

THE BOOKMAN

Edited by Seward Collins

OCTOBER, 1930

VOL. LXXII; NO. 2

THE SPIRIT OF THE AGE IN LITERATURE

by G. K. Chesterton

THE Spirit of the Age is not a Spirit; it is not really spiritual, for by definition it is not immortal. If the phrase in relation to literature is already almost traditional, it is a series of monuments of mortality. Hazlitt used it, I think, to summarize his sketches; and it is amusing to reflect how different has been the age on which we look back from that to which Hazlitt looked forward. He was as far out in the change he hoped for as in the things he thought unchangeable; it would have surprised him, for instance, to learn that he could not take one of his country walks, and give himself up to thinking, without being killed by about six successive motor-cars. Matthew Arnold, writing round about 1870, used a similar phrase but carefully translated it into German. It is again amusing to think that if he had lived till 1914, he would have hurriedly translated it back into English. By which I do not mean that he was either a snob or a turncoat, but that he believed in the Spirit of the Age and suffered accordingly. And it is obvious that what is roughly and rather inaccurately called the Post-War world has a new atmosphere

of its own, not only different from all that Hazlitt or Arnold knew, but very different from all that Hazlitt or Arnold expected.

This atmosphere in all the arts, and notably in literature, is easily discernible, though not perhaps easily definable. If we were forced to fix on a single word, perhaps the word Syncopation would best express the artistic element; for syncopé, which in medicine is a malady, in esthetics is a movement. To put it less pedantically, the world has shown a disposition to come out in spots, even if we admit that some of them are beauty spots. A quality which literary reviewers suddenly started calling sporadic, but which those who love the noble English language will prefer to call patchy, appeared simultaneously in all the arts; music cut up into notes, pictures cut up into cubes, prose cut up into impressions and episodes, and poetry often cut up into isolated images. There went with this a love, not only of vivid or violent color, but of very jagged outline or pattern; as if to emphasize the fact of something broken off sharply from everything else. In the case of literature, the thing

so broken off was the individual mind, or even a subdivision of the individual mind. It has been said that Protestantism isolated the soul; however this may be, it is true that this kind of modernism isolates not only the mind but the mood. It not only cuts up mankind into men, but it actually cuts up a man into moods. That is the fairest way of judging much that is severely judged in the irresponsibility and anarchy of some sex novels, by novelists not personally ignoble. Quite apart from morality, the old love story had a natural artistic unity, for it had a single end, apart from a happy ending. But the story not of love but of loves, under existing conditions, is bound to be a string of episodes without much effect on each other, for that is how the man of that school regards them. It may be very wrong to hunt a boar or a stag, but you could make a hunting song of it, or a story with a climax when the wild boar turned to bay. But if your philosophy is hardly even that of a naturalist catching butterflies, but almost that of an idler or idiot catching flies, you cannot make a climax, but only a series. One effect of this isolation is a certain irresponsibility about communal ideals, which can be best exemplified in poetry; since it contrasts so sharply with the old world of William Morris or Walt Whitman. The change is in the loss of positive ideals. Whitman was an enthusiast for Democracy; his countryman, Mr. Mencken, to put it mildly, is not an enthusiast for Democracy; but neither is he an enthusiast for anything opposed to Democracy. Morris's Earthly Paradise does not exist on earth, but Mr. Aldous Huxley will believe in a heavenly paradise long before he believes in an earthly one.

When Swinburne called his work *Songs before Sunrise*, and posed as a prophet wrapped in a mantle watching the red day-break of revolution, he was almost exactly like the man in Mark Twain who came out hurriedly, bundled in a blanket, to watch the sun rise on the Alps, and after watching the

