ENGLISH LITERATURE

ELIZABETHAN
AND
JACOBEAN

BY

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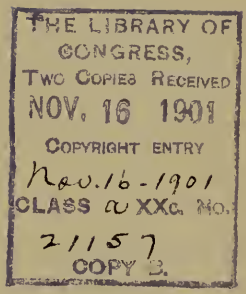

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It is growing to be more and more difficult, as knowledge becomes more exact, to find a general term by which to distinguish the magnificent literature of England at the close of the sixteenth and the opening of the seventeenth centuries. It was customary in earlier times to call everything from Sackville to Shirley Elizabethan, and in common parlance the entire period of sixty or seventy years is still laxly termed the Elizabethan age. In point of fact, the adjectives 'Elizabethan' and 'Jacobean,' though convenient, are misleading; and the literary movement from 1558 to 1625 cannot be regarded with reference to political events. The date of Elizabeth's death, 1603, is a particularly inconvenient one to the student of literature, and divides the epoch of Shakespeare and Ben Jonson in a meaningless way. Nor is there anything which properly connects a writer like Gascoigne with a writer like Quarles. The proper way of regarding this intensely vivid and various age is, perhaps, to divide it into four periods of unequal length and value. But before we define these stages in the evolution of the Elizabethan-Jacobean history, we must

see where England stood among the peoples of Europe in 1558.

Italy at that moment was still at the summit of the intellectual world, easily first among the nations for learning and literary accomplishment. But she was already closely pursued by France, and before the age we are considering ended she was to be passed in the race by Spain and England. This, then, is to be noted, that we find Italian literature the first in Europe, and that we leave it the fourth; the rapid, steady decline of Italy being a phenomenon of highest import in our general survey. But prestige lingers long after the creative faculty has passed away; and the nations of Western Europe were still dazzled by the splendours of Italian poetry long after Italy had ceased to deserve homage. The chivalrous epic of Italy, with its tales 'of ladies dead and lovely knights,' whether entirely serious with Boiardo (1434–1494) and Ariosto (1474–1533), or tinged with burlesque humour with Pulci (1432–1487) and Berni (1497–1535), had been the last great gift of Italy to literature before she sank into her decline. The *Orlando Furioso* and the *Morgante Maggiore* set their stamp on European literature, and most of all on that of England. To note the influence of Ariosto on Spenser, in particular, is of the first critical importance.

All these Italian poets, it will be observed, were dead when Elizabeth came to the throne. There succeeded to these great names nothing better than those of serio-comic poets of the third class, such as Tassoni and Bracciolini, although, during our own great age, the light of Italian poetry made another flicker in the socket with Guarini and with Torquato Tasso.

If however, Italian verse was not any longer of commanding importance, Italian prose was so still less. Italy had possessed a noble school of political historians, but they had passed away before the middle of the sixteenth century. The novelists of manners, who exercised so important an influence on our drama, and on Shakespeare himself, belong to a period antecedent to the revival of English prose; Bandello died in 1561, Cinthio in 1573; the *Notti Piacevoli* was published in 1554. A blight fell upon Italian prose after the appearance of these novels. More curious still was the early attempt made, at first apparently with extraordinary success, to create an Italian drama. It was doomed to sudden and abject failure. In all things it seemed as though Italy, after the splendours of the Cinque Cento, was deliberately drawn into the background by Providence to make room for France, and for Spain, and most of all for England.

If we turn to France, we find that by 1558 the principles of the Italian Renaissance had been completely introduced among the young writers. The famous *Défense et Illustration de la Langue Française* dates from 1549, and in its reformation of the language led to a parallel revival of literary forms and a return to natural poetic inspiration. The result had been an instant and extraordinary renovation of the essential French genius, dipped again in the waters of antiquity and transformed to youth and beauty. That France was ahead of England in her literary revival is easily exemplified by the fact that Joachim du Bellay, by whom the principles of that revival were illustrated with peculiar perfection and delicacy, died in

1560, before Shakespeare and Marlowe were born. Ronsard, who lived to the confines of old age, died just six months after Shakespeare came of age. The creation of tragedy in France followed a little later, but it was coincident with the earliest years of Elizabeth, and the date of the *Cléopâtre* of Jodelle is 1552. The beginnings of original comedy in France, with Grévin and Jean de la Taille, belong to the first decade of Elizabeth's reign. In all forms of imaginative revival France is seen to be about one generation ahead of us at this time. The same may be said of French prose in the hands of the writer who affected us most, namely, Montaigne (1533–1592).

