THE

NINETEENTH CENTURY

No. CCXLV—July 1897

ENGLAND'S OPPORTUNITY

GERMANY OR CANADA?

I claim for the present Government of Canada that they have passed a resolution by which the products of Great Britain are admitted on the rate of their tariff at 12½ per cent. and next year at 25 per cent. reduction. This we have done not asking any compensation. There is a class of our fellow-citizens who ask that all such concessions should be made for a *quid pro quo*. The Canadian Government has ignored all such sentiments. We have done it because we owe a debt of gratitude to Great Britain. We have done it because it is no intention of ours to disturb in any way the system of free trade which has done so much for England. But we are told that this policy which has been adopted by the Canadian Government cannot last, because it is coming into conflict with existing treaties. Let me tell you this—the Canadian people are willing to give this preference to Great Britain; they are not willing to extend it to other countries at the present time. We claim that treaties which are opposed to us cannot stand in the way of our policy; we claim that they do not apply, and that position we intend to discuss with the Imperial authorities. But it may be that, after all, we may fail in our contention; it may be that, after all, it may be held against us, as it has been in the past. If the treaties apply, I have only this to say—that the position will have to be reconsidered *in toto*. If the treaties apply, a new problem will have to be solved, and this problem, what will it be? The problem will be that either Canada will have to retreat or England will have to advance.[1]

This is perhaps the most remarkable passage in the very remarkable speech delivered by the distinguished Prime Minister of Canada immediately after he landed upon the shores of the mother country. It raises questions of intense interest and possibly of absolutely vital

[1] Speech of the Right Hon. Sir Wilfrid Laurier, Prime Minister of the Dominion of Canada, delivered at Liverpool, June 12, 1897.

THE NINETEENTH CENTURY

A MONTHLY REVIEW

EDITED BY JAMES KNOWLES

VOL. XLII

JULY—DECEMBER 1897

LONDON
SAMPSON LOW, MARSTON & COMPANY
(*LIMITED*)
St. Dunstan's House
FETTER LANE, FLEET STREET, E.C.
1897

LIFE IN POETRY: POETICAL DECADENCE[1]

In my last two lectures[2] I traced the conditions under which Poetry comes into existence in the mind of the poet, and the manner in which it clothes itself with external form. I showed that it was the product of the harmonious fusion of two contrary elements, the Universal and the Individual. By the Universal element I mean what we often call by the name Nature: whatever is furnished naturally to the poet's conception by forces outside himself; the sources of inspiration springing from the religion, tradition, civilisation, education of the country to which he belongs; the general mental atmosphere of the age in which he lives; the common law of the language in which he composes. By the Individual element I mean what we usually call Art; including all that is contributed by the genius of the poet, and that helps to constitute the characteristic form or mould in which the universal idea is expressed.

I shall in my present lecture go further, and try to pursue the course of Life in Poetry in the history of the art, because the Art of Poetry has a life of its own, exactly analogous to the life of individual men and of States, proceeding from infancy to maturity and from maturity to decay. Great poetry of any kind is, as a rule, produced within certain well-defined periods of a nation's history, and the culminating point in every such kind of poetry is reached by a gradual ascent to the work of some great representative or classic poet. When this point has been reached we generally find an equally regular course of declension, represented by poets not without genius, but whose work is always characterised by certain common defects, which denote the exhaustion of the art and give warning of its approaching end. In the Greek epic, for example, Homer, representing the zenith of the art, has for his successors the literary composers of the Alexandrian period; and these again have their epigoni in poets like the Pseudo-Musæus. In the history of the Attic drama, the movement of decline begins almost insensibly with Euripides, but proceeds with increasing speed in the days of Agathon and other tragedians, whose names Time has not cared to preserve. The

[1] A lecture delivered in the University of Oxford on the 6th of March, 1897.
[2] Published in the *Nineteenth Century* for August 1896 and February 1897.

epigrammatists of Alexandria are the only representatives left, after the fourth century, of all the lyric singers of the free Greek cities; and thus by degrees the voice of Greek poetry dies into silence. Latin epic poetry declines from the height to which it has been raised by Virgil, through Lucan to Statius, from Statius to Claudian, from Claudian to nothingness. The English poetical drama, culminating in Shakespeare, moves downward to Massinger, and expires in the rhyming tragedies of Dryden and Lee. The ethical and didactic poetry of England, arriving at its grand climacteric in Pope, shows a dwindling force in Johnson and Goldsmith, and reaches its last stage of senility in the sounding emptiness of Erasmus Darwin.

Now, this law of progress and decline, which is common to all the fine arts, may, I think, be formulated as follows. In the infancy of poetry or painting the universal element of life predominates over the individual; men's imaginative conceptions, as we see in the work of Giotto and Chaucer, are stronger than their powers of technical expression. In the maturity of art there is a perfect balance of the two opposing elements, as shown in the works of Raphael and Sophocles and Shakespeare. In the decadence of art, the individual overbalances the universal: we come to the stage either of insipid mannerism, exemplified in the paintings of Carlo Dolci and the poetry of Rogers; or of violent exaggeration, such as we find in the pictures of Michael Angelo Caravaggio, and in tragedies like those of Seneca and Nathaniel Lee.