orb anxiously for some time, found he was just in time to see it set. Swinburne's republicanism was red enough in color, if rather cloudy in form, but it was certainly the red of sunset and the reverse of the red of dawn. The epoch which he supposed to be beginning was in fact at that very moment ending, and we could hardly do better in dating the present literary epoch than to date it from that sad Swinburnian end. To take a metaphor even more Swinburnian than that of sunrise, he was the last foaming wave, sometimes (it might be hinted) a rather frothy wave, which made the high-water mark of that great flood-tide, which in politics we call the French Revolution, and in poetry measure by the names of Shelley and Landor and Béranger and Victor Hugo; with some previous movements in Burns or Blake. Roughly speaking, Shelley was at the beginning of the period and Swinburne at the end of it, and between them was all that counted of the movement which identified poets with prophets of revolt, which set the laurel crown of the bard directly against the golden crown of all other kings, and conceived the lyre as chiefly strung to sound the praises of Liberty. That conception is dead. It died, not so much when Swinburne died, but rather when Swinburne wrote his first Imperial sonnet in praise of the South African war.

It is rather odd to remark, in passing, and rather salutary for professional revolutionists and pioneers, that there is almost always a sort of break, of boredom or disgust, immediately after some very flamboyant figure has defied the convention, and therefore become the fashion. The Bohemian, who is seen everywhere in Society, boldly despising Society, has a high old time while it lasts, and really makes the best of both worlds, the wilderness and the drawing-room; but it does not last very long. Very early in the nineteenth century, it was already old-fashioned to enjoy Byron; as it will never be old-fashioned to enjoy Chaucer or Homer. The ringlets and whiskers of his darkling heroes and

heroines soon began to have a particular sort of staleness, which does not apply to monkish tonsures or ancient Argive beards. It is the staleness of old fashion-plates, which is never felt in old pictures. The Byronic spirit became old-fashioned because it had been the fashion; but, above all, because it had been the very latest, loudest, most daring and revolutionary fashion. When somebody or something has reached that wild, supreme ecstasy of novelty, it is suddenly stricken old, and stamped forever with its date and death. Nobody can carry it any further; nobody wants to do it again; nobody even wants to do it better. It has been too much of a success, and something of a secret and subtle vulgarity, that lies in the very heart of success, has become flagrant in it and sent forth a savor of shame. And by this I mean a general truth about human life, not a petty sneer at the personal life of Byron, whom I admire as a poet and even sympathize with as a man, much more than it is now the fashion to do. But it is true that because Byron was a man full of the Spirit of the Age, his very portrait seemed rapidly to grow aged; like the portrait of Dorian Gray. And similarly, it was because Swinburne was so very certain that he was a revolutionary poet that there is a reaction against him even as a poet, and an utter oblivion of him as a revolutionary. This does not prove that it is wrong to be a revolutionary; on the contrary, many of the things against which Byron and Swinburne revolted were in fact very revolting. But it does mean that this sort of innovation and insurrection is likely to be as much disliked immediately after its triumph as immediately before. The rebel may be right to make a rebellion, but he will not make a dynasty. The man most brilliant and conspicuous with the Spirit of the Age will have an air of horrible and offensive familiarity to the people of the next age. I will not apply the parable in any personal fashion, but it is well to realize that, if there be anywhere at this moment a man who seems vivid and vibrant with the new forces

in literature, picked out by the spotlight in the perfect jazz pattern, and moving in faultless triumph to the vital and essential jazz tune, we may be sure it is that man, and no milder specimen, who will seem in forty years as faded as a rhetorical ode to Julia or Matilda, or the Byronic verses in an old album about a rose and a tear.

Let us realize to start with, therefore, that in so far as the Spirit of the Age is only the Spirit of the Age, and it is not also the Spirit of the Ages, and of all that is before and after the ages, it is a spirit that very quickly evaporates, and perhaps most quickly where it has seemed particularly pungent and strong. Byron and Swinburne did, in their day, emphatically go to our heads; but, to judge by current criticism, they have left many with little more than headaches. This is most notable in the criticism of poetry; but it is still more notable that so much of the poetry is criticism. We need not discuss fully the justice or injustice of the charges of mere ugliness and unworthiness made against recent verse. But nobody will deny the general sense in which Swinburne, if not one of the most perfect of poets, was at least one of the most poetical of poets. And no one will deny that, in comparison at least, he has been followed very abruptly by a race of prosaic poets. Much of it is merely negative and destructive; the sort of analysis that has generally been presented in prose. Swinburne was accused of sacrificing sense to sound, or of writing mere nonsense for the sake of melody. Some of the new poets write what a coarse careless world might mistake for nonsense; but they never bribe or insult us with anything that we could mistake for melody. I confess I think the charge against Swinburne was sometimes just; that having said, "With life before and after", which might mean something, though the opposite of what Swinburne meant, he went on cheerfully to add, "And death beneath and above", which means nothing at all. I admit that merely to provide a rhyme for the beautiful line "Blos-