In Spain the reign of Philip II. (1555–1598) was so nearly coincident with that of Elizabeth that we can trace the literary parallel with some closeness. The following of Italian models is far more general in Spain than it is with us, but it takes a form which is a perfectly original one and native to the Peninsula, namely, the lyrico-mystical. In St Teresa (1515–1582), St John of the Cross (San Juan de la Cruz, 1542–1591, abbot of the monastery of Ubeda, who was called 'the ecstatic doctor'), and Luis Ponce de Leon (1527–1591) we have poets of the transcendental order who were far ahead of any English writers of 1570 in vigour of diction and accomplishment of poetic art; these lyrists were destined to exercise an intense, though limited, influence on our own poetry. The novel, picaresque or pastoral, was cultivated in Spain before it was transplanted to us. Montemayor, who died in 1561, is the direct inspirer of Sidney and the school of Greene. Moreover, in the days of Philip II. the drama found in

Spain that acceptance which it had failed to find in Italy, and the life of Lope de Vega extends on both sides beyond the life of Shakespeare. Mr Fitzmaurice-Kelly has dwelt on the dramatic experiments of Encina (1468–1534), and we have nothing in English of the early sixteenth century to compare with his 'liturgical' dramas. The amazing tragi-comedy or dramatised novel of *Calisto and Melibea*, by Rojas, dates from 1499, and is precisely on a level with what some Englishmen of like mind might have composed in 1599. We are not, however, to presume from this that England was all through the century a hundred years behind Spain, since there seems to have been made no further progress at all, in the novel or the drama, until the days of Cervantes and of Lope de Vega, who were exact contemporaries of Shakespeare and Spenser.

We may therefore roughly say that, standing on the first year of the reign of Elizabeth, we see Italy, flushed and garlanded with triumphs, and taking as a matter of course her prestige of supremacy, practically unsuspicious of the fact that her vitality has left her, and that she is dwindling to the fourth rank among the nations. We see France, at this very instant of sudden revival and reconstitution of her literature, taking the principles of humanism with a sort of limpid innocence, like a child, amusing herself by applying them to the outer surface of life and language, without troubling herself to see that they permeate into the veins of the race. France is in the heyday of her brief literary Age of Gold. Spain is the one country in Europe whose literary history at this moment resembles

our own. Like ourselves, she has tardily accepted the Renaissance; the mediæval strain has nearly worked itself out of her; she is starting, or has started, each of the purely modern forms of literary expression. But, while Spain began her revival earlier than we did, she progressed with it in far more dilatory fashion. In 1558 we are still almost barbarous, while she looks back on Boscán and Garcilaso and Guevara; but Spain moves so slowly that by 1588 we have caught her up, and before 1600 we have passed her.

For in 1588 there was little being produced or prepared that could have suggested to such a general observer as did not then exist in the world that we could pretend to anything better than the fourth place among the literary nations. If we give a brief consideration to the first of the four divisions of one period of which we have spoken above, the record it presents to us is mainly one of sterile turmoil and the irritability of inexperience. From 1558 to 1570 we are told, indeed, that 'Minerva's men and finest wits' swarmed like bees at the universities and the Inns of Court, but little honey resulted, and that neither sweet nor translucent. One great poetic genius, indeed, born out of his due time, and crushed (it would appear) by the absolute inability of his age to comprehend what he was doing, does appear in the form of Thomas Sackville, whose *Induction*, a meteoric portent of a poem, not connected with any other in the generation, appeared in 1563 in the second edition of a dreary and antiquated verse-miscellany called *A Mirror for Magistrates*, where its vivid modern note clashes astonishingly with the droning and mumbling measure of its

fellows. As I have remarked elsewhere, a sign of the unhealthy condition of letters in this hectic generation is that, although it produced experiments in literature, it encouraged no literary man, and Sackville passed abruptly from us into politics and silence. Ascham, an opponent of the Italian influence, and the head of a school which had endeavoured to press upon Englishmen a crabbed Hellenism, stripped of all the elements of beauty, died in 1568, leaving us unconvinced of the value of his own scheme of humanism, yet suspicious of and unprepared for any other. Arthur Brooke, convinced to the finger-tips that salvation can only come from Italy, produces a poem worthy of more historical attention than we have been accustomed to give. Churchyard, Googe, Turberville, dull dogs without much to say or voice for singing, keep the level of accomplishment as low as they can; while Ascham's theories about the classics lead to a great activity in the rendering of Greek and Latin classics into a horrible jargon that passes for the newest English. The year 1570 comes and goes, and English literature is still in doleful case.

