

### III

## THE MODERN WORLD

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**T**HE present age is in a state of rapid flux. Not in one country only, nor among one social class only, but everywhere from top to bottom and from end to end, change is proceeding with unexampled speed. All movement, not only physical but intellectual and moral, has been vastly accelerated. The old barriers are everywhere breaking down, the old ideas and organisations disappearing, or in course of being fundamentally transformed. An enormous stock of hitherto latent energy has been called violently into action, and to this process it is not yet possible to assign any limit. We live, and our children will live after us, among the wreckage of an old order, and the girders and scaffolding of a new one which is arising, amid dust, confusion, and seeming absence of any mastering control or intelligible design, to replace the old.

The nineteenth century, which now lies so far behind us that we can more or less look back upon it as on a past age and receive from it a general total impression, was an age of ideas, and of belief in ideas. Among its dominant ideas were those of nationality and of enfranchisement in politics, of organic continuity in history, of conquest of the physical world in science. Such ideas, grasped, believed in, and practically applied, impressed upon the century a character of its own, and one wholly different from that of any previous age. They were all summed up and included, together with many others of hardly less significance, in the governing idea of progress. Progress was necessarily accompanied by change;

but change was sought not for its own sake, but for the sake of giving effect to the ideas which lay behind it as a motive force. Change was realised as development: this was the achievement of science. Development was assumed to be progress, and was hailed as such: this was the essence of liberalism. It was an age of unbounded hope for the future and of active belief in the work of the present.

A generation ago, a change began to pass over the human spirit. The reflex action of the new ideas cut them away from the base out of which they had sprung. For ideas, like other things, are subject to the law of development, and pass through an orbit of their own. The revolution of the nineteenth century has, like other revolutions, 'devoured its own children.' Its ideas have partly dwindled, partly failed, partly so altered and expanded that they can no longer be recognised for what they were. The law of development has, in the phrase of engineers, 'taken charge.' In discovering it, we have discovered our master. It is a law not of our making, and but little under our control. Before its march all the old traditions, and all the moral or customary sanctions which attached themselves to these, crumble away or go off in smoke. It is a power not only invincible, but incalculable. We may still talk of progress; but many of us have in our hearts ceased to believe in it; or if we do believe in it, it is a different thing in which we believe from that progress which quickened the impulses and inspired the actions of our predecessors. Progress meant to them betterment. It meant the coming of mankind, with certainty and with increasing rapidity, into their inheritance; and that inheritance was assumed, or believed, or as men thought, proved, to be a goodly inheritance, to include in it all good. The inheritance which we now see lying before us seems rather a burden than an enfranchisement. It is an 'importunate and heavy

load.' Long ago, the greatest of the Hebrew prophets cried out sorrowfully to the Power which ruled above, 'Thou hast multiplied the people, and hast not increased the joy.' Some such feeling now weighs upon the present age. The Power goes on its own inflexible, sinister way, and forces us on before it. We find it more and more difficult to believe that it works for good; for we do not see it doing so. There is a wide-spread belief that progress, in the old sense of the word, does not exist.

The denial of progress, as a ruling law of life, has also been a doctrine held in past ages. But they differed from the present age in this, that they carried out their doctrine in practice. They were conservative. They tried, with all the power they had, to fix things as they were, lest a worse thing should come upon them. This was the whole effort of the Middle Ages. It was the effort of the conservative or reactionary element in society which strove, persistently but in the end helplessly, against the intellectual revolution of the eighteenth century, the industrial revolution which succeeded it, and the political, scientific, and social revolutions which have carried on the process down to our own day. But conservatism in the old sense has also ceased to exist as a real and effective doctrine. Change has been realised as an invincible force; the desire for change has become a fixed instinct; and to this, rather than to any reasoned belief or any assured hope, is due the intense restlessness of the modern world.