som by blossom, the spring begins", he did not scruple to write of "the season of snows and sins", as if the most respectable people were always wicked in winter. But I think it will also be admitted, on the other side, that a recent poet who announced his intentions in the lines

And I shall sing
By the blood in stone images—

also indicates a purpose that is not entirely clear; and that on the other hand, when it comes to singing, stone images do not sing quite so successfully as Swinburne.

This, however, is merely a superficial view of the contrast; and by itself would make the critic figure far too much as a *laudator temporis acti*. I am in no way tied to defend the nonsense of the Swinburne period, any more than the nonsense of the Ezra Pound period, but I am quite ready to recognize the sense in both, and especially the sense in which the two senses are separate. And I began this sketch with the name of Swinburne, because, while it is the latest and nearest of the great names of the nineteenth century, it also marks the very sharp change to the new atmosphere of the twentieth. And the first change to notice is that which I did in fact notice first; when I spoke of the red day-break of the revolutionary dreams. One of the things which has suddenly, silently, and curiously completely collapsed, is the notion of an enthusiasm which was poetical and also political. I say an enthusiasm; for the new analytic writers might well be capable of writing political satire. That is, verse which expresses, not our enthusiasm for politics, but our lack of enthusiasm for politicians. It is true that the latest satire is sometimes a little obscure, and that the heartening energy with which the poets hold up a politician to public ridicule and contempt is sometimes a little weakened by the public having a difficulty in grasping what they are talking about, or understanding a word they say. But on that side their work might still be forcible; and

need be none the less so for being as involved as Browning or Donne. But the positive, and especially the popular or collective, side of sociology seems to have suddenly become impossible in poetry. Poetry has become more than normally individualistic. The individualist can write a song; but not a song with a chorus.

Such a change in poetry necessarily has causes that are political rather than poetical. I shall therefore say the less about them; especially as the enquiry would involve the explanation of views of my own, which are here irrelevant and seem to some eccentric. My own opinion is that the younger generation, especially the most intelligent among them, are conscious of the coming of a new social system, which they do not either love or desire, but which they do not hate sufficiently to destroy. The idea that Republics would make the world perfect was soon destroyed—by the Republics. The idea that Socialism would make the world perfect has been left in a more kindly haze; because Socialism has been abandoned by the Socialists. But meanwhile the old private property and liberty were being absorbed or destroyed, not by the Socialists, but by the Capitalists. They are being destroyed by the Trusts; by the sort of Business Government now everywhere prevailing. Now poets cannot be expected to sing wild happy lyrics in praise of Business Government. At the same time poets, especially modern poets, cannot be expected to die on the barricades, in a revolution against Business Government. It is to some extent to the interest of poets that people should be business-like—even in the publishing business. So long as the Trust State is fairly humane and works steadily there is nothing to fight about; but there is precious little to sing about. For Business Government has neither authority nor liberty. Whether or no this explanation be right, it is certainly a paradox that this patchy isolation of the mind should exist under social conditions of almost inhuman sameness and centralization. But the

paradox is in any case a very practical part of the tragedy. Wilde in "The Soul of Man Under Socialism", unconsciously uttered a very profound warning—against Socialism. It was the warning that even under Socialism the soul might have a tragedy like that of Wilde. Under the Servile State the soul will be yet more horribly free. There will be nothing to prevent a man losing his soul, as long as he does not lose his time or his ticket or his place in the bread queue. We need not be surprised, therefore, if the laborious organization and combination of our time encircle a singular loneliness. It is more important to note that the new literature has some of the merits of loneliness; an increasing refusal to be encouraged by newspaper claptrap or made cheerful to order, a certain disgust with Party Systems, and not a little open-mindedness to the ideas of the past as well as the ideas of the future; at least, in the finest minds, a refusal to be tied to the ideas of the present. As usual, the wisest men of the age are not dominated by the spirit of the age. But perhaps the best summary in the matter of our own age would be this; that the stupid people are sneering at the last generation and the intelligent people are sneering at their own generation. But I think it must be admitted that most of them are sneering.