I shall ask you therefore to consider the symptoms that betoken the decline of poetry from its culminating point; and I shall take my illustrations from different periods, which, by universal critical consent, are periods of decadence. The subject is indeed a vast one, but I think I shall be able to establish the truths which I am anxious to impress upon you, by presenting the matter in three aspects: (1) The Decline of the Universal in Ages of Poetical Decadence. (2) The Exaggeration of the Individual in such ages. (3) The Abdication by Society of its right of judgment in questions of Poetry and Art.

Now, as regards the Decline of the Universal, the most vivid examples of this phenomenon are furnished by the history of Greek poetry, because the Greek genius was so comprehensive that there was no form of poetical expression in which it did not produce work of the highest excellence. Let us in the first place make our observations on the ground of Greek drama. Probably few critics would care to contest the opinion that the culminating point of Greek tragedy is to be found in the *Œdipus Rex* and indeed the reason for this is plain. In the early days of the Greek drama the universal predominated strongly over the individual. Everyone who listens to me knows that the form of Greek drama was worked out almost instinctively by means of a union between the Greek myths and the

Chorus, which was the original mouthpiece of the worship of Dionysus. Now, the essence of the drama lies in the exhibition of action; but even as late as the time of Æschylus the religious, or didactic, or universal element in tragic conception was so powerful that, in plays like the *Agamemnon* and the *Eumenides*, though the course of the action is well defined, the Chorus seems to be a more important part of the whole structure than the actors themselves. In the *Œdipus Rex*, on the other hand, there is a perfect balance between Nature and Art; the moral of the play is expressed mainly by means of the action. Pity and terror are aroused by the tragic order in which the events are made to succeed each other; the elevation to which the hero is raised by his genius and wisdom before the great περιπέτεια to which he is exposed; the irony which makes the whole horror of the situation apparent to the spectators, while the person most affected remains unconscious of the truth; the crash of ruin in which he is involved by the antecedent sins of others rather than by his own—all this is as much in accordance with the Greek sense of religion as are the doctrines of the Chorus in the tragedies of Æschylus; and it is more in harmony with the nature of the drama as a form of poetic art.

But when we come to Euripides, with whom begins the period of tragic decadence, the state of the ideal atmosphere has manifestly changed. Poet and audience have both lost much of their old religious belief, and this mental change brings with it a great change in the form of the drama. The Chorus, no longer the natural mouthpiece of the universal feeling of awe and reverence, dwindles into a mere instrument for the invention of new melodies; on the other hand, the story is not arranged for the purpose of bringing out the moral, but to display the poet's ingenuity in the construction of his plot, or some other kind of artistic cleverness. And this tendency was doubtless strongly developed by Agathon, who, if there is any truth in Aristophanes' representation of him in the *Thesmophoriazusæ*, must have been a typical representative of those who follow art for art's sake.

Let us now turn to the Greek epic, and contrast the work of its maturity and decadence as illustrated in the *Iliad* and the *Argonautica* of Apollonius Rhodius. One of the most striking characteristics in Homer's poetry is the richness and variety of its materials, the universal nature of its interest. The poet is at once a theologian, a statesman, a moralist, and—observe this particularly—a painter. There is scarcely an object in nature which he does not represent; and yet so perfect in him is the balance between the universal and the individual, that each of his conceptions is placed in its just relation for the purposes of art. Those exquisite touches of pathos, seeming to spring instinctively out of the narrative; those lofty strokes of rhetoric, so proper to the occasion; those detailed descriptions which

embody the very genius of painting—all is adapted to elevate, to humanise, to relieve the progress of the action. How different is the case with Apollonius Rhodius! The master from whom Virgil learned so much was no mean poet; but in him whatever is excellent comes scarcely at all from the universality of human interest which abounds in the *Iliad*: almost everything depends on the ingenuity of the artist. I do not remember in the *Argonautica* a single passage of natural pathos, a single general reflection or observation universally true, a single effort of soul-stirring rhetoric. All these elements have disappeared from the life of the epic; what remains to it is the genius of painting. Apollonius's descriptions are admirable, whether he exerts himself to paint the external symptoms of love in Medea, or to heighten a scene of romantic adventure. As a specimen of his powers in the latter class take his description of Medea hypnotising the snake that guarded the Golden Fleece,[3] which may be translated thus:

> When to his ears the sweet enchantment came,
> A languor shuddered through the serpent's frame.
> Through all his length the soothing influence rolled,
> Relaxed the spiry volumes fold on fold;
> As swells a sudden wave mid Ocean's sleep,
> Sullen and soundless, through the stagnant deep,
> Yet, though the powerful charm benumbed the rest,
> High o'er the ground up-towered his grisly crest:
> Wide gaped his jaws to seize their prey. But now
> The dauntless maiden dipped her charmèd bough
> In the fell broth, and on his eye-balls flung
> The magic dew, and, while she sprinkled, sung;
> Till, 'neath the charming voice and odours shed
> From the drugged potion, sank the languid head,
> And through the trunks, inert and brown as they,
> The lifeless coils stretched rood on rood away.

