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THE VICTORIAN AGE
IN LITERATURE

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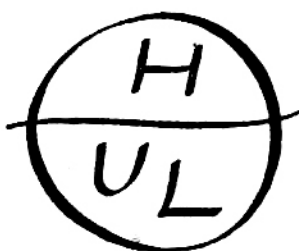
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The Victorian Age in Literature

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CONTENTS

CHAP.		PAGE
	INTRODUCTION	7
I	THE VICTORIAN COMPROMISE AND ITS ENEMIES	10
II	THE GREAT VICTORIAN NOVELISTS . . .	57
III	THE GREAT VICTORIAN POETS . . .	96
IV	THE BREAK-UP OF THE COMPROMISE . .	125
	BIBLIOGRAPHY	155
	INDEX	157

The Editors wish to explain that this book is not put forward as an authoritative history of Victorian literature. It is a free and personal statement of views and impressions about the significance of Victorian literature made by Mr. Chesterton at the Editors' express invitation.

1913

INTRODUCTION

A SECTION of a long and splendid literature can be most conveniently treated in one of two ways. It can be divided as one cuts a currant cake or a Gruyère cheese, taking the currants (or the holes) as they come. Or it can be divided as one cuts wood—along the grain: if one thinks that there is a grain. But the two are never the same: the names never come in the same order in actual time as they come in any serious study of a spirit or a tendency. The critic who wishes to move onward with the life of an epoch must be always running backwards and forwards among its mere dates; just as a branch bends back and forth continually; yet the grain in the branch runs true like an unbroken river.

Mere chronological order, indeed, is almost as arbitrary as alphabetical order. To deal with Darwin, Dickens, Browning in the sequence of the birthday book would be to forge about as real a chain as the 'Tacitus, Tolstoy, Tupper' of a biographical dictionary. It might lend itself more, perhaps, to accuracy: and it might satisfy that school of critics who hold that every artist should be treated as a solitary craftsman, indifferent to the commonwealth and unconcerned about moral things. To write on that principle in the present case, however, would involve all those delicate difficulties, known to politicians, which beset the public defence of a doctrine which one heartily disbelieves. It is quite needless here to go into the old 'art for art's sake' business, or explain at length

why individual artists cannot be reviewed without reference to their traditions and creeds. It is enough to say that with other creeds they would have been, for literary purposes, other individuals. Their views do not, of course, make the brains in their heads any more than the ink in their pens. But it is equally evident that mere brain-power, without attributes or aims, a wheel revolving in the void, would be a subject about as entertaining as ink. The moment we differentiate the minds, we must differentiate by doctrines and moral sentiments. A mere sympathy for democratic merry-making and mourning will not make a man a writer like Dickens. But without that sympathy Dickens would not be a writer like Dickens; and probably not a writer at all. A mere conviction that Catholic thought is the clearest, as well as the best disciplined, will not make a man a writer like Newman. But without that conviction Newman would not be a writer like Newman; and probably not a writer at all. It is useless for the aesthete (or any other anarchist) to urge the isolated individuality of the artist, apart from his attitude to his age. His attitude to his age is his individuality: men are never individual when alone.

It only remains for me, therefore, to take the more delicate and entangled task, and deal with the great Victorians, not only by dates and names, but rather by schools and streams of thought. It is a task for which I feel myself wholly incompetent; but as that applies to every other literary enterprise I ever went in for, the sensation is not wholly novel: indeed, it is rather reassuring than otherwise to realize that I am now

doing something that nobody could do properly. The chief peril of the process, however, will be an inevitable tendency to make the spiritual landscape too large for the figures. I must ask for indulgence if such criticism traces too far back into politics or ethics the roots of which great books were the blossoms; makes Utilitarianism more important than *Liberty* or talks more of the Oxford Movement than of *The Christian Year*. I can only answer in the very temper of the age of which I write: for I also was born a Victorian, and sympathize not a little with the serious Victorian spirit. I can only answer, I shall not make religion more important than it was to Keble, or politics more sacred than they were to Mill.

