

CONCLUSION

A CONCLUSION, like a preface, is perhaps to some extent an old-fashioned thing; and it is sometimes held that a writer does better not to sum up at all, but to leave the facts which he has accumulated to make their own way into the intelligence of his readers. I am not able to accept this view of the matter. In dealing with such a subject as that which has been handled in the foregoing pages, it is at least as necessary that the writer should have something of *ensemble* in his mind as that he should look carefully into facts and dates and names. And he can give no such satisfactory evidence of his having possessed this *ensemble*, as a short summary of what, in his idea, the whole period looks like when taken at a bird's-eye view. For he has (or ought to have) given the details already; and his summary, without in the least compelling readers to accept it, must give them at least some means of judging whether he has been wandering over a plain trackless to him, or has been pursuing with confidence a well-planned and well-laid road.

At the time at which our period begins (and which, though psychological epochs rarely coincide exactly with chronological, is sufficiently coincident with the accession of Elizabeth), it cannot be said with any precision that there was an English *literature* at all. There were eminent English writers, though perhaps one only to whom the first rank could even by the utmost complaisance be opened or allowed. But there was no literature, in the

sense of a system of treating all subjects in the vernacular, according to methods more or less decidedly arranged and accepted by a considerable tradition of skilled craftsmen. Something of the kind had partially existed in the case of the Chaucerian poetic; but it was an altogether isolated something. Efforts, though hardly conscious ones, had been made in the domain of prose by romancers, such as the practically unknown Thomas Mallory, by sacred orators like Latimer, by historians like More, by a few struggling miscellaneous writers. Men like Ascham, Cheke, Wilson, and others had, perhaps with a little touch of patronage, recommended the regular cultivation of the English tongue; and immediately before the actual accession of Elizabeth the publication of Tottel's *Miscellany* had shown by its collection of the best poetical work of the preceding half century the extraordinary effect which a judicious xenomania (if I may, without scaring the purists of language, borrow that useful word from the late Karl Hillebrand) may produce on English. It is to the exceptional fertilising power of such influences on our stock that we owe all the marvellous accomplishments of the English tongue, which in this respect—itself at the head of the Teutonic tongues by an almost unapproachable distance—stands distinguished with its Teutonic sisters generally from the groups of languages with which it is most likely to be contrasted. Its literary power is originally less conspicuous than that of the Celtic and of the Latin stocks; the lack, notorious to this day, of one single original English folk-song of really great beauty is a rough and general fact which is perfectly borne out by all other facts. But the exquisite folk-literature of the Celts is absolutely unable either by itself or with the help of foreign admixture to arrive at complete literary perfection. And the profound sense of form which characterises the Latins is apparently accompanied by such a deficiency of originality, that when any foreign model is accepted it receives hardly any colour from the native genius, and remains a cultivated exotic. The less promising soil of Anglo-Saxon idiom waited for the foreign influences, ancient and modern, of the Renaissance to act

upon it, and then it produced a crop which has dwarfed all the produce of the modern world, and has nearly, if not quite, equalled in perfection, while it has much exceeded in bulk and length of flowering time, the produce of Greece.

The rush of foreign influences on the England of Elizabeth's time, stimulated alike by the printing press, by religious movements, by the revival of ancient learning, and by the habits of travel and commerce, has not been equalled in force and volume by anything else in history. But the different influences of different languages and countries worked with very different force. To the easier and more generally known of the classical tongues must be assigned by far the largest place. This was only natural at a time when to the inherited and not yet decayed use of colloquial and familiar Latin as the vehicle of business, of literature, and of almost everything that required the committal of written words to paper, was added the scholarly study of its classical period from the strictly humanist point of view. If we could assign marks in the competition, Latin would have to receive nearly as many as all its rivals put together; but Greek would certainly not be second, though it affected, especially in the channel of the Platonic dialogues, many of the highest and most gifted souls. In the latter part of the present period there were probably scholars in England who, whether their merely philological attainments might or might not pass muster now, were far better read in the actual literature of the Greek classics than the very philologists who now disdain them. Not a few of the chief matters in Greek literature—the epical grandeur of Homer, the tragic principles of the three poets, and so forth—made themselves, at first or second hand, deeply felt.² But on the whole Greek did not occupy the second place. That place was occupied by Italian. It was Italy which had touched the spring that let loose the poetry of Surrey and Wyatt; Italy was the chief resort of travelled Englishmen in the susceptible time of youth; Italy provided in Petrarch (Dante was much less read) and Boccaccio, in Ariosto and Tasso, an inexhaustible supply of models, both in