It is permissible, however, to take the somewhat arbitrary date of the publication of the Bull of Excommunication by Pope Pius V. (April 25, 1570) as the opening of a new intellectual era in England. Elizabeth, not in the least daunted by her enemies, adopted an attitude of resolute isolation which gave confidence to her entire people. For the next ten years, by contrast with the distracted condition of Europe, the internal affairs of England were prosperous and tranquil, for the country had

realised that it was face to face with an implacable foe, whom, nevertheless, by the exercise of patriotic virtue, it might confidently hope to defy. In this condition of exalted public feeling, under this pleasurable tension, these seeds of Renaissance culture, which had hitherto sent up such dwindled shoots into the English air, began to thrust forth an abundant harvest. The Bull of Deposition, which it was hoped by the Roman party would paralyse England, was a trumpet-blast calling upon all the slumbering forces of intelligence to waken and come forth. Hence the period from 1570 to 1590—the real and essential Elizabethan period—is one of the most vivid and exciting spaces of twenty years with which the student is called upon to deal in the whole history of letters. It rustles with growth, like a tropical forest in early summer. We find it difficult to take note of what is happening, so sudden and so manifold are the manifestations of originality.

In the higher poetry, Spenser, still a schoolboy, leads the chorus with his first lisping translations from Petrarch and Joachim du Bellay as early as 1569. But for the solitary voice of Sackville, calling twice in the wilderness, like a ghostly clarion, there had been none to point out the excellent way of modern English poetry since Surrey. But by this time some of the poets had at least reached the age at which independent impressions are formed and can be retained. In 1570 we may recollect that Marlowe and Shakespeare were six years old, while Constable, Daniel, Drayton, Chapman, Greene, Lodge, Watson, and doubtless Peele and Kyd were children of more or less observation and advancement. Some of

the great prose-writers of the next age were older still; Raleigh was eighteen, Hooker and Sidney sixteen, Bacon nine. These were among the foremost of the names which were to make the closing years of the reign of Elizabeth illustrious.

We may gain, perhaps, a useful idea of what took place within these twenty years if we glance for a moment at what had been accomplished at the close of them. In 1570 there was no poetry of real value being composed in England; in 1590 all the English world was reading the first three books of *The Faerie Queen*, in which romantic and allegorical narrative rose to a height which put us at once on a level with the Italy of Boiardo and Ariosto. In 1570 our prose was still inchoate, still cumbered with the dullness and stiffness, of mediævalism, still in the leading-strings of Latin and French models. By 1590 it had begun to produce, although still rather timidly, a crop of national and individual works. *Euphues* and the *Arcadia* were written; there had grown up a school of writers of prose romances which were not without their promise. If, however, the revival of prose belongs to a still later period, one magnificent thing had been accomplished in these twenty years—the foundation of English drama. From the thin and stammering pseudo-classical plays of the beginning of Elizabeth's reign, from *Ralph Roister Doister* and *The Supposes*, to tragedy as created by Kyd and Marlowe, the transition is like that from deep night to full sunrise. With *The Arraignment of Paris* and *Alexander and Campaspe* (1584) England took her place among the drama-producing nations, but with

Tamburlaine the Great she indicated her intention of standing at their head for all remaining time.

Nevertheless, it must be distinctly recognised that this second Elizabethan period, for all its warm fecundity, was in the main a period of preparation rather than fulfilment. The very type of it was George Gascoigne, who, without bequeathing to English literature a single work or even a single line which is now read with enjoyment, for its own sake, was an innovator of extraordinary ingenuity and versatility. Everything which was later on to be done well, every neglected instrument from which melody was presently to be extracted, was tested, was handled by Gascoigne without any considerable personal success. He died, as he arrived, too soon; in 1577 the world of English fancy was not prepared for the multitudinous experiments of Gascoigne's mind. The author of his elegy, addressing his contemporaries, cried, 'His scene is played; you, follow on the act!' and this is precisely what the greatest of them did. He had written the first Greek play introduced upon the English stage, the first prose drama, the first criticism, the first satire, the first non-dramatic poem in blank verse. Gascoigne was but a servitor among the Elizabethans; but he swept the floor, arranged the seats, and lighted the candles for the orchestra of magnificent performers which swept into their places when he had prematurely passed away.

Almost the only department in which Gascoigne is not known to have essayed his pale experiments is that of prose fiction. This was started by numerous travelled Englishmen,

who had found delight in the Italian stories of the preceding century. Paynter's *Palace of Pleasure* (1566) in the very first years of Elizabeth's reign had alarmed sober and old-fashioned men by introducing tales by Bandello, Boccaccio, and even Straparola. This collection had contained, in its primitive form, the plot of *Romeo and Juliet*. A little later Englishmen attempted to emulate these romantic fictions by prose novels of their own; the *Promos and Cassandra* (1578) of Gascoigne's friend Whetstone being the earliest of these 'right excellent and famous histories, divided into comical discourses,' which can by any stretch of language be called a novel. Lyly's *Euphues*, a real addition to prose literature, and a milestone on the roadway of English style, dates from 1579; and it has been thought that the *Don Simonides* of Barnabe Rich (1581), containing 'strange and wonderful adventures' and 'very pleasant discourse,' the whole 'gathered for the recreation as well of our noble young gentlemen as of our honourable courtly ladies,' may be considered our earliest modern romance.

