in the victory of small nationalities.

The Brontës suggest themselves here; because their superficial qualities, the qualities that can be seized upon in satire, were in this an exaggeration of what was, in George Eliot, hardly more than an omission. There was perhaps a time when Mr. Rawjester was more widely known than Mr. Rochester. And certainly Mr. Rochester (to adopt the diction of that other eminent country gentleman, Mr. Darcy) was simply individualistic not only in practice, but in theory. Now any one may be so in practice: but a man who is simply individualistic in theory must merely be an ass. Undoubtedly the Brontës exposed themselves to some misunderstanding by thus perpetually making the masculine creature much more masculine than he wants to be. Thackeray (a man of strong though sleepy virility) asked in his exquisite plaintive way: "Why do our lady novelists make the men bully the women?" It is, I think,

unquestionably true that the Brontës treated the male as an almost anarchic thing coming in from outside nature; much as people on this planet regard a comet. Even the really delicate and sustained comedy of Paul Emanuel is not quite free from this air of studying something alien. The reply may be made that the women in men's novels are equally fallacious. The reply is probably just.

What the Brontës really brought into fiction was exactly what Carlyle brought into history; the blast of the mysticism of the North. They were of Irish blood settled on the windy heights of Yorkshire; in that country where Catholicism lingered latest, but in a superstitious form; where modern industrialism came earliest and was more superstitious still. The strong winds and sterile places, the old tyranny of barons and the new and blacker tyranny of manufacturers, has made and left that country a land of barbarians. All Charlotte Brontë's earlier work is full of that sullen and unmanageable world; moss-

troopers turned hurriedly into miners; the last of the old world forced into supporting the very first crudities of the new. In this way Charlotte Brontë represents the Victorian settlement in a special way. The Early Victorian Industrialism is to George Eliot and to Charlotte Brontë, rather as the Late Victorian Imperialism would have been to Mrs. Humphry Ward in the centre of the empire and to Miss Olive Schreiner at the edge of it. The real strength there is in characters like Robert Moore, when he is dealing with anything except women, is the romance of industry in its first advance: a romance that has not remained. On such fighting frontiers people always exaggerate the strong qualities the masculine sex does possess, and always add a great many strong qualities that it does not possess. That is, briefly, all the reason in the Brontës on this special subject: the rest is stark unreason. It can be most clearly seen in that sister of Charlotte Brontë's, who has achieved the real feat of

remaining as a great woman rather than a great writer. There is really, in a narrow but intense way, a tradition of Emily Brontë: as there is a tradition of St. Peter or Dr. Johnson. People talk as if they had known her, apart from her works. She must have been something more than an original person; perhaps an origin. But so far as her written works go she enters English letters only as an original person—and rather a narrow one. Her imagination was sometimes superhuman —always inhuman. *Wuthering Heights* might have been written by an eagle. She is the strongest instance of these strong imaginations that made the other sex a monster: for Heathcliffe fails as a man as catastrophically as he succeeds as a demon. I think Emily Brontë was further narrowed by the broadness of her religious views; but never, of course, so much as George Eliot.

In any case, it is Charlotte Brontë who enters Victorian literature. The shortest way of stating her strong contribution is, I think,

this: that she reached the highest romance through the lowest realism. She did not set out with Amadis of Gaul in a forest or with Mr. Pickwick in a comic club. She set out with herself, with her own dingy clothes, and accidental ugliness, and flat, coarse, provincial household; and forcibly fused all such muddy materials into a spirited fairy-tale. If the first chapters on the home and school had not proved how heavy and hateful *sanity* can be, there would really be less point in the insanity of Mr. Rochester's wife—or the not much milder insanity of Mrs. Rochester's husband. She discovered the secret of hiding the sensational in the commonplace: and *Jane Eyre* remains the best of her books (better even than *Villette*) because while it is a human document written in blood, it is also one of the best blood-and-thunder detective stories in the world.

But while Emily Brontë was as unsociable as a storm at midnight, and while Charlotte Brontë was at best like that warmer and more

domestic thing, a house on fire—they do connect themselves with the calm of George Eliot, as the forerunners of many later developments of the feminine advance. Many forerunners (if it comes to that) would have felt rather ill if they had seen the things they foreran. This notion of a hazy anticipation of after history has been absurdly overdone: as when men connect Chaucer with the Reformation; which is like connecting Homer with the Syracusan Expedition. But it is to some extent true that all these great Victorian women had a sort of unrest in their souls. And the proof of it is that (after what I will claim to call the healthier time of Dickens and Thackeray) it began to be admitted by the great Victorian men. If there had not been something in that irritation, we should hardly have had to speak in these pages of *Diana of the Crossways* or of *Tess of the D'Urbervilles*. To what this strange and very local sex war has been due I shall not ask, because I have no answer.

That it was due to votes or even little legal inequalities about marriage, I feel myself here too close to realities even to discuss. My own guess is that it has been due to the great neglect of the military spirit by the male Victorians. The woman felt obscurely that she was still running her mortal risk, while the man was not still running his. But I know nothing about it; nor does anybody else.

