Chapter XIX.

THE ECLIPSE OF GENIUS

It was shown in the first chapter of this work that the English constitutionalism of the eighteenth century, described by Montesquieu as an organisation of liberty, really amounted to an organisation of anarchy, not satisfying the requirements either of order or of progress, but indirectly favouring the development of individual genius and, to a still greater degree, the growth of material wealth. This genius also devoted itself to no very ideal ends, serving at its best for the creation of new mechanical appliances at home, and at its worst for the furtherance of conquest and rapine abroad; while the greed to which it ministered made men capable of the most heinous crimes.

During the latter part of the eighteenth century, and on into the first decades of the nineteenth, the increasing power of the Crown, instead of building up a new order, adds to the existing anarchy, disorganising the military power of the kingdom, breeding disaffection among its Roman Catholic inhabitants, and driving some of England's noblest citizens, at a time when her very existence was at stake, from the service of the State.

It seems at first as if the French Revolution would merely aggravate the evils under which we suffered, by turning the Government from a machine for levying taxes into an active agency for the

repression of free speech in politics and religion. Such, however, is not the most permanent, nor even the most immediate, effect of that unparalleled upheaval. By kindling into flame all the latent tendencies making for beauty in art, for truth in science, philosophy, religion—nor for these alone, but also for the "manners, freedom, virtue, power" whose loss our lost leader too belatedly deplored—the Revolution regenerates England with less expense of ruin than had been needed for the regeneration of France and Continental Europe. And so, when France turns faithless to her high mission as an evangelist of liberty, England comes forward to defend the cause of oppressed nationalities with sword and pen; first against Napoleon, then, after Napoleon's fall, against the Holy Alliance, until that also dissolves under the far extended influence of Canning's voice and Canning's will.

The power of the Crown, already undermined by the disease, discredit, and discord of its personal representatives, finally succumbs to the new spirit; and soon afterwards the old Tory party goes to pieces, one section uniting with the victorious Whigs, whose prestige is still further heightened by a second French Revolution, giving Parliamentary government on the English model to France. Under their auspices a first instalment of electoral reform transfers Sovereignty from the aristocracy to the middle class. This extension of political rights, so far from weakening the Administration, gives it increased strength, enabling a series of much-needed reforms, inspired by the philosophy of Bentham, to be carried. Then a rich and

privileged State Church gradually makes the position of the reforming Ministers untenable by blocking some of their most important measures, luring away their ablest men, and exciting popular bigotry against the faithful remnant. Yet even so progress is not arrested. For the reactionists defeat their own ends by placing in power a great middle class administrator, who, in his heart, despises the views that he affects to share. Free Trade, long advocated by the philosophical Radicals, finally triumphs under his direction, and the new Conservatism, like the old Toryism, is ruined by his desertion.

Free Trade only gives a triumphant popular expression to a new and peculiar phase of thought, a movement of temporary alienation from the State as such, a more or less declared hostility to all Sovereignty. For many years before the abolition of the Corn Laws, the main current of English Liberalism has flowed in other than political channels; and, indeed, a tendency shows itself all round to seek elsewhere than in the political conflicts of the day for the supreme interests of life, demanding on their behalf complete immunity from State control. A band of Oxford scholars, resenting Parliamentary interference with the Irish Church Establishment, assert the right of the Anglican Church to determine her own doctrine and discipline, and to preside over the spiritual destinies of the nation, by virtue of a divine commission handed down from the Apostles. A host of Presbyterian enthusiasts, casting away the bonds of lay patronage, unite in a new community supported by voluntary contributions. On the

material side it is proposed to supersede the legal relief of poverty by reviving the tutelage of the hereditary nobility over the peasants who cultivate their estates; while others wish to make the working classes altogether independent of eleemosynary aid by encouraging them to found co-operative societies for production and distribution. A series of new works in prose and poetry mark a new age of literary productivity, only less brilliant than the epochs of the Revolutionary war and the Regency. This new literature is not inspired by politics, but by individual motives, either social or philosophical; it does not oscillate, like the earlier and greater literatures, between revolt and resignation, defiance and despair, but is penetrated with infinite love and pity, fed from gorgeous memories, and illuminated by immortal hopes. A new school of history, saturated with literary and artistic feeling, aims at the ideal reproduction of the most stirring scenes, the most heroic figures of the past, in language approaching the effect of plastic or pictorial representation. And, conversely, the greatest prose writer of the century devotes himself to a literary interpretation of painting, architecture, and natural scenery, as a symbolism of the most thrilling emotions and of the profoundest ethical truths.