Therefore it seemed probable that the revival in English composition would take the form of the novel. Certainly an impartial observer between 1580 and 1590 would have been justified in supposing so. There came into existence a set of professional men of letters, who supplied the taste of the time with stories of extravagant adventure wrapped up in a curiously sophisticated moral disquisition. Greene began with *Mamillia* (1583), a long series of highly-coloured fantastic novels, 'love-pamphlets,' as he called them; and he was immediately imitated by

Lodge, by Dickenson, by Lodewick Lloyd, and by many others of less notoriety. These books had a peculiarity which is of the greatest importance: they were written for women. It was frequent to dedicate a novel of this class 'To the Gentlewomen of England;' Lyly went so far as to say that his books would 'rather lie shut in a lady's casket than open in a scholar's study.' This gave a peculiarly civilising effect to what was best in these romances, most of which, although they were objected to by the severe on account of their appeal to frivolity and their long-drawn pictures of lovers' emotion, were in no sense licentious or even coarse.

This curious fashion, however, although introduced by a book so original, so wise, and in many ways so attractive as *Euphues*, and although for a little while so triumphant, was doomed to rapid and complete failure. The romantic novel in Elizabethan England culminated in the *Rosalynde* of Lodge (1590), and we may admit the space of twelve years as comprising its rise and its decay. From the first it was exotic; not one of the novels (with the curious exception of Nash's realistic picaresque romance of *Jack Wilton*, 1594, from which an extract is given) touched the incidents of actual life. The landscape was a scene out of some vague, flowery Arcadia; the personages were heroic beyond mortal comprehension; the language used was almost invariably that artificial, mincing dialect suggested, as is now believed, by the study of the world-famous *Reloj de Príncipes*, or 'Dial of Princes,' by the Spanish bishop, Antonio de Guevara (translated from a French version by Lord Berners, and again

by Sir Thomas North in 1557). This dialect took the name of Euphuism, though it existed before the days of *Euphues*, and indeed hangs like a faint scent of musk over most early Elizabethan prose. Discredited and ridiculed, Euphuism was not only long in dying, but lived to impress indelibly the style of the greatest English writers of the next age, and Shakespeare himself.

The novel was a rapidly deciduous growth thrown off to prepare the minds and tongues of Englishmen for an infinitely more important and more national literary manifestation. The exotic, artificial romance was not nearly strong enough meat for the appetites of men, or of women either, awakened to the gust of life at the close of the glorious Tudor epoch. In the extreme fermentation of public and private existence, the violence and intensity of passion experienced in real life easily and finally rendered insipid the flowery, languid stories of the Euphuists. When life moved so quickly, and presented people with such startling reverses of fortune ; when foreign politics, and home churchcraft, and the bewilderment of infatuated love, and the intrepidity of murder, and a thousand other forms of passionate, ill-regulated vitality, were stirring the fantasy of the populace, so that life itself was more exciting than a thousand romances, it was impossible to be interested for any length of time in long, blossomy conversations between the melancholy shepherd Menaphon and the fair nymph Samela of Cyprus. And out of this impatience grew the great literary invention of the Elizabethan age, the stage-play.

We have already passed in review, in earlier

divisions of this volume, the Tudor *miracles* and *moralities* which illustrated the theatrical spirit for men who had not been touched by the new learning. In these interesting but primitive compositions plot had been entirely wanting, and everything approaching to evolution of character. These plays had been humorous, sensible, and lively; they had depended upon allegory for their interest; and they had been independent of all exotic influence. In the first years of Elizabeth certain faint efforts had been made at creating a native comedy and a native tragedy, and these will be chronicled in their place. But the mediæval play had to die before the Renaissance play could be created. According to an early legend, the boy Shakespeare went from his home to Coventry to watch a performance of the old pageant of Corpus Christi. It was the new world contemplating the old world, and between these two there was really no essential bond. The attempts made, therefore, to modernise the surface of the mediæval play, and give it a humanist veneer, are of purely antiquarian interest.

The first Renaissance English play belongs to a period earlier than that with which this division deals. Nor was *Ralph Roister Doister* a farce on English lines at all, but founded almost servilely on a classical model. There were several successors to Udall's clever adaptation of the manner of Plautus, but none of them led any farther in the development of comedy. In tragedy the same process was repeated, under a worse model, the so-called Seneca. The interest taken in this bombastic Latin tragedy in the early years of Elizabeth

was very remarkable, and culminated in the production of *Gorbuduc* of Sackville and Norton, first performed in 1562. The irrational character of these dramatic experiments, and the fact that they led nowhere, and were incapable of development and extension, struck contemporary minds after a quarter of a century of bewildered subjection to Seneca. The most advanced critic to-day could scarcely define the faults of an early Elizabethan dramatist better than Whetstone did (in 1578) when he declared him to be 'most vain, indiscreet, and out of order; he first grounds his work on impossibilities; then in three hours runs he through the world; marries, gets children; makes children men, men to conquer kingdoms, murder monsters; and bringeth gods from heaven, and fetcheth devils from hell.'