CHAPTER I

THE VICTORIAN COMPROMISE AND ITS ENEMIES

THE previous literary life of this country had left vigorous many old forces in the Victorian time, as in our time. Roman Britain and Medieval England are still not only alive but lively; for real development is not leaving things behind, as on a road, but drawing life from them, as from a root. Even when we improve we never progress. For progress, the metaphor from the road, implies a man leaving his home behind him: but improvement means a man exalting the towers or extending the gardens of his home. The ancient English literature was like all the several literatures of Christendom, alike in its likeness, alike in its very unlikeness. Like all European cultures, it was European; like all European cultures, it was something more than European. A most marked and unmanageable national temperament is plain in Chaucer and the ballads of Robin Hood; in spite of deep and sometimes disastrous changes of national policy, that note is still unmistakable in Shakespeare, in Johnson and his friends, in Cobbett, in Dickens. It is vain to dream of defining such vivid things; a national soul is as indefinable as a smell, and as unmistakable. I remember a friend who tried impatiently to explain the word 'mistletoe' to a German, and cried at last, despairing, 'Well, you know holly—mistletoe's the opposite!' I do not commend this logical method

in the comparison of plants or nations. But if he had said to the Teuton, 'Well, you know Germany—England's the opposite'—the definition, though fallacious, would not have been wholly false. England, like all Christian countries, absorbed valuable elements from the forests and the rude romanticism of the North; but, like all Christian countries, it drank its longest literary draughts from the classic fountains of the ancients: nor was this (as is so often loosely thought) a matter of the mere 'Renaissance'. The English tongue and talent of speech did not merely flower suddenly into the gargantuan polysyllables of the great Elizabethans; it had always been full of the popular Latin of the Middle Ages. But whatever balance of blood and racial idiom one allows, it is really true that the only suggestion that gets near the Englishman is to hint how far he is from the German. The Germans, like the Welsh, can sing perfectly serious songs perfectly seriously in chorus: can with clear eyes and clear voices join together in words of innocent and beautiful personal passion for a false maiden or a dead child. The nearest one can get to defining the poetic temper of Englishmen is to say that they couldn't do this even for beer. They can sing in chorus, and louder than other Christians: but they must have in their songs something, I know not what, that is at once shamefaced and rowdy. If the matter be emotional, it must somehow be also broad, common and comic, as 'Wapping Old Stairs' and 'Sally in Our Alley'. If it be patriotic, it must somehow be openly bombastic and, as it were, indefensible, like 'Rule, Britannia!' or like that superb song (I never

knew its name, if it has one) that records the number of leagues from Ushant to the Scilly Isles. Also there is a tender love-lyric called 'O Tarry Trousers' which is even more English than the heart of *A Midsummer Night's Dream*. But our greatest bards and sages have often shown a tendency to rant it and roar it like true British sailors; to employ an extravagance that is half conscious and therefore half humorous. Compare, for example, the rants of Shakespeare with the rants of Victor Hugo. A piece of Hugo's eloquence is either a serious triumph or a serious collapse: one feels the poet is offended at a smile. But Shakespeare seems rather proud of talking nonsense: I never can read that rousing and mounting description of the storm, where it comes to—

Who take the ruffian billows by the top,
Curling their monstrous heads, and *hanging* them
With deafening clamour in the slippery clouds—

without seeing an immense balloon rising from the ground, with Shakespeare grinning over the edge of the car, and saying, 'You can't stop me: I am above reason now.' That is the nearest we can get to the general national spirit, which we have now to follow through one brief and curious but very national episode.

Three years before the young queen was crowned, William Cobbett was buried at Farnham. It may seem strange to begin with this great neglected name, rather than the old age of Wordsworth or the young death of Shelley. But to any one who feels literature as human, the empty chair of Cobbett is more solemn and significant than the throne. With him died the

sort of democracy that was a return to Nature, and which only poets and mobs can understand. After him Radicalism is urban—and Toryism suburban. Going through green Warwickshire, Cobbett might have thought of the crops and Shelley of the clouds. But Shelley would have called Birmingham what Cobbett called it—a hell-hole. Cobbett was one with after Liberals in the ideal of Man under an equal law, a citizen of no mean city. He differed from after Liberals in strongly affirming that Liverpool and Leeds are mean cities.