Science, after 1830, so organises her methods and so extends her domain as to cover the whole field of experience; while the philosophy of the previous century, revived with greater power than ever, declares that outside experience nothing can be known. The modern theories of energy and of evolution, enunciated with more and more distinctness,

are finally combined with the principles of the great English economists in a system of absolute individualism—a grandiose attempt to demonstrate that liberation from the tutelage of the State is the true goal of all reform, and an amount of vital enjoyment strictly proportioned to the vital effort put forth, the destined reward of all virtuous activity in the final stage of human development.

A view of the world and of life so committed to reason, so passionately human, so proudly self-sufficient, even when taking on a religious colouring, implicitly contradicts the pietistic movement, whether under its Tractarian or its Evangelical formulation. With the increasing seriousness of the age this contradiction becomes more explicit, and makes itself felt partly within the Church as a mystical modification of the old teaching, partly both among the clergy and the laity as a destructive criticism of the alleged evidences on which the various theologies have been built up. Carried on simultaneously among the higher and the lower classes of society, with more or less of reticence and caution on the one side, with uncompromising frankness on the other, the disintegrating process leads to a legal decision liberating the ministers of the Establishment from their supposed obligation to regard the whole Bible or any part of it as necessarily true—a decision which, so far, has been much more effective in giving freedom of speech to the laity than in giving it to the clergy.

Side by side with the emancipation of thought and feeling in England we find a world-wide movement for the propagation of political and civil liberty on the English model, partly stimulated by

direct encouragement from England. Peel's fall brings back to power Palmerston, the inheritor of Canning's spirit, and for a period of nearly twenty years the foremost figure in English politics, sometimes opposed on questions of detail by Russell and Gladstone, but at the great critical moments of European history working in fellowship with them. His personality is a potent factor in the Revolution of 1848, leading to the second French Empire, with whose aid he destroys Russia's European ascendancy, thus rendering possible two great triumphs of nationalism—first, the unification of Italy, practically accomplished during his life and with his assistance; then, after his death, the unification of Germany, whose preparation in Schleswig-Holstein an imperfect historical appreciation had led him to oppose.

An anti-slavery movement in America, long fed by English sympathy, leads up, during Palmerston's Administration, to a civil war, profoundly misconceived as to its origin and issues by the governing classes of England, but permanently affecting the future course of her history. After a struggle of unexampled magnitude, democracy triumphs in America, reawakening the dormant democratic spirit of the English people, and so doing for the revived Reform agitation of the middle 'sixties what the second French Revolution had done for middle-class enfranchisement in 1830, while it simultaneously re-kindles the smouldering fire of Irish nationality. English working men, debarred from exercising the right of combination to the full extent represented by their Trade Unions, seek a remedy for their grievances through the

acquisition of the Parliamentary franchise, as their fathers had sought to carry out more visionary schemes of social justice through the instrumentality of the People's Charter. Then the three streams of English Liberalism, rationalist, political, and industrial, uniting in a current of irresistible strength, for a time bear down all before them. Much that the Whigs of 1830 had feared or failed to accomplish is now obtained. Household suffrage, the ballot, Church disestablishment and land reform in Ireland, the relief of Dissenters from Church rates, the nationalisation of the universities, the provision up to a certain point of unsectarian elementary education by the State, the rescue of the Army from plutocratic monopoly — articles mostly of the Benthamite programme—are carried, so to speak, at a rush. Then the reforming Ministers, failing to appreciate the breadth and depth of the movement they profess to lead, find themselves replaced by the reactionists, with whose help they have held their own most advanced followers in check. The Tory leader on his side loses ground by abetting a feeble attempt to restrain the superstitious practices in which Church Toryism finds its most genuine expression.