What delayed the wholesome revival of the modern drama in England was the persistence with which the university wits, such as Sidney, Harvey, and Gosson, determined that this incoherence could only be abated by a stricter adherence to classical rules of composition. Their great mistake was to regard the drama as a purely intellectual or literary thing, without taking into consideration the material requirements of an audience in a theatre. But, while the scholars were wrangling in their closets as to the proper way in which the precepts of Aristotle should be carried out, the common people, who had never heard of Aristotle or of the unities, but who desired to be amused and alarmed in commodious play-houses, on their own lines, with intelligible chronicle-plays and farces, were really preparing the foundations of a national drama. Hence, in discussing the

movement of our dramatic literature, it is impossible to escape from a subject not properly dealt with in this volume, namely, the history of the stage, or to decline to acknowledge the importance of the date 1576, as that of the year in which the great building of advanced suburban theatres began.

We are here, however, confronted by the extremely curious fact that it seems impossible for us to discover what happened in the English theatrical world between this date and 1587. In spite of endless research and conjecture, these ten years, the conduct of which would be of extraordinary interest to us, obstinately refuse to deliver up their dramatic secrets. It is certain that several of the court-plays of Lyly, curious anomalies in stage-craft, which faintly prophesied of the poetic comedy of the next age, were performed; and it is also certain that one play of real merit, in its fragmentary way, *The Arraignment of Paris*, by George Peele, was played in 1584 by the Children of the Chapel Royal before Queen Elizabeth. Robert Greene, afterwards so famous, in these years 'left the University [of Cambridge] and away to London, where [he] became an author of plays.' But these early dramas of Greene have, without exception, perished or vanished. Perhaps the play of *Sir Clyomon and Sir Clamydes*, a strange medley of mediæval and Hellenic romance, belongs to this same dim period of transition. Putting together these and what other scraps of evidence we possess, we come to the conclusion that in these years, from 1576 to 1587, there was a tendency to the employment of Euphuism on the stage, to an avoidance of serious passion; that there was preferred the use of rhyming

metres, blank verse still lacking the sonority desirable for the public stage; that no attention was seriously given to characterisation or construction, the two qualities upon which drama really depends; and that for all these reasons there was a suspended animation, the English drama being unable to start, although absolutely ready to do so, until some man or men should arise strong enough to sweep these obstacles out of her path.

It seems quite certain that neither Peele nor Lyly, though each had a graceful talent, was man enough to do this; and what Greene was doing when he was not penning love-pamphlets is so absolutely unknown to us that conjecture is idle. But the revolutionary qualities wanted were unquestionably met with in two men of extraordinary fertility of invention and resolute originality—Kyd and Marlowe. Of these Marlowe had doubtless the greater genius; the tradition of the seventeenth century, combined with very recent discoveries, leads us to suspect that Kyd was the more innovating spirit. The fault of allegorical pastorals like *Endymion* and *The Arraignment of Paris* was that they were too gentle; they merely brushed the surface of life. These were social entertainments, in which political and courtly complications were touched with so timid a hand that if the official world turned upon the poet he might say that he did not mean anything at all, and that the resemblance was accidental. But such plays ill-matched the deep excitement, the audacious keenness, of the maturing Elizabethan age; and therefore we see, in 1587, two dramatists, supported unquestionably by their strong personal friendship, rise like Harmodius and Aristogeiton

to free English drama by an unexpected death-blow from the tyranny of a paralysing conventionality.

The blow was struck by Marlowe in *Dr Faustus* and by Kyd in *The Spanish Tragedy*. But to comprehend the nature of the revolution worked by these two men we must realise what their personal relations were with their time. It wanted but a little that these twin planets of our dramatic dawn were burned at the stake for their atheistical and infamous opinions; they were in actual danger of a death as violent as any which they drew. One of them actually died by the hand of a murderer, and both were, in their brief, fiery, and tempestuous lives, the prototypes of the melodramatic villains of their own tragedies. Neither Kyd nor Marlowe shrank from the contemplation (we must not say the committal) in real life of those 'carnal, bloody, and unnatural acts' which they loved to describe. If the character of Faustus fascinated them, it was because they saw in him what they wished to be—a turbulent innovator, self-supported in a paroxysm of intellectual arrogance and revolt. These new authors, in addition to the startling frankness with which they voiced the pride of the age, each possessed one dramatic quality of the highest and most pregnant value. Kyd had discovered the secret of the evolution of a plot; Marlowe invented the sonorous fullness of an effective stage blank verse. These two things had but to be united, and tragedy was on the right road. The same year, 1587 (it is probable), saw the first working out of the story of *Hamlet* in a popular Senecan form, due, almost certainly, to Kyd. We incur little danger of mistake, indeed, if we take that date as the

practical start-year of drama in its finished form in England. It is worthy of note that, while tragedy is thus taking hold of the English mind in deep romantic intensity, it is fading from the stage of France, where it seemed to be so passionately welcomed. Before Marlowe and Kyd are vocal, Jodelle and Garnier (with whom Kyd had much in common) have quitted the stage, and have left no direct descendants.