This reminds one of Turner's picture of Apollo killing the Python. It is the work of a great painter. And yet how inferior to Homer is Apollonius even on his own ground! Homer will often stand still to breathe his imagination, in the midst of his rapid narrative, by elaborating a simile; but he never does this without making the simile really illustrate the action. For instance, he illustrates his account of Agamemnon watching the mustering of the troops of the two Ajaces by the following simile: 'As when from a rock a herdman sees a cloud coming over the sea before the blast of the west wind, and as he stands afar off, it seems to be rushing across the sea blacker than pitch, carrying with it a mighty whirlwind; and as he looks he shudders, and drives his flock under a cave.'[4] Apollonius admired and imitated Homer's manner of painting: he is even more picturesque than Homer himself; but there is this difference between them, that the poet of Alexandria introduces similes that do not

[3] *Argonautica*, book iv. 149-161.

[4] *Iliad*, book iv. 275.

illustrate anything, merely for the sake of the painting. Here is a characteristic example. 'As when a sunbeam plays on the side of a house, reflected from water which has just been poured into a cistern, or perhaps a pail: hither and thither it dances on the quick eddy; even so'—What? 'even so the maiden's heart in her breast was tossing, and tears of pity flowed from her eyes.'[5] Or take this, which is still more elaborate: 'As when a poor working woman heaps straws under a burning log, while she is at her task of spinning wool, that she may make a blaze for herself at night beneath her roof, waking betimes; and the flame rising wondrously from the little log consumes all the straw.' A very charming and pathetic picture! But what do you suppose this poor working woman is like? Why, once more, Medea in love. 'Even so,' says the poet, 'beneath her breast cruel love burned always secretly, and he changed her tender cheek from red to pale by reason of the anguish of her mind.'[6] Now, if one wishes to measure the decay of the universal in Greek epic poetry by a positive standard, just compare this kind of thing, which is really the best that Apollonius Rhodius can give, with the contrast between the eloquence of Menelaus and Odysseus as described by Antenor. You may feel the greatness of it in Pope's version :—

> When Atreus' son harangued the listening train,
> Just was his sense, and his expression plain,
> His words succinct, yet full, without a fault,
> He spoke no more than just the thing he ought:
> But when Ulysses rose, in thought profound,
> His modest eyes he fixed upon the ground;
> As one unskilled or dumb, he seemed to stand,
> Nor raised his head, nor stretched his sceptred hand;
> But when he speaks, what elocution flows!
> Soft as the fleeces of descending snows,
> The copious accents fall, with easy art,
> Melting they fall, and sink into the heart.[7]

Thus, you see, in Greek poetry the drama declines and disappears: the epic declines and disappears. For a moment you have a flash of fine inventive genius in the Idylls of Theocritus. But look where Theocritus goes for his invention. Though the inspiration of poets in the great days of Greek art proceeded essentially from civic sources, Theocritus has to go into the country, and to refresh the jaded imagination of the effete Alexandrians with the rustic melodies of shepherd life.

At last you have no distinctive form of poetry left to the Greek muse but the epigram. I am strongly tempted to linger over the Greek Anthology, and to show how much of the universal element in poetry, how much of the spirit of Nature, survived even in decadence, by attempting versions of such characteristic and charming epigrams as Callimachus's verses on the death of Heraclitus, Plato's love epigram beginning 'Ἀστέρας εἰσαθρεῖς, and, what is perhaps the most compact epigram in the world, his couplet on the finding of the gold and the noose, beginning χρυσὸν ἀνὴρ εὑρών. But the shortness of time and the necessities of my argument bid me pass on to the poetry of other civilisations that I may point out how exactly parallel to the course of decadence in Greek poetry, in respect of the dwindling of the universal element of life, is the history of the art both in Rome and in England. The Roman genius of poetry rises in an ascending scale from Lucretius and Catullus to Virgil, from whom it moves in a declining course through Lucan to Ausonius. In Lucretius there is an abounding source of native energy, but a deficiency of art. Something of the universal, something of poetic energy, had been consciously lost even in Virgil's time, as we see from his complaint at the opening of the third *Georgic*:

> Cetera quæ vacuas tenuissent carmine mentes
> Omnia jam vulgata.

But Virgil knew where to go to repair the loss; and having selected such a truly Roman theme as the *Georgics*, he produced, in his treatment of it, that complete balance between the universal and the individual which Lucretius had failed to attain in the *De Rerum Natura*. When we come to Ausonius, on the contrary, we find that the universal element has almost vanished: there is, for example, in his very charming poem on the Moselle, as compared with the *Georgics*, a loss of poetical life almost exactly analogous to that which occurs in Greek poetry between the period of Homer and the period of Apollonius. The *Georgics* are full of beautiful pictures, but they are also full of the genius of Roman action, and of the Roman imperial spirit; while the poem on the Moselle depends for its charm entirely on its landscape-painting.

I come to our own country. Did time permit it would be easy to show in detail that an exact parallel exists between the rise and decline of the poetical drama in Athens and in England. In England, as in Athens, the idea of tragedy arose out of the religion of the country. Shakespeare's tragedies are a direct development of the miracle plays and moralities, just as the tragedies of Æschylus and Sophocles are the final results of the evolution of the drama from the rude exhibitions given by Thespis at the festival of Dionysus. So, too, with the matter of tragedy. In the Attic drama the universal underlying idea of the greater tragedians is Misfortune, necessarily entailed on families and peoples by the curse of hereditary sin: this idea is derived from the popular myths on which the drama was founded. In the Shakespearian tragedy the fundamental idea is Misfortune, brought about by the weakness and corruption of the

[5] *Argonautica*, book iii. 756–761. [6] *Ibid.* book iii. 291–298.
[7] *Iliad*, book iii. 213.

human will; and this idea of conflict between good and evil, the natural product of the Christian faith, is the central principle determining the action of all the ancient miracle plays and moralities. It may be said therefore to be the universal idea of tragedy in the mind of the English people, and, in one shape or another, it survived on the English stage so long as the poetical drama continued to flourish. When the stage was revived after the Restoration, this fundamental idea had vanished as a motive of tragedy. Plays were then written to embody some abstract idea of romantic love, or honour, or absolute monarchy, favoured by the Court, but not indigenous in the mind of the people. The universal element in the poetic drama was extinct; and the poetic drama itself, having no root, withered away.