Meanwhile a more effective stand is made against reviving sacerdotalism by a renewal of the rationalistic movement, this time headed by the most distinguished names in poetry, literature, philosophy, and science—an ample compensation for the temporary defeat of Liberalism in politics. And that defeat is soon turned into overwhelming victory. As in the times of Canning and Palmerston, political Liberalism receives a new impetus from

the sympathy of England with the struggle of nationalism against oppression, represented this time by the Christian subjects of the Porte. Irish interests intervene also, for the fourth time in the century, to complicate the situation, making the task of Liberal statesmen on their return to office incomparably more difficult. Still, thanks to the ever-growing power of the State—itself a result of democratic progress—the legislative and administrative machine, by whichever party leader it may be directed, works with a smoothness and an efficiency before unknown.

It is possible that a concentration of power already so great, and likely to grow greater still, may be viewed by some friends of liberty with jealousy and alarm. It was, in fact, so viewed by Herbert Spencer. This greatest of all English systematic thinkers latterly devoted most of his philosophical activity to upholding the rights of the individual against the claims of the State. Historically his position, like Buckle's, was determined by sympathy with the economists in their fight for the new Poor Law and for Free Trade. Here, however, we are not concerned with the derivation of the theory, but with its truth. Spencer's physiological analogies will not help us much, nor will his general law of evolution, to which others might give a different interpretation. It is a question to be settled on grounds of relative expediency. No doubt there have been occasions in the world's history when similar developments of State sovereignty have proved injurious to the industry, the intellect, the morality, or the general

well-being of the people which experienced them. With ourselves the experience is comparatively new, and perhaps the materials for a comprehensive estimate of its meaning do not yet exist. But so far the prospect seems hopeful. It will be remembered that the experiment of anarchy was tried, more or less, in the eighteenth century, with results which were not satisfactory, even from the standpoint of freedom. The freedom of some meant the enslavement of others, more especially the freedom of parents to bring up their children as they liked. A child necessarily lives in subjection ; but compulsory education in a modern schoolroom is, generally speaking, more to its taste—less like slavery—than compulsory toil in a pestilential factory. For grown-up people a visit from the inspector of nuisances involves less restraint than confinement to a sick bed. To take a more complex case, immunity from ecclesiastical tyranny has only been obtained at the price of having an Administration able to carry measures securing it through Parliament. A weak Government, at the mercy of sinister sectional interests, may be easily got to pass Protectionist legislation ; to repeal such legislation, or to prevent its re-enactment, are tasks demanding irresistible strength.

Our present enormous naval and military expenditure involves the levying of taxes to a corresponding extent ; and this, though sanctioned, after a fashion, by the majority of the electorate, certainly amounts to an abridgment of the liberty of those who pay against their will. Yet even here it may be argued that the practical alternative does not lie between high and low taxes. It lies

between contributions to a fleet and army maintained for defensive purposes by our own Government, and equal contributions made to maintain the fleet and army of some Continental Power, which would annex us if we were not prepared to fight for independence, as Japan was prepared to fight Russia.

Freedom of criticism on the Government is considerably greater now than when a weak and incapable oligarchy held the reins. Freedom of criticism in theology, nearly lost under the long Tory *régime,* has been recovered step by step with the later growth of democracy. At Oxford and Cambridge in particular the change has been most remarkable since Thirlwall was driven from the one and J. A. Froude, several years later, from the other—Thirlwall for opposing compulsory chapel attendance, and Froude for publishing a novel of heterodox tendencies. There, as also at the Scotch universities, Hegel's philosophy has played the same part it played between two and three generations ago in Germany, at once veiling and facilitating the transition from a supernaturalist to a scientific view of nature and man. For a time Hegelians, both of the looser and the stricter observance, were at pains to convey their dissent from the popular theology in language open to an orthodox interpretation. More recently the chief representatives of the school have emulated the plain speaking of Strauss and Feuerbach.