If we turn to narrative and lyrical poetry, we do not find the same abrupt transitions as meet us in the history of drama, but we observe a rapid upward development. Oddly enough, the period is limited, at its beginning and its close, by a publication of Spenser—*The Shepherd's Calendar* in 1579, and the first three books of *The Faerie Queen* in 1590. As will in due course be shown, Spenser himself almost wholly disappears from our view during those years; but the progress of poetry, set in action by the startling novelties of *The Shepherd's Calendar*, continues. Sidney's friendship with Spenser, and his presidency of the 'Areopagus,' a sort of club which set out to revolutionise poetry in a wholly undesirable way, dates from a year or so earlier than this; and Sidney, in defiance of his own rules, begins to write the canzonets and pastoral odes of the *Arcadia*, and, what is much more to the point, to introduce the sonnet and celebrate the alembicated loves of Astrophel and Stella. But these poems are not seen by the general public, and a profound sensation is made by Thomas Watson, whose *Hecatompathia, or Passionate Centurie of Love*, is published in 1582. Watson has, perhaps, not left behind him a single poem, a single

line, which lives in English literature; yet his historical position is a very prominent one. He marks the disappearance of the last traces of mediævalism, and the completion of the triumph of southern influences. Watson is a Petrarchist of the late order, of the class of Bembo and Molza, and of his sonnets may be said what Dr Garnett has excellently remarked of those of the last-mentioned Italian, that they are 'as inexpressive as harmonious—a perpetual silvery chime which soothes the ear, but conveys nothing to the mind.'

It was, in all probability, a very propitious thing for English poetry that the Italian verse of the Cinque Cento declined so suddenly and lost its prestige so completely. The Petrarchists, after the brilliant success of their innumerable warblings, ceased to sing, or ceased to find listeners, in the middle of the century; the latest and perhaps the best of them, Bernardo Tasso and Luigi Tansillo, died in 1568–69. There was, therefore, no contemporary Italian, of their own exact class, before whom Sidney and Watson were tempted to bow down. The most they could do was to become the English Tansillo and Molza of a later age. In spite of the weakness of their cause, their success was considerable. It must not be overlooked that a strong chord of Petrarchism continued to run through the complicated music of the great Elizabethan period, and was not drowned until it melted into the grotesque melody of the disciples of Donne. Drayton, Daniel, Barnfield, even Shakespeare himself, are full of Petrarchism, and it is only proper to remember that all this was started and given direction to by Sidney and Watson, but by Watson most of all.

By the side of the Petrarchan there flourished the pastoral manner, borrowed from Italy and the Peninsula. One of the books of the Cinque Cento which most deeply influenced the literature of the world, and not least of England, was the *Arcadia* of Sannazaro (1504), a pastoral romance, written in careful, but not Euphuistic, prose, plentifully besprinkled with bucolic verse. This work positively fascinated the youth of Europe, and was imitated, to satiety and ridicule, in every language. The Portuguese, in particular, greatly delighted in it, and it was a poet of Portugal, Jorge de Montemayor, whose Castilian pastoral of the *Diana* (1558) awakened in the youthful Sidney the ambition to compete in English pastoral with the poets of Southern Europe. Sidney had imitated Montemayor and Sannazaro before these poets were widely known in England; a version of the *Diana* (1598), by Bartholomew Young, acquired great popularity. Pastoral was started in England in two species—the Virgilian and Chaucerian, mingled in a kind of national eclogue, by Spenser, the purely artificial and Sannazaran by Sidney—and this also had its vogue throughout the next half-century, as exemplified in the direct scholars of Spenser, such as Phineas Fletcher and Browne, and in the more voluptuous dramatists from Beaumont to Shirley.