In so short a book on so vast, complex and living a subject, it is impossible to drop even into the second rank of good authors, whose name is legion; but it is impossible to leave that considerable female force in fiction which has so largely made the very nature of the modern novel, without mentioning two names which almost brought that second rank up to the first rank. They were at utterly opposite poles. The one succeeded by being a much mellower and more Christian George Eliot; the other succeeded by being a much more mad and unchristian Emily Brontë. But Mrs. Oliphant and the author calling

herself "Ouida" both forced themselves well within the frontier of fine literature. *The Beleaguered City* is literature in its highest sense; the other works of its author tend to fall into fiction in its best working sense. Mrs. Oliphant was infinitely saner in that city of ghosts than the cosmopolitan Ouida ever was in any of the cities of men. Mrs. Oliphant would never have dared to discover, either in heaven or hell, such a thing as a hairbrush with its back encrusted with diamonds. But though Ouida was violent and weak where Mrs. Oliphant might have been mild and strong, her own triumphs were her own. She had a real power of expressing the senses through her style; of conveying the very heat of blue skies or the bursting of palpable pomegranates. And just as Mrs. Oliphant transfused her more timid Victorian tales with a true and intense faith in the Christian mystery—so Ouida, with infinite fury and infinite confusion of thought, did fill her books with

Byron and the remains of the French Revolution. In the track of such genius there has been quite an accumulation of true talent as in the children's tales of Mrs. Ewing, the historical tales of Miss Yonge, the tales of Mrs. Molesworth, and so on. On a general review I do not think I have been wrong in taking the female novelists first. I think they gave its special shape, its temporary twist, to the Victorian novel.

Nevertheless it is a shock (I almost dare to call it a relief) to come back to the males. It is the more abrupt because the first name that must be mentioned derives directly from the mere maleness of the Sterne and Smollett novel. I have already spoken of Dickens as the most homely and instinctive, and therefore probably the heaviest, of all the onslaughts made on the central Victorian satisfaction. There is therefore the less to say of him here, where we consider him only as a novelist: but there is still much more to say than can even conceivably be said.

Dickens, as we have stated, inherited the old comic, rambling novel from Smollett and the rest. Dickens, as we have also stated, consented to expurgate that novel. But when all origins and all restraints have been defined and allowed for, the creature that came out was such as we shall not see again. Smollett was coarse; but Smollett was also cruel. Dickens was frequently horrible; he was never cruel. The art of Dickens was the most exquisite of arts: it was the art of enjoying everybody. Dickens, being a very human writer, had to be a very human being; he had his faults and sensibilities in a strong degree; and I do not for a moment maintain that he enjoyed everybody in his daily life. But he enjoyed everybody in his books; and everybody has enjoyed everybody in those books even till to-day. His books are full of baffled villains stalking out or cowardly bullies kicked downstairs. But the villains and the cowards are such delightful people that the reader always hopes the villain will

put his head through a side window and make a last remark; or that the bully will say one thing more, even from the bottom of the stairs. The reader really hopes this; and he cannot get rid of the fancy that the author hopes so too. I cannot at the moment recall that Dickens ever killed a comic villain, except Quilp, who was deliberately made even more villainous than comic. There can be no serious fears for the life of Mr. Wegg in the muckcart; though Mr. Pecksniff fell to be a borrower of money, and Mr. Mantalini to turning a mangle, the human race has the comfort of thinking they are still alive: and one might have the rapture of receiving a begging letter from Mr. Pecksniff, or even of catching Mr. Mantalini collecting the washing, if one always lurked about on Monday mornings. This sentiment (the true artist will be relieved to hear) is entirely unmoral. Mrs. Wilfer deserved death much more than Mr. Quilp, for she had succeeded in poisoning family life persistently, while he was (to say

the least of it) intermittent in his domesticity. But who can honestly say he does not hope Mrs. Wilfer is still talking like Mrs. Wilfer—especially if it is only in a book? This is the artistic greatness of Dickens, before and after which there is really nothing to be said. He had the power of creating people, both possible and impossible, who were simply precious and priceless people; and anything subtler added to that truth really only weakens it.

The mention of Mrs. Wilfer (whom the heart is loth to leave) reminds one of the only elementary ethical truth that is essential in the study of Dickens. That is that he had broad or universal sympathies in a sense totally unknown to the social reformers who wallow in such phrases. Dickens (unlike the social reformers) really did sympathise with every sort of victim of every sort of tyrant. He did truly pray for *all* who are desolate and oppressed. If you try to tie him to any cause narrower than that Prayer Book definition, you will find you have shut out half his

best work. If, in your sympathy for Mrs. Quilp, you call Dickens the champion of downtrodden woman, you will suddenly remember Mr. Wilfer, and find yourself unable to deny the existence of downtrodden man. If in your sympathy for Mr. Rouncewell you call Dickens the champion of a manly middle-class Liberalism against Chesney Wold, you will suddenly remember Stephen Blackpool—and find yourself unable to deny that Mr. Rouncewell might be a pretty insupportable cock on his own dunghill. If in your sympathy for Stephen Blackpool you call Dickens a Socialist (as does Mr. Pugh), and think of him as merely heralding the great Collectivist revolt against Victorian Individualism and Capitalism, which seemed so clearly to be the crisis at the end of this epoch—you will suddenly remember the agreeable young Barnacle at the Circumlocution Office: and you will be unable, for very shame, to assert that Dickens would have trusted the poor to a State Department.

Dickens did not merely believe in the brotherhood of men in the weak modern way; he was the brotherhood of men, and knew it was a brotherhood in sin as well as in aspiration. And he was not only larger than the old factions he satirised; he was larger than any of our great social schools that have gone forward since he died.