It is no idle Hibernianism to say that towards the end of the eighteenth century the most important event in English history happened in France. It would seem still more perverse, yet it would be still more precise, to say that the most important event in English history was the event that never happened at all—the English Revolution on the lines of the French Revolution. Its failure was not due to any lack of fervour or even ferocity in those who would have brought it about: from the time when the first shout went up for Wilkes to the time when the last Luddite fires were quenched in a cold rain of rationalism, the spirit of Cobbett, of rural republicanism, of English and patriotic democracy, burned like a beacon. The revolution failed because it was foiled by another revolution: an aristocratic revolution, a victory of the rich over the poor. It was about this time that the common lands were finally enclosed; that the more cruel game laws were first established; that England became finally a land of landlords instead of common land-owners. I will not call it a Tory reaction; for

much of the worst of it (especially of the land-grabbing) was done by Whigs; but we may certainly call it Anti-Jacobin. Now this fact, though political, is not only relevant but essential to everything that concerned literature. The upshot was that though England was full of the revolutionary ideas, nevertheless there was no revolution. And the effect of this in turn was that from the middle of the eighteenth century to the middle of the nineteenth the spirit of revolt in England took a wholly literary form. In France it was what people did that was wild and elemental; in England it was what people wrote. It is a quaint comment on the notion that the English are practical and the French merely visionary, that we were rebels in arts while they were rebels in arms.

It has been well and wittily said (as illustrating the mildness of English and the violence of French developments) that the same Gospel of Rousseau which in France produced the Terror, in England produced *Sandford and Merton*. But people forget that in literature the English were by no means restrained by Mr. Barlow; and that if we turn from politics to art, we shall find the two parts peculiarly reversed. It would be equally true to say that the same eighteenth-century emancipation which in France produced the pictures of David, in England produced the pictures of Blake. There never were, I think, men who gave to the imagination so much of the sense of having broken out into the very borderlands of being, as did the great English poets of the romantic or revolutionary period; than Coleridge in the secret sunlight of the Antarctic, where the waters were like witches'

oils; than Keats looking out of those extreme mysterious casements upon that ultimate sea. The heroes and criminals of the great French crisis would have been quite as incapable of such imaginative independence as Keats and Coleridge would have been incapable of winning the battle of Wattignies. In Paris the tree of liberty was a garden tree, clipped very correctly; and Robespierre used the razor more regularly than the guillotine. Danton, who knew and admired English literature, would have cursed freely over *Kubla Khan*; and if the Committee of Public Safety had not already executed Shelley as an aristocrat, they would certainly have locked him up for a madman. Even Hébert (the one really vile Revolutionist), had he been reproached by English poets with worshipping the Goddess of Reason, might legitimately have retorted that it was rather the Goddess of Unreason that they set up to be worshipped. Verbally considered, Carlyle's *French Revolution* was more revolutionary than the real French Revolution: and if Carrier, in an exaggerative phrase, empurpled the Loire with carnage, Turner almost literally set the Thames on fire.

This trend of the English Romantics to carry out the revolutionary idea not savagely in works, but very wildly indeed in words, had several results; the most important of which was this. It started English literature after the Revolution with a sort of bent towards independence and eccentricity, which in the brighter wits became individuality, and in the duller ones, Individualism. English Romantics, English Liberals, were not public men making a republic, but

poets, each seeing a vision. The lonelier version of liberty was a sort of aristocratic anarchism in Byron and Shelley; but though in Victorian times it faded into much milder prejudices and much more *bourgeois* crotchets, England retained from that twist a certain odd separation and privacy. England became much more of an island than she had ever been before. There fell from her about this time, not only the understanding of France or Germany, but to her own long and yet lingering disaster, the understanding of Ireland. She had not joined in the attempt to create European democracy; nor did she, save in the first glow of Waterloo, join in the counter-attempt to destroy it. The life in her literature was still, to a large extent, the romantic liberalism of Rousseau, the free and humane truisms that had refreshed the other nations, the return to Nature and to natural rights. But that which in Rousseau was a creed, became in Hazlitt a taste and in Lamb little more than a whim. These latter and their like form a group at the beginning of the nineteenth century of those we may call the Eccentrics: they gather round Coleridge and his decaying dreams or linger in the tracks of Keats and Shelley and Godwin; Lamb with his bibliomania and creed of pure caprice, the most unique of all geniuses; Leigh Hunt with his Bohemian impecuniosity; Landor with his tempestuous temper, throwing plates on the floor; Hazlitt with his bitterness and his low love affair; even that healthier and happier Bohemian, Peacock. With these, in one sense at least, goes De Quincey. He was, unlike most of these embers of the revolutionary age in letters, a