One prominent section of literature remains to be spoken of, and that is prose. But here we find much less to be said of a definite kind. The great years from 1570 to 1590 were years of national concentration on the difficult and supremely fascinating art of verse, and very secondary and desultory attention was given to

pedestrian prose. Of late what is perhaps an exaggerated attention has been given to the useful and picturesque but prolix translations of the early Elizabethan age. Sir Thomas North, Philemon Holland, Savile, and the rest have their place in the development of prose, but they were awkward writers, rocking feverishly between a vulgar raciness and an inappropriate pomposity of language. In Lyly, for the first time, we meet with an English writer of measured and occasionally elegant prose, although even Lyly is painfully prolix and mannered. In Hooker, for the first time, we discover really competent and practical prose, capable of conducting an argument with sanity, lucidity, and dignity; but Hooker published nothing until 1594. Much of the practical prose of the early Elizabethan is energetic, and it is possible from a dozen writers to select brief passages of extreme magnificence; but it is difficult to perceive that they wrote upon any system, or that it had ever crossed their minds that prose should be given, and could deserve, no less sustained technical attention than verse itself. After 1590 there came a burst of geographical and adventurous prose, much of which makes exceedingly good reading to-day. Nothing is more delightful than to plunge into those miscellanies in which Hakluyt and afterwards Purchas preserved the 'memorable exploits of late years by our English nation achieved, from the greedy and devouring jaws of oblivion.' Most of all, the progress of biblical and liturgical prose deserves our careful attention, the *Bishops' Bible* of Parker (1568) being the companion of men who gradually became dissatisfied with its imperfections, and

demanded from the Conference of 1604 a revision of the English Scriptures, which led, in 1611, to the publication of a Bible the most faultless and the most melodiously picturesque to be found in any European vernacular. For the success of this crowning trophy of Jacobean genius praise must not be withheld from Lancelot Andrewes, the editor or chairman of James I.'s learned committee of ecclesiastics.

We have now indicated a few of the influences and the surroundings which moulded English imaginative thoughts in the days which preceded the magnificent burst of genius in the midst of which the voice of Shakespeare was raised. When the creators were at work, simultaneously building the vast palaces of Elizabethan poetry, it became difficult to recollect the very names of their predecessors. It has therefore seemed well that we should linger a little on the movement of those gentle forces which led up to the great explosion of genius, in order to prepare readers for the phenomena which will be presented to them in due chronological course. From 1591 to 1616—that is to say, during the quarter of a century peculiarly identified with the activity of Shakespeare—English literature was raised to an extraordinary height of splendour and originality, and this must now be studied in the detailed life of its individual exponents.

One general order of ideas may, however, be suggested. Without giving way to the tendency to see historical events immediately reflected in literary productions, we may yet perceive to advantage the many ways in which Elizabethan literature proceeded on lines continuous with

those worked along by the great Tudor statesmen. First of all, it is impossible not to be struck by the contributions to the sentiments of national independence offered by one great author after another. There was this difference between, let us say, the polished epics of Italy and *The Faerie Queen*, that the one represented a vain aspiration and the other a living entity. When Spenser drew a picture of that newly-invented paragon of chivalry, the English gentleman, he painted something at once more attractive and more romantic than Orlando or Rinaldo had proved on the realistic canvas of Boiardo. But while he seemed, with his allegory and his fabulous geography, to be farther from existence than the southerners, he was actually moving much nearer to it, because he presented the veritable sentiment of the English champions who surrounded the virgin Gloriana on her throne.

The literature of this magnificent period, in its pride of mien and audacity of purpose, seems to support the prerogative of the English Crown. It is the literature of a nation that has just awakened to a sense of its strength, its isolation, its almost insupportable inward pertinacity. With the sudden development of political independence, there came an apprehension of the necessity of intellectual and spiritual cultivation. Every accomplishment helped to make England great, and while the Italian laboured at high astronomy or was martyred in the cause of ethical speculation without a spark of national enthusiasm, the Elizabethan turned his little copy of verses or practised an air on the theorbo with the belief that England would be so far the richer for

his energy. The courtier, the speculator, the soldier, the poet, the adventurer on perilous seas, the patient and responsible public servant, were found united in a single personage in these 'spacious' times. The careers of men like Raleigh and Sidney appeal to us all; but those of Fulke Greville, of John Davies, of Sackville, may teach us still more of this devotion to the day's service, be it what it may; of this noble determination to do well whatever England may call a man to do, be it successively the task of a poet, a diplomatist, a member of Parliament, a lawyer, a financier, or a soldier.

It would be absurd, however, to pretend that Elizabethan literature was sustained at these crystal heights. Spenser and Shakespeare exemplify the chivalrous aspect at its best; we shall discover little chivalry in Marston and Joseph Hall. Yet even in the grossest and most turbid of the Elizabethans we find abundance of that energy and intensity which are the signs of life and youth, and their faults are those out of which a great nation grows into serenity and strength. If the playwrights were coarse and rough, they were at least rough with the crudity of a full-bodied vintage, a wine that suffers in its youth for the stoutness and vigour of its quality. This is quite another thing from the malady of morals which falls on a feeble and decaying people, and which is like the flatness of a thin, indifferent vintage kept too long. In the general fusion of forces which took place in the reign of Elizabeth, a certain confused violence could not fail to be a symptom, in literature as well as in politics and Church matters. Life suddenly began to

be many-sided and copious, and elements of turbidity were inevitable in so tumultuous a torrent of thought.