The solvent effect of many forces has co-operated to bring this state of things about. Intercommunication in space has reached such a pitch of ease and regularity that the communities of mankind are no longer cut off from one another; what affects one, almost at once begins to affect all, and an impulse towards change arising anywhere from fresh

ideas or altered circumstances is propagated, as it were by waves travelling in all directions through an elastic medium, over the whole world. An immensely increased knowledge of the past has come to men from the compilation of records and the organisation of research; and the historical method (perhaps the greatest single invention of modern times) has interconnected all that knowledge so as to make it breed and multiply through mutual fertilisation. Knowledge and understanding of so many past changes has brought about an attitude of mind in which nothing is seen to be unchangeable, in which no change seems impossible, in which life itself appears to consist of change. The development of applied science and the triumph of machinery have opened up a boundless prospect of the degree to which this inherent law of change may be utilised, may be turned by mankind to planned ends and foreseen purposes. Together with all these solvent influences is to be reckoned another, negative indeed, yet in its effect perhaps the most potent of all. This is the disappearance of religion, in the older and original sense of the word. For religion as it was understood in earlier ages was a system of enactments and prohibitions based on undefined fear and sanctioned by terrible penalties; once established, it was the strongest of all conservative forces, because exercising the highest and widest controlling power over the thought as well as the actions of men.

The joint result of all these solvent influences in their accumulated force is a movement of change so rapid and so wide-spread that all the old framework of life tends to disappear, and no pattern of life is left. The course of change points everywhere, which is the same thing as pointing nowhere. The compasses by which life was directed have been demagnetised. It is an age of perplexity, an age of disillusionment. This is not like the old clearing up of thought

(the *Aufklärung* of philosophic historians) which sought to dispel illusions that had gathered round and blurred a framework of certainty. It is disillusionment in another sense. Its light is a blind and formless glare in which all objects disappear. It issues in the feeling that what is to be discovered is infinite and cannot be discovered fully; that what is to be done is infinite and cannot be done effectively.

Against this relapse into chaos what is needed is a steady-ing influence; and this influence, while it may arise from different sources and act along many channels, is to be sought and found nowhere with more clearness and certainty than in poetry. For it is the function of poetry, as we have seen, to make patterns out of life; to discover by its imaginative vision, to make manifest by its creative and constructive power, the order and beauty, the truth and law, that underlie the flux of things. To the paralysing sense of disillusionment it opposes a revelation of essential truth; beneath the chaotic surface of life it apprehends ordered beauty. It re-creates the fabric of life; it renews the meaning and the motive of living.

It would be needless, in speaking to any educated audience, to multiply instances in which this function has actually been performed by great poets, or to point out how their quickening and reconstituting influence is not confined to their own fellow-countrymen in their own age, but retains or may even increase its effect in distant ages and among other civilisations. All the great poets of the past derive their greatness for us in the present from the fact that their effective force on life still survives. The religious poetry of the ancient Hebrew people, translated into other tongues and reinterpreted by new minds, remains a dominant power not merely among the wide-spread colonies of their own descendants, but among all the nations who have received

it as part of the inheritance of Christianity. Homer, the poet of poets who wrote the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey*, was the teacher and in some sense the creator (so the Greeks themselves claimed) of ancient Greece; but after ancient Greece had perished, and ever since, down to the present day, he has remained a powerful influence over the ideals, and thus over the conduct and action, of successive generations of mankind. Virgil, the prophet and interpreter through his poems of the Latin race and the Roman Empire, shares with the Roman statesmen, jurists, and administrators the glory of having formed and transmitted to posterity the plan of an ordered civilisation reigning throughout an organised empire and imposing itself on the outer surrounding world. The great poets of England and the English-speaking nations have, on one side or another, achieved a task hardly less. Chaucer interpreted and summed up the expansion given to life by the earlier Renaissance; he initiated modern England. Spenser gave voice to the ideals and inspired the action of the Elizabethan age. Milton engraved upon the minds of his countrymen (and among those countrymen were the Fathers of the American Republic) the doctrine, the belief, the law of conduct, which were the strength of Puritanism and the basis of Republicanism. In more recent times the poetry of Byron and Shelley carried on the work and enforced the ideas which, through the French Revolution and the movement of which the French Revolution was the symbol and centre, transformed the civilisation and life of Europe. The Brownings became, a generation later, the interpreters of that Liberalism which, in the social, political, and industrial world, was the chief motive force of the nineteenth century. In the middle years of that same century the group of American poets among whom Longfellow, Whittier, and Lowell are the most distinguished names, exercised

the most powerful influence over national life, and share with Lincoln and Grant, with soldiers and statesmen and men of action, the glory of creating and sustaining that faith and that resolution among the people which saved the Union and established a free and indissoluble Commonwealth.

Poets have not ceased; and there may be poets now alive whose work in the judgment of future generations will be comparable in the history of the world to that of their great predecessors. Whether this be so or not, the task and function of poetry remain the same; and thus the study of poetry remains an essential part of human culture, and its practice an essential element in human activity.