One sometimes hears it said that the Materialism of thirty years ago has been superseded by a theory variously described as Spiritualism and as Idealism. The assertion is doubly misleading. It is not true

that Materialism, in the philosophical sense, prevailed to a greater extent then than now. Mill, Spencer, Lewes, Tyndall, Huxley, and Clifford would have disclaimed the name with as much right as Mr. Haldane or Mr. Asquith. If, on the other hand, the name is used to denote denial of supernatural religion, or as the equivalent of Agnosticism, then it is not true to say that Materialism has been superseded, for such denial is now more common than ever, whether among philosophers or among the educated classes in general.

Materialism in another sense—that is to say, the rage for the acquisition of money valued chiefly as a means for the gratification of animal or childish appetites—has, unhappily, been long on the increase, as is shown, among other ways, by the spread of a passion for gambling through all classes of the community. Rapid industrial progress naturally fixes the attention on money-making, and on the spending or the reinvestment of what is made, as the great interests of life; and gambling enables both these ends to be pursued with the least possible trouble or delay, the gratification of getting money and the gratification of spending it (in fresh stakes) being so combined as to raise each other to the highest pitch of intensity. And democracy, in so far as it favours industrial progress, shares to that extent in the responsibility for its reaction on private life.

It remains to consider the modern movement in its reaction on the intellectual life of the community. So far as this is represented by the amount of

literary genius forthcoming, most qualified judges are, I presume, agreed in thinking that what we have to report is a continuous decline, advancing by a series of downward steps until at the present day we find ourselves in a state of destitution not paralleled since the period preceding the Reformation. It may be open to question whether the generation of Byron, Shelley, and Keats shows any falling-off from the generation of Wordsworth, Hazlitt, Scott, Lamb, Coleridge, Landor, and Jane Austen. But the Regency clearly stands above the Early Victorian period as much as that stands above the Middle Victorian period, and the Middle Victorian above the Late. As for our own age, it would be surprising to learn that any English writer now under fifty has produced a book which will be remembered as literature fifty years hence. The literary output is, indeed, enormous both in prose and poetry; and much talent is devoted to literature as a profession: never before has the average of cleverness, and even of good writing, been so high. But high averages are no substitute for exceptional genius; as Goethe says, a hundred greys do not make one white horse.

This dearth of first-class literary ability has been ascribed to the absorption of the nation's best intellect in scientific work. The explanation might hold good if science had more distinguished names to boast of than literature. Unhappily, she has not. Here also, or, rather, here especially, mediocrity seems to be the order of the day since 1879, the year of Clifford's and Clerk Maxwell's death. We often hear of new discoveries and new

methods, but there is a remarkable impersonality about them; they are the result of co-operation among a number of inquirers rather than of individual genius. It is the same in philosophy, except that philosophy has no such certain results to show. The Early and Middle Victorian heroes, Mill, Bain, Buckle, and Spencer, are supposed to have been superseded—by whom, or for how long, is not clear.

Historical composition, involving as it does both literary and scientific ability, supplies us with another test. An arrangement of nineteenth-century historians in chronological groups gives us first: Hallam, Napier, Milman, Grote, Arnold, Thirlwall, Finlay, and Macaulay; followed by Kinglake, Helps, Froude, Buckle, Freeman, Goldwin Smith, Stubbs, and Gardiner; next come Seeley, J. R. Green, Lecky, Bryce, Sir George Trevelyan, and J. A. Symonds; after whom we are left with the contributors to *The Cambridge Modern History*, and to *The Political History of England*.

Parliamentary, forensic, pulpit, and platform oratory have declined at the same rate—a circumstance the more remarkable as one would expect every form of eloquence to be stimulated by a democratic environment; and journalism, as compared with what it was fifty, forty, or thirty years ago, shows a like decay.

Women have contributed so much to the best English literature that their emancipation and higher education might well have been looked to as opening fresh sources of power. If anything, the effect of their more favoured position has been

to stop the former supplies. Not only are the Sibylline books rapidly decreasing in number, but their contents are less interesting, and the price paid for them has risen.[1]

It was said twenty years ago that there was no man in the whole world under fifty one would cross the street to look at. Thus, whatever may be the causes of this decline in genius, they are common to all civilised mankind; only, as England used to be in a peculiar way the land of genius, they must have acted with exceptional energy among ourselves. In all probability these causes are no other than the tendencies already indicated as characteristic of our more recent history: the rise of a strong Government, the reform of abuses, the growth of democracy, the accumulation of wealth, the spread of education, the dissolution of theological beliefs. Let us see in what way they work.