The reader of the following pages will be able to appreciate what were the main imaginative forms taken by this redundancy and ebullience of national sentiment. If he passes suddenly from 1591 to 1616, which we take as the close of our third period, he will be surprised at the change he encounters. At the first date the world was opening before the inexperienced poet; at the second, all experiments have been tried, all heights reached in the summer of English poetry, and the faintest breath of autumnal sadness is felt in the air. We left Raleigh dreaming of Guiana; we find Ben Jonson and Donne blushing to remember their marriage odes on Somerset's hideous wedding. The man of the moment is Bacon; the Spanish Marriage fills the air; Shakespeare is dying, and Beaumont; Fletcher's dramatic art has already become a formula; the school of Spenser has sunk into silence. Everywhere there is a sense of the meridian being passed; in literature, as in politics, the high rapture cannot be sustained, and the independence of a people is no sooner broadly established than it begins to cultivate the weaknesses of other settled nations.

In nine years more, at the death of James I. in 1625, what we permitted ourselves to suspect has become matter of patent observation. Everywhere the symptoms of decay and decline are obvious. Bacon is degraded, and dying; and no one takes his place. Ben Jonson is paralysed, and 'sick and sad,' and his 'sons in Apollo' have not a tithe of his genius. Fletcher

is dead, and his work descends to Massinger. Of the glorious romantic poets which had made London the capital of Parnassus, the weary Heywood is still hanging about the stage, Middleton is closing appropriately in *Anything for a Quiet Life*, and with Ford and Shirley in a little momentary revival, a martin's summer, is preparing England for a long period of darkness. In all this we trace nothing more nor less than the collapse of energy which answers in the history of the imagination of a people to nervous exhaustion in an individual. England was tired of her rapture, her transcendent effort, and she was ready to sink into the repose of a convention.

We may, perhaps, discover a further reason for the malady which begins to afflict her from the reign of James I. onwards to the end of the Commonwealth. One palpable cause of the neglect of letters has been always pointed out in the confusion of political issues, and the concentration of popular attention on vast constitutional problems. But this easy solution of the difficulty is not to be accepted without a protest. In the first place, the decline of literature was proceeding at full speed while the political world was still quiet, and when none but the most far-sighted patriots anticipated a grand upheaval. On the other hand, it is by no means certain that an eager interest in high matters of State is necessarily unfavourable to the production of literature. The ecclesiastical storms which led to the appointment of Elizabeth's High Commission swept through every household in England, but their violence and bluster did not brush a grain of jewel-dust off the wings of *The Faerie Queen*, or delay by an

hour the evolution of the genius of Shakespeare. Nor is it at all certain that the disturbed condition of English politics half a century later had any ill effect on the imagination of Milton. We have to beware of attributing to politics too direct an influence on the waxing and waning of poetical literature.

When we close the brilliant and unparalleled period the examination of which we are now about to commence, what we do find is that England did not escape that curious blight or malady of the mind which fell on every other part of Europe, and marked, in so doing, the close of the Renaissance. This was the preoccupation with a forced ingenuity of fancy which is known by so many names, and which affected so many literatures in different but contemporary ways, as in Donne with us, Marino with the Italians, Gongora with the Spaniards. In this a morbid horror of the obvious leads the writer into forms of thought and speech which are inelegant and non-natural, and in which the proportion between what is essential and what is trifling is lost. It is not quite exact to say that this change consisted in a decay of taste, because ugly and monstrous things had been written, with an almost innocent nonchalance, by the poets of the great period, while those of the decline were often prettier and more graceful in trifles than their masters had been. But there was a decay of the sense of relative values, and this we see exemplified in the works of a man of such amazing genius and force as Donne, who says the most penetrating and the most silly thing at the same moment, not (as it would appear) distinguishing what is silly from what is pene-

trating, and having no criterion by which to judge his creations.

So that, without paradox, we may say that what this period of our literary history did, in its excessive and volcanic strain of production, was to wear out and paralyse those faculties by which it held its own acts in the balance. It lost the sense of proportion, the power of parallel measurement, so that it stumbled and fell, as those do who by some affection of the nerves have lost the power of regulating their actions. What was left for further generations, then, to do was to recover the measuring and weighing power by means of a strict and tonic mental discipline. And it is thus, and thus alone, that we can comprehend the readiness with which those whose childhood had been spent in the light of Spenser and Shakespeare were willing to subject themselves to the Aristotelian rules and the versification of Waller and Denham. It was that the blaze and blare of Elizabethan genius had worn out their capacities of enjoyment, and they had to subject themselves to a system of intellectual discipline to recover their mental tone.