

# OLD AND NEW

## SUNDRY PAPERS

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## PREFACE

ALTHOUGH the following essays and addresses form rather a miscellaneous lot, they have this in common, that they treat, in general, of changes in fashion, especially in matters of speech and of school. Four of the papers have already appeared in print: "The Dark Ages," "Fashion and the Broad A," "Numeric Reform in Nescioubia," "Is Modern Language Teaching a Failure?" For permission to republish these I gratefully acknowledge my indebtedness respectively to the Secretary of the Modern Language Association of America, the Editor of *The Nation*, the Secretary of the Simplified Spelling Board of New York, and the Editors of *The School Review*.

C. H. G.

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## OLD AND NEW



# I

## NOR YET THE NEW<sup>1</sup>

Old things need not be therefore true,  
O brother men, nor yet the new.

WHEN Arthur Hugh Clough penned these lines, he little dreamed how quickly the second member of his apparently axiomatic proposition would become obsolete. "New things need not be therefore true"? It sounds like an echo from a forgotten past; yet only a few score years ago it was a perfectly safe assertion, as safe as "All's not gold that glitters," or "Where there's a will there's a way."

There was a time when the old had the right of way and the new had to turn out or force its passage, when the idea of innovation gave pause, when the successful or even the unsuccessful experience of ages created a presumption in favor of accepted usage, when a departure from tradition demanded an excuse. "I love everything that's old," says one of the characters in *She Stoops to Conquer*, "old friends, old times, old manners, old books, old wine." The same author once said: "When I was a young man, being anxious to distinguish myself, I was perpetually starting new propositions. But I soon gave this over; for I found that generally what was new was false." Of wellnigh universal application was the opinion uttered later by Daniel Webster with reference to a certain political platform: "What is valuable is not new, and what is new is not valuable."

<sup>1</sup> An address to the Smith College chapter of the Phi Beta Kappa on May 17, 1919.

"We have changed all that," as Molière's quack doctor observed. The heart and the liver no longer abide in the respective places to which the former school of medicine — and its accomplice, Dame Nature — assigned them. "Time-honored custom" is without honor. The very word "time-honored" is now used ordinarily in derision. To say that a thing is old is to condemn it without a trial. An old style must be a bad one, an old thought is not worth thinking. What we admire is the "music of the future," the "new art," the "modern school." To a strictly judicial mind, it would seem, the quality of age or of novelty would carry no necessary implication of value; the question of acceptance would be decided on the basis of intrinsic merit. But the judicial mind is rare. We are unconsciously swept along by the tide of opinion, and that tide has set in the direction of the untried. When did it turn?

I believe that the ancients (if one may venture a generalization) were preponderantly inclined to favor antiquity; not because they were ancients — for of this they were cheerfully unaware — but because the notion of progress was in their day foreign to the general run of men. This was surely the case in the Middle Ages. Only with the gradual enlargement of men's horizon by the unfolding and the penetration of a vanished glorious civilization, and by the discovery of unsuspected continents and races, did the taste for innovation develop, a love of change for its own sake, an eagerness to find in one's inner as well as in the outer world fresh fields to conquer, a desire to exploit the individual self; and this tendency was in the Renaissance tempered by a worship of ancient Rome and Greece. Then came, in the period we call neo-classical, a renewed submission to authority, a satisfaction with things as they are and as they have been. Yet we find in the eighteenth cen-



tury again a growing spirit of speculation, a battle of new ideas — for in those days they still had to battle.

With the French Revolution came an overturn in the procedure of judgment. Henceforth it is to be no longer the new, but the old, that must fight for its existence. The burden of proof is on tradition, the presumption is in favor of novelty. Let only a fashion be proclaimed as new, and its right to prevail finds general approval. The revolutionist becomes the popular hero. In an interesting article on "Theology in *Paradise Lost*," Professor R. E. Neil Dodge speaks thus of Satan:

But Satan has a higher claim on our attention than mere epic importance: he is the greatest embodiment in English poetry of one eternal type of the human spirit — the rebel. On this point, Milton could hardly have guessed the extraordinary future of his creation; for the rebel, as a human type entitled to respect and often to sympathy, was not recognized in Europe till the period of the French Revolution. Cromwell and the Puritans might be rebels, but only in the eyes of the Royalists: in their own eyes they were liberators. The term "rebel" was in itself a term of reproach, and was to remain such till the days of Byron. Milton, therefore, would be not a little perplexed at our strange modern sympathy with Satan, which to him would be almost incomprehensible.