This unsociable quality in the intellect, which can coexist with so much superficial sociability or herding in the habits, is the most outstanding fact about really able writers in recent days. One of its manifestations is a verbal eccentricity in works of a talent that goes beyond the eccentric. It is something like the secret language that is invented by a child. *Ulysses* contains a number of very queer words; though perhaps none queerer than *Ulysses*. For the comparison is curious in itself, seeing that throughout a prolonged pagan epic Homer manages to be very pure in very plain language, while Joyce manages to be very coarse in very esoteric language. There are whole passages,

of the sort on which the moral argument turns, which are dark to the point of decency. He has been compared to Rabelais, but the very comparison should be enough to show us vividly the difference made by the Spirit of the Age. It is the whole force of Rabelais that he seems to roar like ten thousand men; that one of his giants is like a multitude turned into a man. What he roars may not always be very distinct or intelligible, any more than the roar of an actual rabble or mob; but we know that what is being shouted is something quite normal and human, even if it be what some would call bestial. But we do not feel, or at least I do not feel, that James Joyce ever speaks for anybody except James Joyce. We may call this individuality or insanity or genius or what we will; but it belongs to its time because of this air of having invented its own language; and moved a little further away from anything like a universal language. The new *Ulysses* is the opposite of the old *Ulysses*, for the latter moved amid ogres and witches with a level-headed and almost prosaic common sense, while the former moves among common lamp-posts and public houses with a fixed attitude of mind more fantastic than all the fairy-tales. I am not here either adequately praising or adequately criticizing this much controverted work; I am merely using it as an illustration of the isolation of one mind, or even of one mood. Rabelais sometimes seems confusing, because he is like twenty men talking at once; but Joyce is rather inaudible, because he is talking to himself.

The late D. H. Lawrence is generally quoted, along with such a writer as James Joyce, as a typical product of the time. Personally I suspect that there was rather more in Lawrence than any mere spirit of any mere age, especially such an age. Whether what was inside him ever really came out of him, or ever came out except tail-foremost, in the wrong order and the wrong proportion, may be more doubtful. I fancy that most of his faults could be referred to the one

not unpardonable fault of impatience. His time and training made it inevitable that he should grope. But his temper made it natural that he should not so much grope as grab. Like so many men of his type, he started cock-sure that he was right, and gradually grew more and more fruitful and human as he discovered that he was wrong. He would never, naturally enough, have put it in the form that he was wrong; and indeed it would be truer to say that he found himself capable of being much more right. But anyhow, he, much more than any of his comrades and contemporaries, had something of that old religious spirit of the revolutionist; the constructive revolutionist who makes himself responsible for a new world. He did, if in the groping modern fashion, try to get to grips with our ultimate relations with God and woman and nature, and the things on which a new world can be built. He had much more of the childlike and honorable seriousness of men like Morris and Thoreau and Walt Whitman. He did not always sneer. But the moral chaos of his time delayed the self-education of his genius, and it marks the same spirit of syncopation or separatism that it had to be merely self-education. He lived in an age crowded with schools and schooling, and all the things he naturally hated; but there was no education, because there was no tradition. There was no communal inheritance of virtues or right relations, and therefore his virtues, like all the virtues of his generation, had to be individual and rather irritable.

Something of the same abnormal reaction towards the normal may be observed in the ripening of the remarkable talent of Miss Rebecca West, who has of late tended more and more to reconstruct for herself the tradition that her friends have destroyed for her. Her friends and intellectual interests, also, have been more among the survivals of the old visionaries of social construction; the old guard of the systematizers of whom perhaps the last and greatest remains in Mr.