The seemingly quaint custom of comparing Dickens and Thackeray existed in their own time; and no one will dismiss it with entire disdain who remembers that the Victorian tradition was domestic and genuine, even when it was hoodwinked and unworldly. There must have been some reason for making this imaginary duel between two quite separate and quite amiable acquaintances. And there is, after all, some reason for it. It is not, as was once cheaply said, that Thackeray went in for truth, and Dickens for mere caricature. There is a huge accumulation of truth, down to the smallest detail, in Dickens: he seems sometimes a mere mountain of facts.

Thackeray, in comparison, often seems quite careless and elusive; almost as if he did not quite know where all his characters were. There is a truth behind the popular distinction; but it lies much deeper. Perhaps the best way of stating it is this: that Dickens used reality, while aiming at an effect of romance; while Thackeray used the loose language and ordinary approaches of romance, while aiming at an effect of reality. It was the special and splendid business of Dickens to introduce us to people who would have been quite incredible if he had not told us so much truth about them. It was the special and not less splendid task of Thackeray to introduce us to people whom we knew already. Paradoxically, but very practically, it followed that his introductions were the longer of the two. When we hear of Aunt Betsy Trotwood, we vividly envisage everything about her, from her gardening gloves to her seaside residence, from her hard, handsome face to her tame lunatic laughing at the bedroom

window. It is all so minutely true that she must be true also. We only feel inclined to walk round the English coast until we find that particular garden and that particular aunt. But when we turn from the aunt of Copperfield to the uncle of Pendennis, we are more likely to run round the coast trying to find a watering-place where he isn't than one where he is. The moment one sees Major Pendennis, one sees a hundred Major Pendennises. It is not a matter of mere realism. Miss Trotwood's bonnet and gardening tools and cupboard full of old-fashioned bottles are quite as true in the materialistic way as the Major's cuffs and corner table and toast and newspaper. Both writers are realistic: but Dickens writes realism in order to make the incredible credible. Thackeray writes it in order to make us recognise an old friend. Whether we shall be pleased to meet the old friend is quite another matter: I think we should be better pleased to meet Miss Trotwood, and find, as David Copperfield did,

a new friend, a new world. But we recognise Major Pendennis even when we avoid him. Henceforth Thackeray can count on our seeing him from his wig to his well-blacked boots whenever he chooses to say "Major Pendennis paid a call." Dickens, on the other hand, had to keep up an incessant excitement about his characters; and no man on earth but he could have kept it up.

It may be said, in approximate summary, that Thackeray is the novelist of memory—of our memories as well as his own. Dickens seems to expect all his characters, like amusing strangers arriving at lunch: as if they gave him not only pleasure, but surprise. But Thackeray is everybody's past—is everybody's youth. Forgotten friends flit about the passages of dreamy colleges and unremembered clubs; we hear fragments of unfinished conversations, we see faces without names for an instant, fixed for ever in some trivial grimace: we smell the strong smell of social cliques now quite incongruous to us; and

there stir in all the little rooms at once the hundred ghosts of oneself.

For this purpose Thackeray was equipped with a singularly easy and sympathetic style, carved in slow soft curves where Dickens hacked out his images with a hatchet. There was a sort of avuncular indulgence about his attitude; what he called his "preaching" was at worst a sort of grumbling, ending with the sentiment that boys will be boys and that there's nothing new under the sun. He was not really either a cynic or a *censor morum*; but (in another sense than Chaucer's) a gentle pardoner: having seen the weaknesses he is sometimes almost weak about them. He really comes nearer to exculpating Pendennis or Ethel Newcome than any other author, who saw what he saw, would have been. The rare wrath of such men is all the more effective; and there are passages in *Vanity Fair* and still more in *The Book of Snobs*, where he does make the dance of wealth and fashion look stiff and monstrous, like a Babylonian mas-

querade. But he never quite did it in such a way as to turn the course of the Victorian Age.

It may seem strange to say that Thackeray did not know enough of the world; yet this was the truth about him in large matters of the philosophy of life, and especially of his own time. He did not know the way things were going: he was too Victorian to understand the Victorian epoch. He did not know enough ignorant people to have heard the news. In one of his delightful asides he imagines two little clerks commenting erroneously on the appearance of Lady Kew or Sir Brian Newcome in the Park, and says: "How should Jones and Brown, who are not, *vous comprenez, du monde*, understand these mysteries?" But I think Thackeray knew quite as little about Jones and Brown as they knew about Newcome and Kew; his world was *le monde*. Hence he seemed to take it for granted that the Victorian compromise would last; while Dickens (who knew his Jones and

Brown) had already guessed that it would not. Thackeray did not realise that the Victorian platform was a moving platform. To take but one instance, he was a Radical like Dickens; all really representative Victorians, except perhaps Tennyson, were Radicals. But he seems to have thought of all reform as simple and straightforward and all of a piece; as if Catholic Emancipation, the New Poor Law, Free Trade and the Factory Acts and Popular Education were all parts of one almost self-evident evolution of enlightenment. Dickens, being in touch with the democracy, had already discovered that the country had come to a dark place of divided ways and divided counsels. In *Hard Times* he realised Democracy at war with Radicalism; and became, with so incompatible an ally as Ruskin, not indeed a Socialist, but certainly an anti-Individualist. In *Our Mutual Friend* he felt the strength of the new rich, and knew they had begun to transform the aristocracy, instead of the aristocracy transforming them.