It is the same with our epic poetry. The English idea of epic action was composite, made up of many contrary elements—ecclesiastical, chivalric, civic, Christian and Pagan; and it was long before these elements could find the right form of organic expression. We see them trying to struggle into poetic life in the *Faery Queen*, a poem which is overflowing with imaginative matter; but they do not assume in it a consistent and intelligible shape; the English epic does not settle into its ideal unity until a mould is found for it in *Paradise Lost*, in which all the elements treated by Spenser are mixed with each other in such right proportion that the just poetical balance is attained. After Milton, the universal idea of the epic so rapidly dwindles that it has no exponent in English poetry but Sir Richard Blackmore, who, as Dryden says, 'wrote to the rumbling of his chariot wheels.'

I pass on to consider the second symptom of poetical decadence, namely the exaggeration of the individual element, which is the necessary result of the decline of the universal. As the sense of poetry dwindles in society at large, as people less and less care for and believe in what is beyond and above themselves, the poet endeavours more and more to fill up the gap in imagination by novelty in art. Observe how this was the case on the stage at Athens. It is evident that neither Euripides himself nor a very considerable portion of his audience cared anything for the myths which formed the subject of the tragic drama, except in so far as they provided a groundwork of supposed fact on which plays could be constructed. The moral counted for nothing; what Euripides wanted above all things was a subject that had not been treated in poetry before. Hence he chose just those myths for representation which his greater predecessors had left untouched, and he defended his practice on the ground that he was only representing realities. You know how Æschylus deals with his argument in *The Frogs*. Euripides asks (I use Frere's translation):

> But after all what is the horrible mischief?
> My poor Sthenobœas, what harm have they done?

Æschylus replies:

> The example is followed, the practice has gained,
> And women of family, fortune, and worth,
> Bewildered with shame, in a passionate fury,
> Have poisoned themselves for Bellerophon's sake.
> *Euripides*: But at least you'll allow that I never invented it;
> Phædra's affair was a matter of fact.
> *Æschylus*: A fact with a vengeance! but horrible facts
> Should be buried in silence, not bruited abroad,
> Nor brought forth on the stage, nor emblazoned in poetry.
> Children and boys have a teacher assigned them;
> The bard is a master for manhood and youth,
> Bound to instruct them in virtue and truth,
> Beholden and bound.[8]

Euripides again, if he chose an old myth, cast about in all directions for a new way in which to treat it. Æschylus and Sophocles roused pity and terror by the ideal nature of the tragic situation: Euripides sought to rouse the feeling of compassion by stage effects, making his characters poor and lame, dressing them in rags, and, generally speaking, reducing the myth as far as possible to the level of actual life. He endeavoured also to attract attention and excite wonder by novelties of thought and expression, making his *dramatis personæ* say things which he knew would shock the prejudices of the majority of his audience, and would please the cultivated and clever minority: 'Who knows whether living is not the same as dying?' 'The tongue swore, but the mind remained unsworn,' and the like.

Still, when all is said, Euripides was a great poet, and his art was kept within due bounds by the sense of the universal still surviving in his audience. If we wish to study the exaggeration of the individual in poetry, the most striking examples of this are to be found in the plays of Seneca. All Seneca's plays are founded on Greek myths; and of course these myths were in themselves nothing to him: they did not in any way form part of the Roman conscience; moreover, his plays were never meant for acting; hence the sole motive of their composition was his desire to match himself as a poet with the tragedians of Athens, and to do something in tragedy which they had not done. Now observe how he goes to work. In his *Phædra* he enters into competition with Euripides. Euripides, though he overstepped due bounds in the selection of the subject, treated it with tragic instinct, and invested the character of Phædra in his *Hippolytus* with dignity and nobility. Seneca aimed solely at giving an exhibition of frenzied female passion, and his representation of Phædra's character is so horrible that I cannot use it for the purposes of illustration. Again, in his *Œdipus*, Seneca matches himself with Sophocles, and of course the result is still worse. You can imagine for yourselves the

[8] Aristophanes, *Ranæ*, 1049–1057.

lengths to which exaggeration carries him from the single fact that, after the awful περιπέτεια in the story, he positively ventures to imagine a meeting and a dialogue between Œdipus and Jocasta. In the *Trachiniæ* Sophocles represents the terrible death of Hercules by means of a poisoned garment, which has been sent to him by Deianira, under a misconception. The hero in the midst of frightful suffering meets his end with manly resolution; but all that Sophocles makes him say is—I use the excellent translation of Mr. Lewis Campbell:

> Stubborn heart, ere yet again
> Wakes the fierce rebound of pain,
> While the evil holds aloof,
> Thou, with bit of diamond proof,
> Curb thy cry, with forced will
> Seeming to do gladly still.