prose and verse. Spain was only less influential because Spanish literature was in a much less finished condition than Italian, and perhaps also because political causes made the following of Spaniards seem almost unpatriotic. Yet the very same causes made the Spanish language itself familiar to far more Englishmen than are familiar with it now, though the direct filiation of euphuism on Spanish originals is no doubt erroneous, and though the English and Spanish dramas evolved themselves in lines rather parallel than connected.

France and Germany were much (indeed infinitely) less influential, and the fact is from some points of view rather curious. Both were much nearer to England than Spain or Italy; there was much more frequent communication with both; there was at no time really serious hostility with either; and the genius of both languages was, the one from one side, the other from the other, closely connected with that of English. Yet in the great productions of our great period, the influence of Germany is only perceptible in some burlesque matter, such as *Eulenspiegel* and *Grobianus*, in the furnishing of a certain amount of supernatural subject-matter like the Faust legend and in details less important still. French influence is little greater; a few allusions of "E. K." to Marot and Ronsard; a few translations and imitations by Spenser, Watson, and others; the curious sonnets of *Zepheria*; a slight echo of Rabelais here and there; some adapted songs to music; and a translated play or two on the Senecan model.¹

But France had already exercised a mighty influence upon England; and Germany had very little influence to exercise for centuries. Putting aside all pre-Chaucerian influence which may be detected, the outside guiding force of literary English literature (which was almost exclusively poetry) had been French from the end of the fourteenth century to the last survivals of the

¹ Some, like my friend Mr. Lee, would demur to this, especially as regards the sonnet. But Désportes, the chief creditor alleged, was himself an infinite borrower from the Italians. Soothern, an early but worthless sonneteer, c. 1584, did certainly imitate the French.

Scoto-Chaucerian school in Hawes, Skelton, and Lindsay. True, France had now something else to give; though it must be remembered that her great school coincided with rather than preceded the great school of England, that the *Défense et Illustration de la Langue Française* was but a few years anterior to Tottel's *Miscellany*, and that, except Marot and Rabelais (neither of whom was neglected, though neither exercised much formal influence), the earlier French writers of the sixteenth century had nothing to teach England. On the other hand, Germany was utterly unable to supply anything in the way of instruction in literary form; and it was instruction in literary form which was needed to set the beanstalk of English literature growing even unto the heavens. Despite the immense advantage which the English adoption of German innovations in religion gave the country of Luther, that country's backwardness made imitation impossible. Luther himself had not elaborated anything like a German style; he had simply cleared the vernacular of some of its grossest stumbling-blocks and started a good plain fashion of sentence. That was not what England wanted or was likely to want, but a far higher literary instruction, which Germany could not give her and (for the matter of that) has never been in a position to give her. The models which she sought had to be sought elsewhere, in Athens, in old Rome, in modern Tuscany.

But it would probably be unwise not to make allowance for a less commonplace and more "metaphysical" explanation. It was precisely because French and German had certain affinities with English, while Italian and Spanish, not to mention the classical tongues, were strange and exotic, that the influence of the latter group was preferred. The craving for something not familiar, for something new and strange, is well known enough in the individual; and nations are, after all, only aggregates of individuals. It was exactly because the models of the south were so utterly divided from the isolated Briton in style and character that he took so kindly to them, and that their study inspired him so well. There were not, indeed, wanting signs of what mischief

might have been done if English sense had been less robust and the English genius of a less stubborn idiosyncrasy. Euphuism, the occasional practice of the Senecan drama, the preposterous and almost incredible experiments in classical metre of men not merely like Drant and Harvey, but like Sidney and Spenser, were sufficiently striking symptoms of the ferment which was going on in the literary constitution of the country. But they were only harmless heat-rashes, not malignant distempers, and the spirit of England won through them, with no loss of general health, probably with the result of the healthy excretion of many peccant humours which might have been mischievous if driven in. Even the strongest of all the foreign forces, the just admiration of the masterpieces of classical antiquity, was not in any way hurtful; and it is curious enough that it is only in what may be called the autumn and, comparatively speaking, the decadence of the period that anything that can be called pedantry is observed. It is in Milton and Browne, not in Shakespere and Hooker, that there is an appearance of undue domination and "obsession" by the classics.