He knew that Veneering had carried off Twemlow in triumph. He very nearly knew what we all know to-day: that, so far from it being possible to plod along the progressive road with more votes and more Free Trade, England must either sharply become very much more democratic or as rapidly become very much less so.

There gathers round these two great novelists a considerable group of good novelists, who more or less mirror their mid-Victorian mood. Wilkie Collins may be said to be in this way a lesser Dickens and Anthony Trollope a lesser Thackeray. Wilkie Collins is chiefly typical of his time in this respect: that while his moral and religious conceptions were as mechanical as his carefully constructed fictitious conspiracies, he nevertheless informed the latter with a sort of involuntary mysticism which dealt wholly with the darker side of the soul. For this was one of the most peculiar of the problems of the Victorian mind. The idea of the supernatural was

perhaps at as low an ebb as it had ever been—certainly much lower than it is now. But in spite of this, and in spite of a certain ethical cheeriness that was almost *de rigueur*—the strange fact remains that the only sort of supernaturalism the Victorians allowed to their imaginations was a sad supernaturalism. They might have ghost stories, but not saints' stories. They could trifle with the curse or unpardoning prophecy of a witch, but not with the pardon of a priest. They seem to have held (I believe erroneously) that the supernatural was safest when it came from below. When we think (for example) of the uncountable riches of religious art, imagery, ritual and popular legend that has clustered round Christmas through all the Christian ages, it is a truly extraordinary thing to reflect that Dickens (wishing to have in *The Christmas Carol* a little happy supernaturalism by way of a change) actually had to make up a mythology for himself. Here was one of the rare cases where Dickens, in a real and human

sense, did suffer from the lack of culture. For the rest, Wilkie Collins is these two elements: the mechanical and the mystical; both very good of their kind. He is one of the few novelists in whose case it is proper and literal to speak of his "plots." He was a plotter; he went about to slay Godfrey Ablewhite as coldly and craftily as the Indians did. But he also had a sound though sinister note of true magic; as in the repetition of the two white dresses in *The Woman in White;* or of the dreams with their double explanations in *Armadale*. His ghosts do walk. They are alive; and walk as softly as Count Fosco, but as solidly. Finally, *The Moonstone* is probably the best detective tale in the world.

Anthony Trollope, a clear and very capable realist, represents rather another side of the Victorian spirit of comfort; its leisureliness, its love of detail, especially of domestic detail; its love of following characters and kindred from book to book and from genera-

tion to generation. Dickens very seldom tried this latter experiment, and then (as in *Master Humphrey's Clock*) unsuccessfully; those magnesium blazes of his were too brilliant and glaring to be indefinitely prolonged. But Thackeray was full of it; and we often feel that the characters in *The Newcomes* or *Philip* might legitimately complain that their talk and tale are being perpetually interrupted and pestered by people out of other books. Within his narrower limits, Trollope was a more strict and masterly realist than Thackeray, and even those who would call his personages "types" would admit that they are as vivid as characters. It was a bustling but a quiet world that he described: politics before the coming of the Irish and the Socialists; the Church in the lull between the Oxford Movement and the modern High Anglican energy. And it is notable in the Victorian spirit once more that though his clergymen are all of them real men and many of them good men, it never

really occurs to us to think of them as the priests of a religion.

Charles Reade may be said to go along with these; and Disraeli and even Kingsley; not because these three very different persons had anything particular in common, but because they all fell short of the first rank in about the same degree. Charles Reade had a kind of cold coarseness about him, not morally but artistically, which keeps him out of the best literature as such: but he is of importance to the Victorian development in another way; because he has the harsher and more tragic note that has come later in the study of our social problems. He is the first of the angry realists. Kingsley's best books may be called boys' books. There is a real though a juvenile poetry in *Westward Ho!* and though that narrative, historically considered, is very much of a lie, it is a good, thundering honest lie. There are also genuinely eloquent things in *Hypatia*, and a certain electric atmosphere of sectarian

excitement that Kingsley kept himself in, and did know how to convey. He said he wrote the book in his heart's blood. This is an exaggeration, but there is a truth in it; and one does feel that he may have relieved his feelings by writing it in red ink. As for Disraeli, his novels are able and interesting considered as everything except novels, and are an important contribution precisely because they are written by an alien who did not take our politics so seriously as Trollope did. They are important again as showing those later Victorian changes which men like Thackeray missed. Disraeli did do something towards revealing the dishonesty of our politics—even if he had done a good deal towards bringing it about.

Between this group and the next there hovers a figure very hard to place; not higher in letters than these, yet not easy to class with them; I mean Bulwer Lytton. He was no greater than they were; yet somehow he seems to take up more space. He did not,

in the ultimate reckoning, do anything in particular: but he was a figure; rather as Oscar Wilde was later a figure. You could not have the Victorian Age without him. And this was not due to wholly superficial things like his dandyism, his dark, sinister good looks and a great deal of the mere polished melodrama that he wrote. There was something in his all-round interests; in the variety of things he tried; in his half-aristocratic swagger as poet and politician, that made him in some ways a real touchstone of the time. It is noticeable about him that he is always turning up everywhere and that he brings other people out, generally in a hostile spirit. His Byronic and almost Oriental ostentation was used by the young Thackeray as something on which to sharpen his new razor of Victorian common sense. His pose as a dilettante satirist inflamed the execrable temper of Tennyson, and led to those lively comparisons to a bandbox and a lion in curlpapers. He interposed the glove

of warning and the tear of sensibility between us and the proper ending of *Great Expectations.* Of his own books, by far the best are the really charming comedies about *The Caxtons* and *Kenelm Chillingly;* none of his other works have a high literary importance now; with the possible exception of *A Strange Story;* but his *Coming Race* is historically interesting as foreshadowing those novels of the future which were afterwards such a weapon of the Socialists. Lastly, there was an element indefinable about Lytton, which often is in adventurers; which amounts to a suspicion that there was something in him after all. It rang out of him when he said to the hesitating Crimean Parliament: "Destroy your Government and save your army."