In his *Hercules Œtæus*, Seneca supposes that the garment was sent to Hercules by Deianira in a moment of mad jealousy. His mother Alcmena exhorts him to die with fortitude, to which the hero makes the following reply: 'If Caucasus exposed me to be feasted on by the beak of the greedy vulture, though all Scythia groaned, no tear or groan should be wrung from me. If the wandering Symplegades should crush me between their rocks, I would flinch not from the dread of each returning shock. Let Pindus fall upon me, and Hæmus, and Athos who breaks the Thracian waves, and Mimas shaking off the thunderbolt of Jove. Nay, mother, though the world itself should fall upon me, and on the world the chariot of Phœbus all in flames should fire my couch, no coward shriek should subdue the will of Hercules. Let ten thousand wild beasts descend and rend me all together. Let the Stymphalian bird on one side with fierce yells, and on the other the bull batter me with all the terrors of his neck; let all the monsters Earth breeds and dreadful Sinis hurl themselves on my limbs. Though I be dragged in pieces I will keep silence.'[9] But if he means to keep silence, why so many words? Absence of inspiration, exaggeration of art!

It will suffice if I give you one more example of the exaggerated art which arises out of the exhaustion of nature. It is perfectly plain that both Dante and Cowley derive their poetical ideas from the same source, namely, the Scholastic Philosophy, though one wrote when that philosophy had reached its zenith, and the other when it was in the last age of decline. Each of these poets makes use of objects of sense, in order to convey to the mind of the reader an image of some unseen spiritual form of life. Dante gives his reason for this practice, which is as follows: 'It is necessary to speak thus to your wit, since only from an object of sense does it apprehend

[9] *Hercules Œtæus*, 1378–1396.

what it afterwards makes the subject of understanding. Hence the Scripture condescends to your capacity, and attributes feet and hands to God, meaning something else; and Holy Church represents to you in human likeness Gabriel, and Michael, and the other who made Tobias whole again.'[10] See how real this universal belief makes Dante's imagery. Thus, describing the appearance of certain souls whom he met in the moon's sphere, he says: 'As through glasses transparent and polished, or through waters clear and calm, not so deep as to make the bottom dark, the lines of our faces are so faintly returned that a pearl on a white forehead comes not with less force against our eyes; so saw I many faces ready to speak.'[11] Judging these to be reflections, he turns his head behind him to see the objects from which they proceed; but Beatrice, 'with a smile glowing in her holy eyes,' explains to him that these appearances are true substances. Compare with this Cowley's description of the Tree of Knowledge:—

> The sacred tree midst the fair orchard grew;
> The phœnix Truth did on it rest,
> And built his perfumed nest,
> That right Porphyrian tree, which did true logic show:
> Each leaf did learnèd notions give;
> The apples were demonstrative:
> So clear their colour and divine,
> The very shade they cast did other lights outshine.

Clearly there is nothing natural here; the poet merely wants to make a display of his art—art which is in itself poor, because its mechanism is glaringly apparent: nothing is required but to think of the ideas suggested by 'tree,' 'leaf,' and 'apples,' and to couple them in a verse with the ideas suggested by 'logic,' 'learned notions,' 'demonstrations.'

The last symptom of poetical decadence which need be considered is the Abdication by Society of its right of judgment in matters of Art and Taste. In all great periods of poetical production this right is freely exercised. Sometimes the people judges as a whole, as at Athens, when the spectators decided, rightly or wrongly, on the merits of the dramatists who competed before them for the prize. Sometimes the standard of taste is determined by the voice of a few judges who are felt to represent the sense of the community, men like the Quintilius Varus spoken of by Horace, who could say to the poet, 'Correct this and that,' because as both had the same universal idea in their minds, the critic would point out to the poet the places in which his expression fell short of what was ideally right. But when this universal sense of law in art decays, then the average man begins to doubt about the truth of his own perceptions; and the strong-

[10] *Paradiso*, canto iv. 40.

[11] *Ibid.* canto iii. 10.

willed artist introduces such novelties as he may choose. The individual becomes despotic, and, like all despots, he instinctively fortifies himself with a bodyguard, consisting partly of fanatical admirers, partly of those who find their account in imposing on the public.

This is the origin of the Coterie, which in all ages of artistic decline is a powerful factor in directing the fashion of taste. The poetical decadence of Greece enjoyed a comparative freedom from the plague, because the Greek genius was so richly endowed that an idea of truth and nature survived the loss of political liberty; yet in Alexandria the coterie of Callimachus was able to prevent Apollonius Rhodius from obtaining a hearing. The coterie throve at Rome in the Silver Age of Latin Literature; and from the letters of Pliny the younger we can easily divine how the machinery of admiration was prepared beforehand, and worked by wire-pullers at the public readings and recitations. When the last of the great mediæval Italian poets vanished, a hundred literary academies began to squabble over the rival merits of Ariosto and Tasso. In France the decay of mediæval Romance was emphasised by the enthusiasm with which it was cultivated in Mademoiselle Scudéri's little literary circle; and the Précieuses went on copying the obsolete fashions of the Troubadours till they were extinguished by the ridicule of Molière. In England the poetical barrenness of the last quarter of the eighteenth century was illustrated in the notorious coterie of Della Crusca, who, with Laura Maria and Anna Matilda, attitudinised before a gaping public, and fell at last too easy victims to the somewhat laboured satire of Gifford.