Bernard Shaw. We must look elsewhere for a new and clean-cut case of the more modern attitude, and on the whole, perhaps, the last philosophic phase is best expressed in one of the most brilliant of living writers: Mr. Aldous Huxley. He would not even be complimented to be compared to Shelley, and nobody is likely to make the comparison. But he would not even be complimented to be compared to Shaw, in so far as Shaw stands for that stock of nineteenth-century ideals of simplification and perfectibility, which, along with his vegetarianism, Shaw really inherits from Shelley. Mr. Aldous Huxley does not inherit or continue those ideals which broadly began with Rousseau, he turns on them and rends them. He is a very rare specimen, a real realist; in the sense that he is a realist at the expense of new things as well as old and ready to testify against revolt as well as against tyranny. In truth he is ready to testify against anything; it would be rather more difficult to say what he is testifying to or for. Perhaps the change I describe, from the revolt of the nineteenth century to the realism of the twentieth, could not be better measured than by the distance between two dates; the day on which Mr. H. G. Wells, laying the foundations of the first of his Utopias, declared that its first principle should be that Original Sin is a lie—to the day when Mr. Aldous Huxley, heir of the great scientific house in its next generation, wrote that the medieval mind was far wiser than the nineteenth-century minds, because it recognized Original Sin. There is no doubt at all about Mr. Aldous Huxley recognizing Original Sin. There are moments when he seems to drift darkly towards that Calvinist exaggeration that was called Total Depravity. Indeed, while I always admire and often agree with his suggestions, there does seem to be a darker suggestion of that sort of Manichæan mysticism which traced the roots of evil in nature itself; a strange wilderness of vision, without form or frontier, in which everything is repulsive because nothing is

forbidden. This, being but a guess at the subconscious, is perhaps unfair; it is fairer to say that there returns with Aldous Huxley something of the spirit of Jonathan Swift; the rocky sincerity, the splendid scorn of snobbery, especially intellectual snobbery, the virile impatience with unworthy praise; but, with the rest, something of that strange self-torturing itch of the sensitive man to insist on ugliness because of his love of beauty. In Huxley, as in Swift, the passages called unpleasant are really unpleasant; perhaps they would be worse if they were pleasant. They can hardly be called sensual, for they do not even please the senses. I may well end this rude outline with the name of this remarkable writer, because he does exactly mark the

way in which the mind of man has come full circle since the middle of the nineteenth century. He is the low-water mark, as I have said that Swinburne was the high-water mark, of that foaming or frothing sea of humanitarian hope. Yet there was a truth behind the impatient discovery of the Millennium, as well as behind the belated rediscovery of the Fall. Nor will man be permanently satisfied with the pessimism of Huxley, any more than with the optimism of Whitman. For man knows there is that within him which can never be valued too highly, as well as that within him which can never be hated too much; and only a philosophy which emphasizes both, violently and simultaneously, can restore the balance to the brain.

PRELUDE

by Conrad Aiken

I

And how begin, when there is no beginning?
How end, when there's no ending? How cut off
One drop of blood from other, break the stream
Which, with such subtlety, such magnificent power,
Binds the vast windflower to its throbbing world?
. . . Shall we be bold and say, then, "at this point
The world begins, the windflower ends?" rip out
One bleeding atom, pretend it has no kin? . . .
Or shall we, with the powerful mind, hold off
The sky from earth, the earth from sky, to see
Each perish into nothing?

They will perish:
The drop of blood, the windflower, and the world;
Sound will be silence; meaning will have no meaning.
The blade of grass, in such a light, will grow
Monstrous as Minotaur; the tick of the clock,—
Should it be taken as the clock's dark secret,—
Is chaos and catastrophe; the heart
Cries like a portent in a world of portents,
All meaningless and mad.

II

Softly, together
We tread our little arcs upon our star;
Stare at each other's eyes, and see them thinking;
Lay hands upon our hearts and feel them beating;