With the next phase of Victorian fiction we enter a new world; the later, more revolutionary, more continental, freer but in some ways weaker world in which we live to-day. The subtle and sad change that was passing like twilight across the English brain at this

time is very well expressed in the fact that men have come to mention the great name of Meredith in the same breath as Mr. Thomas Hardy. Both writers, doubtless, disagreed with the orthodox religion of the ordinary English village. Most of us have disagreed with that religion until we made the simple discovery that it does not exist. But in any age where ideas could be even feebly disentangled from each other, it would have been evident at once that Meredith and Hardy were, intellectually speaking, mortal enemies. They were much more opposed to each other than Newman was to Kingsley; or than Abelard was to St. Bernard. But then they collided in a sceptical age, which is like colliding in a London fog. There can never be any clear controversy in a sceptical age.

Nevertheless both Hardy and Meredith did mean something; and they did mean diametrically opposite things. Meredith was perhaps the only man in the modern world who has almost had the high honour of rising

out of the low estate of a Pantheist into the high estate of a Pagan. A Pagan is a person who can do what hardly any person for the last two thousand years could do: a person who can take Nature naturally. It is due to Meredith to say that no one outside a few of the great Greeks has ever taken Nature so naturally as he did. And it is also due to him to say that no one outside Colney Hatch ever took Nature so unnaturally as it was taken in what Mr. Hardy has had the blasphemy to call Wessex Tales. This division between the two points of view is vital; because the turn of the nineteenth century was a very sharp one; by it we have reached the rapids in which we find ourselves to-day.

Meredith really is a Pantheist. You can express it by saying that God is the great All: you can express it much more intelligently by saying that Pan is the great god. But there is some sense in it, and the sense is this: that some people believe that this world is sufficiently good at bottom for us to

trust ourselves to it without very much knowing why. It is the whole point in most of Meredith's tales that there is something behind us that often saves us when we understand neither it nor ourselves. He sometimes talked mere intellectualism about women: but that is because the most brilliant brains can get tired. Meredith's brain was quite tired when it wrote some of its most quoted and least interesting epigrams: like that about passing Seraglio Point, but not doubling Cape Turk. Those who can see Meredith's mind in that are with those who can see Dickens' mind in Little Nell. Both were chivalrous pronouncements on behalf of oppressed females: neither have any earthly meaning as ideas.

But what Meredith did do for women was not to emancipate them (which means nothing) but to express them, which means a great deal. And he often expressed them right, even when he expressed himself wrong. Take, for instance, that phrase so often

quoted: "Woman will be the last thing civilised by man." Intellectually it is something worse than false; it is the opposite of what he was always attempting to say. So far from admitting any equality in the sexes, it logically admits that a man may use against a woman any chains or whips he has been in the habit of using against a tiger or a bear. He stood as the special champion of female dignity: but I cannot remember any author, Eastern or Western, who has so calmly assumed that man is the master and woman merely the material, as Meredith really does in this phrase. Any one who knows a free woman (she is generally a married woman) will immediately be inclined to ask two simple and catastrophic questions, first: "Why should woman be civilised?" and, second: "Why, if she is to be civilised, should she be civilised by man?" In the mere intellectualism of the matter, Meredith seems to be talking the most brutal sex mastery: he, at any rate, has not doubled Cape Turk, nor even passed

Seraglio Point. Now why is it that we all really feel that this Meredithian passage is not so insolently masculine as in mere logic it would seem? I think it is for this simple reason: that there is something about Meredith making us feel that it is not woman he disbelieves in, but civilisation. It is a dark undemonstrated feeling that Meredith would really be rather sorry if woman were civilised by man—or by anything else. When we have got that, we have got the real Pagan—the man that does believe in Pan.

It is proper to put this philosophic matter first, before the æsthetic appreciation of Meredith, because with Meredith a sort of passing bell has rung and the Victorian orthodoxy is certainly no longer safe. Dickens and Carlyle, as we have said, rebelled against the orthodox compromise: but Meredith has escaped from it. Cosmopolitanism, Socialism, Feminism are already in the air; and Queen Victoria has begun to look like Mrs. Grundy. But to escape from a city is

one thing: to choose a road is another. The free-thinker who found himself outside the Victorian city, found himself also in the fork of two very different naturalistic paths. One of them went upwards through a tangled but living forest to lonely but healthy hills: the other went down to a swamp. Hardy went down to botanise in the swamp, while Meredith climbed towards the sun. Meredith became, at his best, a sort of daintily dressed Walt Whitman: Hardy became a sort of village atheist brooding and blaspheming over the village idiot. It is largely because the free-thinkers, as a school, have hardly made up their minds whether they want to be more optimist or more pessimist than Christianity that their small but sincere movement has failed.