This brings me naturally to the conclusion I desire to draw from my argument. You will have observed that all my examples of poetical decadence have been taken from the historic periods of literature, and that I have said nothing about the art and poetry of our own day; had I attempted to do so I should have been in fault, because that would have involved the assumption that we are living in an age of artistic decline. Whether this is or is not the case, posterity alone can decide with certainty; but meantime it is of the highest importance that we should be able to form an opinion on the matter, since we have Matthew Arnold's authority for the statement that 'in poetry, when it is worthy of its high destinies, our race, as time goes on, will find an ever surer and surer stay.' Poetry which is to fulfil a duty of that kind must not be of a decadent order.

Now modern society finds itself face to face with this phenomenon, that the present creative tendency in all forms of art is opposed to tradition. The Preraphaelite movement in English poetry and painting; the movement of the Symbolists in French poetry; the revolution effected by Wagner in German music—all of which claim to be the determining factors in the art of the future—agree in this,

that they have broken with the artistic principles of the past. Moreover, the ideas involved in these movements have given rise to a most interesting dispute between the representatives of science and art. On the one side the artists say to society: 'There is coming a new heaven and a new earth. Old things have passed away; all things have become new. Religion is powerless. Science is "bankrupt"'—that is their phrase—'Art alone, mystical, symbolic, spiritualistic art, can supply the void in the human imagination.' On the other side come the men of science, represented by Herr Max Nordau, a name of European reputation, and they say: 'Do not trust these artists; they are charlatans, who, so far from being Apostles and Prophets, are to be classed as "Mattoides," "Circulars," "Graphomaniacs," and other varieties of hysterical patients.' Who shall decide when doctors disagree?

Now, I confess that, when I read Herr Nordau's book on 'Degeneration,' from which I have extracted these names, and which is full of vigorous and vivacious thought and admirable literary criticism, I thought that he was intending to take a humorous revenge on the artists, for having called him a member of a 'bankrupt' company; and that he had hit on the happy device of the philosopher who, having fallen into a dispute with a voluble fishwife, reduced her to silence by calling her 'an isosceles triangle.' But closer study showed me that the book was written with true Teutonic seriousness. Frivolous observers may regard art and poetry as the product of mere fashion and whim. Not so the man of science, who treats them as belonging to the department of pathology. 'The physician,' says Herr Nordau, 'recognises in the tendencies of contemporary art and poetry, in the style of the creators of mystic, symbolic, decadent works, and in the attitude of their admirers, in the æsthetic impulses and instincts of fashionable society, a concurrence of two well-defined pathologic states with which he is perfectly well acquainted, degeneration and hysteria; the lower degrees of which are called neurasthenia.'

Do you ask how this is proved? The late M. Paul Verlaine, the poetical chief of the French symbolists, wrote an Art of Poetry, in which he lays down rules very much opposed to those of Horace. M. Verlaine's portrait shows, it appears, that the shape of his skull resembles that of the degenerate hysterics whom Lombroso classifies as born criminals. What then can be more reasonable than to conclude that the new French Art of Poetry is the product of hysteria? Again, in one of his poems, M. Verlaine calls very frequently on the name of the Virgin. Of course; says Herr Nordau; exactly the same symptoms were noted by Dr. Legrain in an omnibus driver suffering from hereditary mania. Mr. Rossetti, in a ballad, employs a burden which is certainly as senseless as it is ugly, 'Eden bower's in flower,' and 'O the flower and the hour!' Clearly, Herr Nordau thinks, this

is a case of *echolalia*, a mode of utterance which seems to prevail among imbeciles and idiots.

Now, when these pathological methods of judgment are applied to works of art, I think we may venture to say, even to men of science, *Ne sutor ultra crepidam*. The methods are unscientific. Unless Herr Nordau can prove that he has followed all the operations of a poet's brain when he is composing, it is not scientific to couple his case with that of the madman or idiot, whose symptoms can be watched in the ward of a hospital. And, again, unless his investigations in the history of poetry have been very much more extensive than I imagine, it is not scientific to ascribe the practice of a poet to a physical cause, when it may have been the result of mere literary imitation. Will Herr Nordau, for instance, venture to say that, when Shakespeare introduces such a line as, 'with hey, with hey! the thrush and the jay!' into a song, he does so under the influence of hysteria? Or when he finds, as he may, examples of *echolalia* in the poetry of the Greeks and the Romans, has he evidence to show that these people were widely afflicted with neurasthenia?

There is indeed something question-begging in Herr Nordau's whole argument. 'The ancient Northern myth,' says he, 'contained the frightful dogma of a Twilight of the Gods. In our days the finest imaginations are haunted with the sombre apprehension of a Twilight of Nations, in which sun and stars are gradually extinguished, and in the midst of a dying Nature men perish with their institutions and works.' In other words, the whole of modern society is incurably affected with hysteria: hence all modern art and poetry must necessarily reflect the universal disease.