This brings me to the real subject of my discussion, the fashion of rebellion. For the insurgent attitude has now become a pose. With sundry ups and downs, the fortune of the Miltonic Satan has prospered, until in our generation he has become a favorite society figure. The drawing-room anarchist, the literary rebel, the artistic iconoclast lay down the law for all of us. Among the conventions of the day, the most conspicuous is the convention of revolt. The only really unconventional person among us is the one who is not revolting against convention. If we wish to praise a young poet or painter, we must begin by making it plain that he is a revolter. Magazines, books, pictures are in

full tilt against some invisible adversary; and one must be very old-fashioned, as well as very bold, to ask whether the mysterious foe can by any possibility be a windmill. Occasionally, however, an elderly swimmer does contrive to lift his head sufficiently out of the flood to wonder what it is all about.

A good many years ago there was in Boston a national assembly of Christian Endeavorers. They swarmed in streets, shops, parks, eating-houses, one could scarcely stir without stepping on them; and their general aspect was that of holiday-makers. After conscientiously studying them for several days an observer timidly inquired: "Are these people endeavoring to do anything in particular, or are they just endeavoring?" We might, if we dared, put a similar question to our revolvers: "Are you revolting against anything in particular, or are you just revolting?" Many of them, I suspect, would be at a loss for an answer; after a moment's cogitation, however, they would doubtless reply that they were revolting against the Victorian Age. And, in fact, the Victorian Age appears to be the special butt of their scorn. In the rich vocabulary of their terms of obloquy, "Victorian" is the very worst. It designates self-complacency, cant, hypocrisy, convention — not the convention of revolt, of course, but the convention of decency. Quite vainly would one plead that the Age of Victoria, rated according to genius, bids fair to take rank with the ages of Pericles, Augustus, Elizabeth, and Louis XIV; that future generations may possibly regard the time of Thackeray, Dickens, George Eliot, George Meredith, Thomas Hardy, of Browning and Tennyson, of Arnold and Newman, of Mill and Darwin and Huxley and Spencer and Kelvin and Lister as rather a hard one to match in the annals of letters and science. Such a suggestion would, of

course, appeal only to critics who knew the Victorian Age and some other ages. One might, however, put forward with more confidence the consideration that the Victorian Age has been dead for a good while, and that it is a pure waste of hind-leg power to go on forever kicking at a corpse. Still, even that argument would probably be unavailing; so stubborn is the corpse-kicking habit, so firmly rooted is convention. Indeed, if I mistake not, I have never come across a convention more hide-bound than this same convention of revolt.

However, not all the "lords of convention" are corpse-kickers. Some of them kick against things that are still alive, such as duty, self-control, propriety. I have some hesitation in listing propriety among the living; but I believe it has not entirely succumbed to the new convention, although it has been the object of the most furious calcitrations. Marriage, of course, is doomed. So is work. None of the new ideal heroes are salt-earners; they are too busy with self-expression and self-development and self-analysis. The more one thinks of it, the more evident it becomes that all their interests begin with "self"; they are addicted to every "self" compound except self-support. What is to become of us when we shall all have adopted the new mode of existence, I cannot imagine. When all are parasites, what or whom are we to live on? The new liver should meditate on this, ere they push their propaganda too far. Another danger threatens them. I have just expressed some doubt regarding the longevity of their favorite victim, propriety — "sweet-tongued propriety," as André Chénier once called it, "*la décence au doux langage*." Now, if propriety should die, there could be no impropriety, inasmuch as the continuance of the latter is wholly contingent on the presence of the former. And if there were no impropriety,

they could no longer be improper, and life would have lost its savor. Nothing is so disheartening to a shocker as to find the "shockee" impervious to a shock. Of Baudelaire, who was a bit overfond of shocking, is told this tale, which is probably *ben trovato*. One day, having failed in all other efforts to startle, he dyed his hair green. A friend opportunely called, and the poet eagerly watched for a manifestation of horror. Not a sign: the caller chatted unconcernedly about the weather and the races, apparently unconscious of anything unusual. At last the poet could contain himself no longer. "Don't you see it?" he shouted. "See what?" "My hair!" "Well, what about your hair?" "Can't you see it's green?" shrieked Baudelaire. "Yes," drawled the other, with a yawn, "everybody's wearing green hair this season."