For the duel is deadly; and any agnostic who wishes to be anything more than a Nihilist must sympathise with one version of nature or the other. The God of Meredith is impersonal; but he is often more healthy

and kindly than any of the persons. That of Thomas Hardy is almost made personal by the intense feeling that he is poisonous. Nature is always coming in to save Meredith's women; Nature is always coming in to betray and ruin Hardy's. It has been said that if God had not existed it would have been necessary to invent Him. But it is not often, as in Mr. Hardy's case, that it is necessary to invent Him in order to prove how unnecessary (and undesirable) He is. But Mr. Hardy is anthropomorphic out of sheer atheism. He personifies the universe in order to give it a piece of his mind. But the fight is unequal for the old philosophical reason: that the universe had already given Mr. Hardy a piece of *its* mind to fight with. One curious result of this divergence in the two types of sceptic is this: that when these two brilliant novelists break down or blow up or otherwise lose for a moment their artistic self-command, they are both equally wild, but wild in opposite directions. Meredith shows an extravagance

in comedy which, if it were not so complicated, every one would call broad farce. But Mr. Hardy has the honour of inventing a new sort of game, which may be called the extravagance of depression. The placing of the weak lover and his new love in such a place that they actually see the black flag announcing that Tess has been hanged is utterly inexcusable in art and probability; it is a cruel practical joke. But it is a practical joke at which even its author cannot brighten up enough to laugh.

But it is when we consider the great artistic power of these two writers, with all their eccentricities, that we see even more clearly that free-thought was, as it were, a fight between finger-posts. For it is the remarkable fact that it was the man who had the healthy and manly outlook who had the crabbed and perverse style; it was the man who had the crabbed and perverse outlook who had the healthy and manly style. The reader may well have complained of paradox when I

observed above that Meredith, unlike most neo-Pagans, did in his way take Nature naturally. It may be suggested, in tones of some remonstrance, that things like "though pierced by the cruel acerb" or "thy fleeting-ness is bigger in the ghost," or "her gabbling grey she eyes askant," or "sheer film of the surface awag" are not taking Nature naturally. And this is true of Meredith's style, but it is not true of his spirit; nor even, apparently, of his serious opinions. In one of the poems I have quoted he actually says of those who live nearest to that Nature he was always praising—

> "Have they but held her laws and nature dear,
> They mouth no sentence of inverted wit";

which certainly was what Meredith himself was doing most of the time. But a similar paradox of the combination of plain tastes with twisted phrases can also be seen in

Browning. Something of the same can be seen in many of the cavalier poets. I do not understand it: it may be that the fertility of a cheerful mind crowds everything, so that the tree is entangled in its own branches; or it may be that the cheerful mind cares less whether it is understood or not; as a man is less articulate when he is humming than when he is calling for help.

Certainly Meredith suffers from applying a complex method to men and things he does not mean to be complex; nay, honestly admires for being simple. The conversations between Diana and Redworth fail of their full contrast because Meredith can afford the twopence for Diana coloured, but cannot afford the penny for Redworth plain. Meredith's ideals were neither sceptical nor finnicky: but they can be called insufficient. He had, perhaps, over and above his honest Pantheism two convictions profound enough to be called prejudices. He was probably of Welsh blood, certainly of Celtic sympathies,

and he set himself more swiftly though more subtly than Ruskin or Swinburne to undermining the enormous complacency of John Bull. He also had a sincere hope in the strength of womanhood, and may be said, almost without hyperbole, to have begotten gigantic daughters. He may yet suffer for his chivalric interference as many champions do. I have little doubt that when St. George had killed the dragon he was heartily afraid of the princess. But certainly neither of these two vital enthusiasms touched the Victorian trouble. The disaster of the modern English is not that they are not Celtic, but that they are not English. The tragedy of the modern woman is not that she is not allowed to follow man, but that she follows him far too slavishly. This conscious and theorising Meredith did not get very near his problem and is certainly miles away from ours. But the other Meredith was a creator; which means a god. That is true of him which is true of so different a man as Dickens,

that all one can say of him is that he is full of good things. A reader opening one of his books feels like a schoolboy opening a hamper which he knows to have somehow cost a hundred pounds. He may be more bewildered by it than by an ordinary hamper; but he gets the impression of a real richness of thought; and that is what one really gets from such riots of felicity as *Evan Harrington* or *Harry Richmond*. His philosophy may be barren, but he was not. And the chief feeling among those that enjoy him is a mere wish that more people could enjoy him too.

I end here upon Hardy and Meredith; because this parting of the ways to open optimism and open pessimism really was the end of the Victorian peace. There are many other men, very nearly as great, on whom I might delight to linger: on Shorthouse, for instance, who in one way goes with Mrs. Browning or Coventry Patmore. I mean that he has a wide culture, which is called by some a narrow religion. When we

think what even the best novels about cavaliers have been (written by men like Scott or Stevenson) it is a wonderful thing that the author of *John Inglesant* could write a cavalier romance in which he forgot Cromwell but remembered Hobbes. But Shorthouse is outside the period in fiction in the same sort of way in which Francis Thompson is outside it in poetry. He did not accept the Victorian basis. He knew too much.