Conclusions of this kind are not very respectful to the human race, to the judgment of which even men of science must submit their opinions; and perhaps they are somewhat premature. It may be, of course, that time will justify Herr Nordau's forebodings, and that the historian—if any historians are left—will be able to trace the ruin of a perished society to the ravages of hysteria. Meantime we, who live in the present, are bound to regard the artist, the individual who receives pleasure from art, and the organised body of individuals who judge of art, as responsible beings, who have as natural a capacity for deciding what is good or bad in the principles of taste as for perceiving what is right or wrong in the practice of morals. And hence, when the modern painters and poets and musicians come to us, telling us that the principles of ancient art are obsolete, and that they themselves can supply us with new sources of imaginative pleasure, and even fill the void caused by the loss of religion, it is not sufficient to dismiss them as 'mattoides,' or 'graphomaniacs,' or 'circulars,' even though they may have fairly provoked this kind of retaliation by speaking of the 'bankruptcy of science.' On the other hand, they can hardly expect us to accept their own estimate of

themselves without examination. We ought to consider patiently what they have to tell us, and my main object in this series of lectures is to suggest a method of induction from experience and observation, by which society may be able to test the quality of the pleasure which the modern artists are offering to our imagination.

I have shown in my earlier lectures that all poets whose works have provided the world with enduring pleasure have followed a universal mode of conception, and have conformed to certain invariable laws of expression. I have shown to-day that the work of all poets produced in periods of undoubted decadence is distinguished by other characteristics also invariable, also universal. In support of my argument I have not relied upon a single opinion that has not received the critical consent of ages, or cited a single fact that is not capable of positive verification, in so far as the subject admits of this. I think therefore that, in judging of the value of any modern poem, I have the right to infer that, in so far as it is conceived or expressed in a manner fundamentally different from the great living poems of the world, it is unlikely to contain the principle of enduring life; while in so far as it reproduces those particular features we have been considering to-day, it is in all probability the fruit of poetical decadence.

Let me apply this test, as a crucial instance, to the principles and practice of modern French poetry, because in France, as is usual, the leaders of the new School of Art defend their innovations on the ground of logic. Speaking of right aim in poetry, M. Mallarmé, chief of the French symbolists, says: 'To name an object is to destroy three-quarters of the enjoyment of a poem.' From this we see that the new school of Poetry agrees with the old school in holding that the end of poetry is to produce pleasure for the imagination; but if M. Mallarmé's words mean anything, they must mean that, when Homer named the wrath of Achilles, or Milton the loss of Eden, as the subjects of their poems, these poets at once destroyed three-quarters of the pleasure that their art might have produced. M. Mallarmé goes on to say: 'The true goal of poetry is suggestion. Symbolism consists in the artistic employment of mystery; in evoking, little by little, an object, so as to indicate a state of soul, or, conversely, to choose an object, and to disentangle from it a state of soul by a series of decipherings.'

This, you may say, is a little obscure. But we may divine M. Mallarmé's meaning from M. Paul Verlaine's *Art Poétique*, a poem containing very many charming ideas that could have occurred only to a man of genius, however perversely that genius may have been employed. He says:

> Il faut aussi que tu n'ailles point
> Choisir tes mots sans quelque méprise:
> Rien de plus cher que la chanson grise,
> Où l'Indécis au Précis se joint.

C'est des beaux yeux derrière des voiles,
C'est le grand jour tremblant de midi,
C'est par un ciel d'automne attiédi,
Le bleu fouillis des claires étoiles!

Car nous voulons la Nuance encor,
Pas la Couleur, rien que la nuance!
Oh! la nuance seule fiance
Le rêve au rêve et la flûte au cor!

I do not pretend to understand what M. Verlaine meant by these last two lines: probably he would have admitted that he did not know himself. But the drift of his advice is quite intelligible. Like M. Mallarmé, he says, 'Do not choose definite subjects: what we want in poetry is not expression but suggestion; neutral tints, not positive colours.' His *Art Poétique* is therefore naturally opposed to the *Ars Poetica* of Horace:—

Cui lecta potenter erit *res*
Nec facundia deseret hunc nec lucidus ordo.

M. Verlaine would maintain that Horace's principle, 'Denique sit quidvis simplex duntaxat et unum,' would not produce the effect that he himself desired. Nor would it; but why? Because Horace and M. Verlaine aim at producing pleasure of a different kind. Horace aims at pleasing the imagination with ideas, at creating an illusion of organic ideal life, outlined with all the clearness of sculpture, but animated with the breath of human sympathy. M. Verlaine and M. Mallarmé seek, by means of metrical language, to evoke moods of the soul. Horace strives to produce pleasure that may satisfy the philosopher; the pleasure desired by M. Verlaine is the intoxication of the opium-eater. A poetical idea is enjoyed as a thing of beauty by one generation after another, *semper, ubique, ab omnibus*; the mood of the individual soul evaporates with the fumes of the intellectual drug by which it is called into being.

The French symbolists are therefore opposed to the classical poets both in their ends and means; but these are in full accord with the ends and means of the poets of decadence. For observe that their symbolism is quite of a different kind from that of Dante, who, perhaps above all other poets, aimed at the 'facundia' and 'lucidus ordo' desired by Horace. Dante's symbolism was based on the scholastic philosophy, when that system was universally accepted as the key to the interpretation of Nature. When this philosophy ceased to satisfy the intellect, then it also lost its poetical power, and, as we see from the lines of Cowley I have already cited, fell, for poetical purposes, into complete decay. Modern symbolism or mysticism, which aims in poetry at suggestion rather than expression, is in reality identical with the taste for enigmas and obscure thought represented in the style of Lycophron of Alexandria, surnamed *ὁ σκοτεινός*,

whose *Cassandra* is said to have been composed with a riddle in every line. And who now knows anything of Lycophron except his name?