I am gratified to find myself in the company of the discriminating author of an article on "New Poetry and New America," G. R. Elliott, who writes as follows of the "new poets":

They keep on extravagantly wooing nature and extravagantly repudiating human convention. The prevailing creed of anti-conventionalism is perhaps most striking in the poetry of Miss Amy Lowell, since she pursues, more open-mindedly than any other present American poet, the purely aesthetic aim. She wishes to be tied by no dogma. But, as a matter of fact, she is tied to the dogma of anti-conventionalism. It is the single unifying theme which runs through all her volumes, providing the substance of some of her best poems (such as "Patterns") and of some of her worst. So fixed has the cult become! Mr. Frost, unconsciously but inevitably, gives the text of it in opening his *North of Boston*: "Something there is that doesn't love a wall." That something is surely the spirit of our new poetry. Its hatred of the walls of human convention has itself become conventional. It is no longer the spontaneous poetic outbreak of a century ago, voicing a spontaneous social outbreak against dead conventions which had become intolerable. It is now a decadent cult-concept lingering on into a new age.

I cannot resist the temptation to quote a bit more of Mr. Elliott's criticism of the "new poetry":

Its call to salvation amounts to this: our great need at the present time is that we should face, more frankly than ever before, our destructive desires, and in thus facing them learn to master them. In facing those desires the new poetry, as already stated, has shown itself adept and vivid. But what is its notion of mastering them? The firmest answer to this question that I have been able to find in many volumes of new poetry is this of Mr. Oppenheim:

Be what you are;

Then you can take your desires and lift them and harness them;

Men that can harness Niagara can harness gluttony. . . .

The idea of putting on harness is so rare in our new poetry, and so prominent just now in our national state of mind, that one accepts it here with gratitude. If Mr. Oppenheim could only learn what the word harness means he would be in a fair way toward writing, or helping others to write, some fine national poetry. But unfortunately he has no more notion than his colleagues of what the word really means. The race-horses of desire run through the whole course of his poetry barebacked and without bridles. All thought of being harnessed in the sense of being controlled, either from within or from without, is expressly repudiated by the author again and again. In the code of Mr. Oppenheim and his colleagues, harnessing our desires means expanding them in such a way that, by an inexplicable transformation, our evil desires turn into good desires.

Now that our author has led us to the Imagists, I suppose it behooves me to include them in my survey, inasmuch as everybody is voluble about them, following the example so notably set by themselves. Not without reservation, however, do I class them as revolters: they are by no means such out and out revolutionists as they think — or, I should rather say, as they would have us believe; for I suspect some of them, at least, of knowing more than they seem to know. They are quite aware, for instance, that while loudly proclaiming themselves midwives at the birth of a new art, they are really but imitators, translating into uncongenial Anglo-Saxon an artistic experiment

tried with some success in French, thirty-odd years ago. They must know, too, that through the French Symbolists they are the indirect issue of Walt Whitman, whom, for some reason, they seem inclined to avoid mentioning, as if he were a discreditable relation, rather than the most successful member of the family. Some of them, no doubt, have heard of *versi sciolti*, for several centuries a recognized poetic form in Italian. Indeed, the use of irregular rhythms was familiar to hoary antiquity: it may be found in the Hebrew psalms; in the cadenced prose of classic Latin; in the *cursus*, or fixed patterns for the ends of clauses, of the medieval Latinity; in the Church sequence, originally a piece of prose set to music. One may record in passing Tieck's experiments in polyphonic prose. There are only two new features in the modern *vers libre* movement: one is its typography, the other is the tremendous cackle raised over it. No, the free versifiers are but pseudo-Satans, devotees of near-novelty.

The Imagist claim to the invention of a hitherto unknown type of rhythm is easily exploded. It has been blown to flinders scientifically, with regular laboratory apparatus and uncompromising method, by Dr. W. M. Patterson of Columbia, in his remarkable book called *The Rhythm of Prose*. "According to the results of our experiments," he declares, "there is no psychological meaning to the claims for a third *genre* between regular verse and prose, except in the sense of a jumping back and forth from one side of the fence to the other." A similar conclusion may be reached, without resorting to time-sense machine or padded chamber, by the layman who will take the trouble to write out in short, irregular lines a choice passage of prose. The outcome is an Imagist poem, absolutely indistinguishable from an intentional one, except, perhaps, by

its weightier cargo of ideas. This experiment has been most convincingly performed by Professor J. L. Lowes, who, by the magic of typography alone, has transmuted various selections from the prose of George Meredith into Imagist poems indisputably better than any which the Imagists themselves have produced.