There is one more matter that may best be considered here, though briefly: it illustrates the extreme difficulty of dealing with the Victorian English in a book like this, because of their eccentricity; not of opinions, but of character and artistic form. There are several great Victorians who will not fit into any of the obvious categories I employ; because they will not fit into anything, hardly into the world itself. Where Germany or Italy would relieve the monotony of mankind by paying serious respect to an artist, or a scholar, or a patriotic warrior, or a priest—

it was always the instinct of the English to do it by pointing out a Character. Dr. Johnson has faded as a poet or a critic, but he survives as a Character. Cobbett is neglected (unfortunately) as a publicist and pamphleteer, but he is remembered as a Character. Now these people continued to crop up through the Victorian time; and each stands so much by himself that I shall end these pages with a profound suspicion that I have forgotten to mention a Character of gigantic dimensions. Perhaps the best example of such eccentrics is George Borrow; who sympathised with unsuccessful nomads like the gipsies while every one else sympathised with successful nomads like the Jews; who had a genius like the west wind for the awakening of wild and casual friendships and the drag and attraction of the roads. But whether George Borrow ought to go into the section devoted to philosophers, or the section devoted to novelists, or the section devoted to liars, nobody else has ever known, even if he did.

But the strongest case of this Victorian power of being abruptly original in a corner can be found in two things: the literature meant merely for children and the literature meant merely for fun. It is true that these two very Victorian things often melted into each other (as was the way of Victorian things), but not sufficiently to make it safe to mass them together without distinction. Thus there was George Macdonald, a Scot of genius as genuine as Carlyle's; he could write fairy-tales that made all experience a fairy-tale. He could give the real sense that every one had the end of an elfin thread that must at last lead them into Paradise. It was a sort of optimist Calvinism. But such really significant fairy-tales were accidents of genius. Of the Victorian Age as a whole it is true to say that it did discover a new thing; a thing called Nonsense. It may be doubted whether this thing was really invented to please children. Rather it was invented by old people trying to prove their first childhood,

and sometimes succeeding only in proving their second. But whatever else the thing was, it was English and it was individual. Lewis Carroll gave mathematics a holiday: he carried logic into the wild lands of illogicality. Edward Lear, a richer, more romantic and therefore more truly Victorian buffoon, improved the experiment. But the more we study it, the more we shall, I think, conclude that it reposed on something more real and profound in the Victorians than even their just and exquisite appreciation of children. It came from the deep Victorian sense of humour.

It may appear, because I have used from time to time the only possible phrases for the case, that I mean the Victorian Englishman to appear as a blockhead, which means an unconscious buffoon. To all this there is a final answer: that he was also a conscious buffoon—and a successful one. He was a humorist; and one of the best humorists in Europe. That which Goethe had never

taught the Germans, Byron did manage to teach the English—the duty of not taking him seriously. The strong and shrewd Victorian humour appears in every slash of the pencil of Charles Keene; in every undergraduate inspiration of Calverley or "Q." or J. K. S. They had largely forgotten both art and arms: but the gods had left them laughter.

But the final proof that the Victorians were alive by this laughter, can be found in the fact they could manage and master for a moment even the cosmopolitan modern theatre. They could contrive to put "The Bab Ballads" on the stage. To turn a private name into a public epithet is a thing given to few: but the word "Gilbertian" will probably last longer than the name Gilbert.

It meant a real Victorian talent; that of exploding unexpectedly and almost, as it seemed, unintentionally. Gilbert made good jokes by the thousand; but he never (in his best days) made the joke that could possibly

have been expected of him. This is the last essential of the Victorian. Laugh at him as a limited man, a moralist, conventionalist, an opportunist, a formalist. But remember also that he was really a humorist; and may still be laughing at you.

CHAPTER III

THE GREAT VICTORIAN POETS

WHAT was really unsatisfactory in Victorian literature is something much easier to feel than to state. It was not so much a superiority in the men of other ages to the Victorian men. It was a superiority of Victorian men to themselves. The individual was unequal. Perhaps that is why the society became unequal: I cannot say. They were lame giants; the strongest of them walked on one leg a little shorter than the other. A great man in any age must be a common man, and also an uncommon man. Those that are only uncommon men are perverts and sowers of pestilence. But somehow the great Victorian man was more and less than this. He was at once a giant and a dwarf. When he has been sweeping the sky in circles infinitely

great, he suddenly shrivels into something indescribably small. There is a moment when Carlyle turns suddenly from a high creative mystic to a common Calvinist. There are moments when George Eliot turns from a prophetess into a governess. There are also moments when Ruskin turns into a governess, without even the excuse of sex. But in all these cases the alteration comes as a thing quite abrupt and unreasonable. We do not feel this acute angle anywhere in Homer or in Virgil or in Chaucer or in Shakespeare or in Dryden; such things as they knew they knew. It is no disgrace to Homer that he had not discovered Britain; or to Virgil that he had not discovered America; or to Chaucer that he had not discovered the solar system; or to Dryden that he had not discovered the steam-engine. But we do most frequently feel, with the Victorians, that the very vastness of the number of things they know illustrates the abrupt abyss of the things they do not know.