Again, one of the distinguishing marks of great classical poets, like Sophocles and Virgil, is their reticence and reserve. The chief characteristic of poetical decadence, as we see in Seneca, is lawlessness in the choice of subject and violence of expression. M. Rollinat, who is said to enjoy a high reputation among his countrymen, is probably the only poet in the world who can boast of having surpassed Seneca in these qualities. Here are the titles of some of his poems: *Buried Alive; The Soliloquy of Tropmann; Putrefaction; Rondeau of the Guillotined*; and the following is the only quotable portion of a composition describing the embalming of a dead woman's body: 'To snatch the dead one, fair as an angel, from the atrocious kisses of the worm, I caused her to be embalmed in a strange box. It was a night in winter.' Then the whole process of embalming is minutely painted.

One more example will suffice. All great classic poetry reflects in an ideal way the active life of the society in which it is composed. The *Iliad* breathes in an heroic style the spirit of Greek warfare. Æschylus, who fought at Marathon, Sophocles, who served as a general with Pericles, fill their tragedies with the heroic sentiment of their age: the old Attic comedy found its matter in contemporary social interests: Shakespeare's chronicle plays popularise half the history of England: the satires of Dryden and Pope are the monuments of once living manners. But the French symbolists—whose aim it is to evoke moods of the soul—dread nothing so much as any form of social activity. 'Art for Art's sake!' is their cry. There is something pathetic in the earnestness with which M. Charles Morice, the chief philosopher of the school, utters his lamentations over the exacting tyranny of public duties. 'To think,' he cries, 'that the poet should be obliged to break off in the middle of a stanza in order to go and complete a period of twenty-eight days' training in the army!' And again: 'The agitations of the streets; the grinding of the Government machine; journals; elections; changes of administration—never has there been such a hubbub; the turbulent and noisy autocracy of commerce has caused the public to suppress in other preoccupations the preoccupation of Beauty; and industry has killed whatever might have been allowed by politics to live on in silence.' One feels sad as one thinks of the happiness and quietism which might have been the lot of this forlorn soul in some other period of poetical decadence. One sees, for example, that he might have obtained from one of the Ptolemies, say in the second century B.C., the post of sub-librarian at Alexandria, and one fancies him composing some afternoon, in a cool portico the pentameter of the epigram which he had begun in the morning, without any interruption from the drill-sergeant. Or he

might have lived at Rome under the placid reign of Domitian, certainly without being disturbed by the clamours of a vulgar newsboy, bawling over the Palatine the latest stages of a ministerial crisis, and breaking in on his preoccupation as he put together some tuneful trifle on a Greek subject, or prepared for public recitation a flattering elegy on Cæsar's pet bear.

I have confined my observations to the modern French School of Poetry, because I find there the philosophy of a widespread movement put forward in the most frank and lucid form. But, in fact, the features which this school presents are repeated with variations in the contemporary literature of every country in Europe. For the moment, at least, life in poetry is no longer looked for in that perfect balance between the universal and individual elements which is the essence of all classical art. The aim of the poet is not now to create the natural in the sphere of the ideal, the image of

> Nature to advantage dressed,
> What oft was thought but ne'er so well expressed.

The essence of Life in Poetry, and in all the arts according to the new philosophy, is Novelty. And whence are the sources of this new life to be derived? The answer is that each of the arts is to borrow some principle from the others; the painter aims at effects which have hitherto been attempted only by poetry; the poet devotes his efforts to imitate in words ideas which are more naturally expressed by means of forms and colours, or indefinable emotions like those which are aroused by the notes of music; the musician tries to combine with the resources of his own art the beauties peculiar to poetry and painting. I do not deny that, when these experiments are made by men of genius, the artistic result produced is often striking, and for a time even pleasurable. But when it is claimed by the pioneers of the new movement by the brotherhoods, the societies, the coteries, which seek by organised efforts to impose the new doctrines on the taste of a bewildered world—that this confusion of the boundaries of art is the beginning of a fresh and vigorous outburst of artistic life, experience says No! The things that are being attempted are as old as civilised society. The poet-musician who endeavours to create a new kind of pleasure, by combining on the stage the principles of poetry, painting, and music, is only doing what was done two thousand years ago by Agathon and the late Attic dramatists. The poet who exalts the element of painting inherent in his art above the principle of action is following the example of Apollonius Rhodius. The poet who tries to attract attention to himself by an ideal representation of extravagant and unnatural passion is modelling himself upon Seneca. And Agathon, and Apollonius Rhodius, and Seneca are all poets of decadent ages.

Now, if we are living in an age of poetical decadence, it is a very

serious matter, and questions arise which urgently demand an answer. Is this decadence confined to the genius and methods of the poets themselves? or does it extend to the taste of that portion of society which the poets are specially anxious to please? or does it, as Herr Nordau thinks, imply a failure of the sources of life in the nation at large? These are problems of the profoundest interest, and I shall attempt to deal with them in the lecture with which I propose to conclude this series—namely, on the relations that exist between the Life of Poetry and the Life of the People.

W. J. Courthope.