Among the great poets, as among all great artists, there is very wide differentiation of function. While they all, in virtue of being poets, create or embody patterns of life, these patterns are never twice the same; they are the creation of individual genius working on material which, being coextensive with life itself, is of infinite complexity and variety. In the phrase of St. Paul, 'there are divers interpretations, but one spirit.' The interpretation is never twice the same; the material to be interpreted never presents itself to two artists alike. Hence the task of poetry is never completed; it is a concurrent and endless integration of the meaning of life; and while the poetry of the past is our priceless inheritance, the poetry of the present is our ceaseless need. Some poets have been, primarily and distinctively, prophets of the future; with others, their work has been to reillumine the past and make it alive to us, to make it an effective part of our own conscious life. Others, again, have brought form and beauty into the present, and shewn us the pattern in the things that lie nearest to us. Thus Tennyson owed his vast influence and popularity to the fact that he was always just abreast of his time; he was the voice, during the

sixty years of his poetical production, of the actual spirit of his country, the thought and emotion and work of his age. Other poets as great have failed to obtain the same universal acceptance, because the patterns of life they created were of a life somewhat further apart from common experience: such poets may have to wait for their fame until after death, or may exercise their influence not so much on the world of their own time directly as on a smaller number of minds whom they inspire and fertilise, and through whom they become powerful germinal influences on a later generation. To elucidate and appreciate this complex stream of creation and its effect upon mankind is part of the study of poetry: but more than that, it is part of the study of civilisation, part of the equipment required for understanding the world and being able to deal with it, to master its springs and to sway its course.

The state of flux which I began by noting as characteristic of this early twentieth century is perhaps nowhere so marked and so rapid as in the United States. From its beginnings, and now as much as ever, the American Republic has been the laboratory and testing-ground of the whole world. The founders of the Republic set themselves to make that continent to which the name of the New World had been applied since its discovery and colonisation, a new world in the full sense; and this has remained more or less, in principle at least, the guiding doctrine of their successors. But in the framing of a pattern for this new world, poetry and the poets (except, as I mentioned, in the course of the great struggle which established the freedom and unity of the nation) have borne little part. The creators of the United States were neither poets nor much influenced in their thought and action by poetry. Washington, Franklin, Hamilton, all had a certain amount of imaginative or creative



genius; but they had minds of the prosaic, not the poetical order. The poetry of Puritanism had, a century before their time, put forth its first and last flower in Milton; unless we say that, half a century later still, the thin and austere but exquisite poetry of Emerson was a last autumnal flowerage from the same stem. There are many modern American poets, but no one among them has been recognised by the world as belonging to the first rank, or appears to be a moulding and formative influence over the national life. Of the two names whom many would hold to be the foremost among American poets, Poe was a stray exotic, and Whitman a splendid anomaly. Perhaps the national life is more confused, certainly the national history is poorer, through the comparative absence of poetry—of a national and great poetry—as one of its constructive and enriching elements. And in the solution of the vast problems which to-day confront the Republic, those patterns of life given by the poets, whether native or foreign, cannot be neglected without grave loss. It is necessary to maintain, it is at once a privilege and a duty to urge, the study of poetry as a part of the public provision for the education of the people.

This new Institute, like most modern foundations for promoting higher education, devotes itself largely or mainly to technology and science. This is quite right; for these are studies of immediate utility and pressing importance. But did it confine itself to these, it would contract its own scope and diminish its own value. Technical processes are means and not ends in life; physical science itself is based ultimately on ideas: letters and art give it not merely its interpretation, but its impulse and inner meaning. Thus the study of the humanities is at once the basis and the crown of the study of the sciences; or rather, we may say, supplies these sciences with a motive and an informing spirit.

The humanities, the studies which deal directly with the vital and human elements in life, with thought, emotion, and imagination, culminate in poetry; and we may now proceed to consider somewhat more closely and more in detail the function and task of poetry in relation to actual life at the present day. The modern world, as I said, is in a state of rapid flux and transformation. Among a thousand elements or forces which go to make its movement, one or another may be singled out as of special prominence. But there would be general agreement with any one who called the present age eminently an age of the extension and dominance of science; or who called it, no less eminently, an age of business conducted on a vast scale, at high tension, with exceeding complexity; or who, once more, called it the age of expanding and triumphant democracy. Let us proceed to regard the function of poetry in relation to these three great distinguishing features of the actual world.