We feel, in a sort of way, that it *is* a disgrace to a man like Carlyle when he asks the Irish why they do not bestir themselves and reforest their country: saying not a word about the soaking up of every sort of profit by the landlords which made that and every other Irish improvement impossible. We feel that it *is* a disgrace to a man like Ruskin when he says, with a solemn visage, that building in iron is ugly and unreal, but that the weightiest objection is that there is no mention of it in the Bible; we feel as if he had just said he could find no hair-brushes in Habakkuk. We feel that it *is* a disgrace to a man like Thackeray when he proposes that people should be forcibly prevented from being nuns, merely because he has no fixed intention of becoming a nun himself. We feel that it *is* a disgrace to a man like Tennyson, when he talks of the French revolutions, the huge crusades that had recreated the whole of his civilisation, as being "no graver than a schoolboy's barring out." We feel that it *is* a disgrace

to a man like Browning to make spluttering and spiteful puns about the names Newman, Wiseman, and Manning. We feel that it *is* a disgrace to a man like Newman when he confesses that for some time he felt as if he couldn't come in to the Catholic Church, because of that dreadful Mr. Daniel O'Connell, who had the vulgarity to fight for his own country. We feel that it *is* a disgrace to a man like Dickens, when he makes a blind brute and savage out of a man like St. Dunstan; it sounds as if it were not Dickens talking but Dombey. We feel it *is* a disgrace to a man like Swinburne, when he has a Jingo fit and calls the Boer children in the concentration camps "Whelps of treacherous dams whom none save we have spared to starve and slay": we feel that Swinburne, for the first time, really has become an immoral and indecent writer. All this is a certain odd provincialism peculiar to the English in that great century: they were in a kind of pocket; they appealed to too narrow a public opinion;

I am certain that no French or German men of the same genius made such remarks. Renan was the enemy of the Catholic Church; but who can imagine Renan writing of it as Kingsley or Dickens did? Taine was the enemy of the French Revolution; but who can imagine Taine talking about it as Tennyson or Newman talked? Even Matthew Arnold, though he saw this peril and prided himself on escaping it, did not altogether escape it. There must be (to use an Irishism) something shallow in the depths of any man who talks about the *Zeitgeist* as if it were a living thing.

But this defect is very specially the key to the case of the two great Victorian poets, Tennyson and Browning; the two spirited or beautiful tunes, so to speak, to which the other events marched or danced. It was especially so of Tennyson, for a reason which raises some of the most real problems about his poetry. Tennyson, of course, owed a great deal to Virgil. There is no question of

plagiarism here; a debt to Virgil is like a debt to Nature. But Tennyson was a provincial Virgil. In such passages as that about the schoolboy's barring out he might be called a suburban Virgil. I mean that he tried to have the universal balance of all the ideas at which the great Roman had aimed: but he hadn't got hold of all the ideas to balance. Hence his work was not a balance of truths, like the universe. It was a balance of whims; like the British Constitution. It is intensely typical of Tennyson's philosophical temper that he was almost the only Poet Laureate who was not ludicrous. It is not absurd to think of Tennyson as tuning his harp in praise of Queen Victoria: that is, it is not absurd in the same sense as Chaucer's harp hallowed by dedication to Richard II or Wordsworth's harp hallowed by dedication to George IV is absurd. Richard's court could not properly appreciate either Chaucer's daisies or his "devotion." George IV would not have gone pottering about Helvellyn in search

of purity and the simple annals of the poor. But Tennyson did sincerely believe in the Victorian compromise; and sincerity is never undignified. He really did hold a great many of the same views as Queen Victoria, though he was gifted with a more fortunate literary style. If Dickens is Cobbett's democracy stirring in its grave, Tennyson is the exquisitely ornamental extinguisher on the flame of the first revolutionary poets. England has settled down; England has become Victorian. The compromise was interesting, it was national and for a long time it was successful: there is still a great deal to be said for it. But it was as freakish and unphilosophic, as arbitrary and untranslatable, as a beggar's patched coat or a child's secret language. Now it is here that Browning had a certain odd advantage over Tennyson; which has, perhaps, somewhat exaggerated his intellectual superiority to him. Browning's eccentric style was more suitable to the poetry of a nation of eccentrics; of people

for the time being removed far from the centre of intellectual interests. The hearty and pleasant task of expressing one's intense dislike of something one doesn't understand is much more poetically achieved by saying, in a general way "Grrr—you swine!" than it is by laboured lines such as "the red fool-fury of the Seine." We all feel that there is more of the man in Browning here; more of Dr. Johnson or Cobbett. Browning is the Englishman taking himself wilfully, following his nose like a bull-dog, going by his own likes and dislikes. We cannot help feeling that Tennyson is the Englishman taking himself seriously—an awful sight. One's memory flutters unhappily over a certain letter about the Papal Guards written by Sir Willoughby Patterne. It is here chiefly that Tennyson suffers by that very Virgilian loveliness and dignity of diction which he put to the service of such a small and anomalous national scheme. Virgil had the best news to tell as well as the best words to tell it in. His world

might be sad; but it was the largest world one could live in before the coming of Christianity. If he told the Romans to spare the vanquished and to war down the mighty, at least he was more or less well informed about who *were* mighty and who *were* vanquished. But when Tennyson wrote verses like—

> "Of freedom in her regal seat,
> Of England; not the schoolboy heat,
> The blind hysterics of the Celt"

he quite literally did not know one word of what he was talking about; he did not know what Celts are, or what hysterics are, or what freedom was, or what regal was or even of what England was—in the living Europe of that time.

His religious range was very much wider and wiser than his political; but here also he suffered from treating as true universality a thing that was only a sort of lukewarm local patriotism. Here also he suffered by the