These new gentlemen, in fact, carry our minds back to Monsieur Jourdain, who all his life had been talking prose without knowing it. Furthermore, they do not even stick to their own principles. They tell us that the unit of poetry is the stanza, which is made up of a given series of cadences, and that these sequences are repeated from strophe to strophe. Now, I have failed to discover a single poem in which this rule is observed; and I have found only two or three in which there is apparent the least inclination to follow it. Some of the poets, however, would express the principle a bit differently: according to these, the essence of poetry is nothing more nor less than a happy succession of varied intonations — exactly my definition, acoustically speaking, of good prose as distinguished from bad prose. Some years ago, Professor F. N. Scott, of Michigan, worked out a plausible theory that the rhythm of prose is a rhythm of pitch, whereas the rhythm of poetry is a rhythm of accent. Whether he be right or wrong, there is in my mind not the slightest doubt that “free verse” is a particular development of prose, and not of poetry, as far as its form is concerned; its virtues are the recognized virtues of well written prose, its failures bring it into the category of mediocre prose. To say this is by no means to condemn it. The thing to be reprehended is the confusing misuse of the word “verse.” Tea and coffee are both of them excellent beverages; most of us enjoy them both, each at its proper hour; but nothing is gained by calling both of them tea.

Some distance back, I referred to Anglo-Saxon as an "uncongenial" medium for the reproduction of the essays of the *vers libristes* of France. In thus speaking I had in mind not so much the superior smoothness and delicacy of the French language as the nature of French metrics. The neo-Latins have never been accustomed to anything like the regular beat of English and German measures. Their traditional poetic movement, compared to ours, is so fluid that the step to free verse is a very short one, and necessitates no sharp break with old habits. It means a use of the same phrasing in lines of variable, instead of constant, length. Most of La Fontaine's fables, indeed, are to my ear composed in *vers libres*. For a Frenchman the real wrench comes when he tries to give up rime. For him, what determines the poetic structure is the harmony of endings, as, for us, the pattern of accents. And we need not be surprised to see that in a great part of French free verse, the rime is kept, though happily released from certain restrictions that appeal only to the eye. In Mallarmé, the leading theorist of the Symbolists, we find the same confusion of prose and poetry that I noted in our Imagists — with this significant difference, that Mallarmé is conscious of what he is doing. "Verse," he says, "exists everywhere in language where rhythm exists — everywhere, that is, but in advertisements and newspapers. In the genus we call prose there are verses, sometimes admirable ones, in all rhythms. But, really and truly, there is no such thing as prose: first there is the alphabet; after that, nothing but verses, more or less compact, more or less loosely knit. Every time that one strives for style, the result is versification. The official type of verse should be reserved for moments of soul-crisis. . . . Our present poets, instead of taking it as their starting-point, all of a sudden



let it spring up to crown a poem or a period." For the sensitive and dainty Mallarmé there is no drink but tea.

In conception, in substance, the Imagist work is for the most part essentially poetic. It is poetry of the most evanescent type, so tenuous in thought and feeling that only the most exquisite diction can justify its perpetuation in cold print. Such justification frequently makes itself felt as we read, whatever doubts may arise afterward. As we turn the pages of an Imagist volume, we seem to be idly watching a procession of pretty soap-bubbles, rising one after another, light, graceful, glittering, iridescent, to live in pure beauty for one instant and then fade into the atmosphere without leaving a trace. In truth, nothing definite is bequeathed to the memory. Our only picture, on closing the book, is the generic image of the bubble, the bright, fragile, aqueous film momentarily vivified by a gentle breath of tepid air. That is all; save that we may recall the names of some of the poets whose bubbling has given us most pleasure. Now and then we encounter an Imagist who belongs to a different class, his ebullitions being of a solider consistency. Such a one can describe a woodpile with such skill as to make his description exactly as interesting as the woodpile itself, and not without the woodpile's suggestion of labor. Another, cynically frolicsome, may exhaust himself in a macabre orgy; while a colleague may drearily observe in the universe a reflection of his own perversity and gloom. Another still, like a fanciful will-o'-the-wisp, appears to be mischievously eluding pursuit, and can scarcely be conceived otherwise — if tracked into privacy — than as all aquiver with gelatinous mirth over a huge hoax perpetrated on a band of solemn votaries.

I shall now ask you to make an abrupt but alliterative transition, from poetry to painting. I might speak of the