It is a question whether Shelley was right when he said that to divide true love is not to take it away. One would have liked to hear Mary's opinion on the subject. At any rate, to divide intellect *is* to take it away. Now, merely to keep going, and periodically to renew, the huge administrative, legislative, military, and educational machinery of the modern State must absorb an enormous amount of intelligence and moral force, leaving so much the less available, so to speak, for play. Subjection, also, to such machinery involves a certain amount of steady drill, a uniformity of regulation by which genius is apt to be stifled.

[1] The accomplished historian of modern astronomy, Miss Agnes Clerke, was educated entirely at home.

When we hear that a Government office is a nest of singing birds we may conjecture, without listening, that the birds do not utter wood-notes wild.

Besides repressing originality and spontaneity among the higher intellects, popular education indirectly contributes to the same result by calling into existence a new public of inferior taste and less critical ability. Men of letters, and even men of science—not to mention politicians and preachers—lay themselves out to capture this new public by catering to its demands. At the same time, the number of candidates for popular favour being immensely multiplied by the diffusion of a facile culture, each competitor tries to draw attention to himself by sedulously cultivating what is called the personal note, which is more often than not a borrowed note strained out of recognition in a particular way. Now, the test of prose destined to become classical is that it can be read over and over again with increasing pleasure; whereas the oftener we read this prose of the spurious personal note, the more obvious does its meretricious character become. And the test of good poetry, as Leslie Stephen pointed out, is that it learns itself by heart, which is just what does not happen with poetry that is a jumble of outlandish vocables, painfully picked out of the dictionary, or of adjectives whose connection with their substantives amounts to a syntactical intrigue.

Men and women of ability are, by the sympathetic and communicative tendency of their nature, peculiarly susceptible to such far-fetched literary appeals; so that they sincerely admire the misdirection of talent, and point it out for the admiration

of the less gifted in the critical organs that they control. At the same time the increasing accumulation of wealth, with its inevitable accompaniment of increasing luxury, makes the production of paying—that is to say, artificial or morbid—literature an economic necessity. And men of science work under the same restraint. Once, like Agassiz, they had no time to make money. Perhaps in the near future they will have no time for anything else.

I have mentioned the removal of abuses and the destruction of false dogmas in progress for the last century as counting among influences unfavourable to genius. One is sorry to have to say this of such a necessary process; but I believe it will be found, on examination, that the fact is so. For these reforms, however salutary in other ways, tell also as the withdrawal of so much stimulation from that militant enthusiasm, that noble rage against cruelty and falsehood, which has ever been so large a constituent in the higher intellectual energisings of the past. Relative wrongness has been the negative electricity without which the positive electricity of their relative rightness could not exist. We know it from the confessions of genius. Shelley, with full adhesion, quotes Byron as saying that "most men are cradled into poetry by wrong." Newman tells the scholar who would reach "Love's high unruffled state," that he must "first learn him how to hate." Browning explains that Dante "loved well because he hated, hated wickedness that hinders loving." And even Matthew Arnold, who hated hatred itself, cries

out when confronted by an evil world: "Let me be keener to slay thee lest thou poison me!"

In accordance with this law, genius, where it still exists, is chiefly to be found among the collectivists or the anarchists to whom our whole society is hateful as an organised spoliation of the working classes; an organised defilement of the sexual relations; an organised and useless torture, inflicted under the name of justice, on those unhappiest victims whom we call the criminal classes.

It is no part of the historian's business to predict or to advise; and the present writer, at any rate, is not conscious of being qualified for either office. What has been said in this connection must therefore not be taken as expressing any approval of the views so brilliantly advocated in some contemporary novels and dramas. The sole point contended for is that literary genius, with few exceptions, has so far found its highest expression in a moral purpose, in the utterance of a protest against the propagation of falsehood or the practice of injustice, real or illusory, in fancy or in fact.

Perhaps a profounder analysis may show that the ethical motive is itself referable to a still more general law, and that the vital conditions of genius are furnished in the last resort by variety and contrast. Now, the general tendency of modern progress has been adverse to those conditions; it has made for assimilation and uniformity. English influence at its best has told for the extension of personal liberty and of representative government over the whole world; more equivocally, for the similar extension of English capitalist industry. At home Liberalism has always meant the extension

of rights and the removal of privileges. Our commercial legislation has decreed that no one industry shall be favoured at the expense of another, that the interest of the consumer shall not be sacrificed to the interest of the producer. Our criminal law has been reformed in the sense of proportioning punishment to crime. Our Factory Acts and Education Acts have given the children of the poor a position more like the position enjoyed by the children of the rich. Our social legislation tends towards giving the working classes the same immunity from disease and danger that is enjoyed by the middle and upper classes, or at any rate a money compensation for its loss. Sir William Harcourt's great Budget of 1894, by its identification of the succession duty on real and personal estate, marks a step in the same direction. It may be objected that, by progressively increasing the duty on large estates, Harcourt rather differentiated than assimilated the burden of taxation. But in reality this arrangement amounts to a more subtle kind of assimilation. For it proportions the tax, not to what has been inherited, but to what can be spared. And the same rule holds in reference to the system of exemptions and deductions observed in assessing small incomes for taxation.

Assimilation seems also to be the law of progressive religious thought in England. Evangelical pietism aimed at extending the field of religious obligation over the whole of life. Tractarianism tried to do the same thing more thoroughly by providing a more effective machinery for the purpose; by assimilating the Church of England, first to the primitive, and then to the mediæval, Church.

Since then, as a direct result of Anglican influence, there has followed the Modernist movement of our own time, which is simply an assimilation of Roman to Protestant principles on the lines of private judgment as distinguished from authority and tradition. Meanwhile, for over two centuries, the far broader methods of Rationalism have been working for the establishment of one uniform philosophy of existence, constructed on principles of pure reason, and tending towards the total exclusion of a supernatural world from any share in our interests or beliefs.

Genius of a high order has been required for carrying out some of these assimilations; but their total effect has been to abolish the conditions under which genius exists, just as the highest military abilities need war to bring them into activity, and are then thrown into the shade by the peace that they have helped to restore. It must, therefore, not be read as a sign of degeneration that genius among ourselves is no longer forthcoming in the same profusion as before. Whether it be, as some have tried to show, a morbid growth of the mind still remains uncertain; that it grows on morbid conditions seems an established fact. And one of these conditions is, over and above the existence of inequalities and contrasts, an erroneous appreciation of their values—a false estimate of their real extent, a false estimate of their importance for human happiness, a false estimate of the rapidity with which it is possible for human intellect and energy to replace them, when they are undesirable, by an improved state of things. Now, such an erroneous valuation is particularly stimulating to

genius. "Thy sorrow," exclaims Carlyle, "is the inverted image of thy nobleness; the depth of thy despair is the measure of thy capacity for hope!" But, unfortunately for genius, the tendency of advancing knowledge is to diminish both its sorrow and its hope. That we should have learned to appreciate the difficulties of reform as they never were appreciated before is only one aspect of the universal disillusionment our organised experience has brought about. And this decay of illusion must be counted among the causes to which the decline of genius is due. For illusion was the very air that it breathed—an illusive estimate of the evils to be overcome, and of the forces available for their overthrow; an illusive estimate of historical heroism, individual or collective, creating epics and dramas through all the past; illusive estimates of what the old religions had effected, leading to estimates equally illusive of what new religions or new sciences might also effect, creating Utopias in the future—these, in great measure, inspired the splendid imaginative and historical literatures, the vast philosophies, the glowing oratory, whose discontinuance we now deplore. Yet for our own clearer sense of reality we must also thank those children of light, the men of genius, less careful than the children of this world to secure the perpetuation of their race. For that very organisation of experience which has dispersed the mists of ignorance is their work; nor can its lessons be more impressively conveyed than in the warning given by Matthew Arnold, as the sum of Wordsworth's teaching, neither to make man too much a God, nor God too much a man.

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