The subdivisions of the period in which these purely literary influences worked in combination with those of the domestic and foreign policy of England (on which it is unnecessary here to dilate), can be drawn with tolerable precision. They are both better marked and more important in verse than in prose. For it cannot be too often asserted that the age, in the wide sense, was, despite many notable achievements in the *sermo pedestris*, not an age of prose but an age of poetry. The first period extends (taking literary dates) from the publication of Tottel's *Miscellany* to that of *The Shepherd's Calendar*. It is not distinguished by much production of positive value. In poetry proper the writers pursue and exercise themselves upon the track of Surrey, Wyatt, and the other authors whom Grimoald, or some other, collected; acquiring, no doubt, a certain facility in the adjustment to iambic and other measures of the altered pronunciation since Chaucer's time; practising new combinations in stanza, but inclining too

much to the doggerel Alexandrines and fourteeners (more doggerel still when chance or design divided them into eights and sixes); repeating, without much variation, images and phrases directly borrowed from foreign models; and displaying, on the whole, a singular lack of inspiration which half excuses the mistaken attempt of the younger of them, and of their immediate successors, to arrive at the desired poetical medium by the use of classical metres. Among men actually living and writing at this time Lord Buckhurst alone displays a real poetical faculty. Nor is the case much better in respect of drama, though here the restless variety of tentative displays even more clearly the vigorous life which underlay incomplete performance, and which promised better things shortly. The attempt of *Gorboduc* and a few other plays to naturalise the artificial tragedy, though a failure, was one of those failures which, in the great literary "rule of false," help the way to success; the example of *Ralph Roister Doister* and *Gammer Gurton's Needle* could not fail to stimulate the production of genuine native farce which might any day become *la bonne comédie*. And even the continued composition of Moralities showed signs of the growing desire for life and individuality of character. Moreover, the intense and increasing liking for the theatre in all classes of society, despite the discouragement of the authorities, the miserable reward offered to actors and playwrights, and the discredit which rested on the vocations of both, was certain in the ordinary course of things to improve the supply. The third division of literature made slower progress under less powerful stimulants. No emulation, like that which tempted the individual graduate or templar to rival Surrey in addressing his mistress's eyebrow, or Sackville in stately rhyming on English history, acted on the writers of prose. No public demand, like that which produced the few known and the hundred forgotten playwrights of the first half of Elizabeth's reign, served as a hotbed. But it is the great secret of prose that it can dispense with such stimulants. Everybody who wished to make his thoughts known began, with the help of the

printing press, to make them known ; and the informal use of the vernacular, by dint of this unconscious practice and of the growing scholarship both of writers and readers, tended insensibly to make itself less of a mere written conversation and more of a finished prose style. Preaching in English, the prose pamphlet, and translations into the vernacular were, no doubt, the three great schoolmasters in the disciplining of English prose. But by degrees all classes of subjects were treated in the natural manner, and so the various subdivisions of prose style—oratorical, narrative, expository, and the rest—slowly evolved and separated themselves, though hardly, even at the close of the time, had they attained the condition of finish.

The year 1580 may be fixed on with almost mathematical accuracy as the date at which the great generation of Elizabethan writers first showed its hand with Lyly's *Euphues* in prose and Spenser's *Shepherd's Calendar* in verse. Drama was a little, but not more than a little, later in showing the same signs of rejuvenescence ; and from that time forward till the end of the century not a year passed without the appearance of some memorable work or writer ; while the total production of the twenty years exceeds in originality and force, if not always in artistic perfection of form, the production of any similar period in the world's history. The group of University Wits, following the example of Lyly (who, however, in drama hardly belongs to the most original school), started the dramas of history, of romance, of domestic life ; and, by fashioning through their leader Marlowe the tragic decasyllable, put into the hands of the still greater group who succeeded them an instrument, the power of which it is impossible to exaggerate. Before the close of the century they had themselves all ceased their stormy careers ; but Shakespere was in the full swing of his activity ; Ben Jonson had achieved the freshest and perhaps capital fruit of his study of humours ; Dekker, Webster, Middleton, Chapman, and a crowd of lesser writers had followed in his steps. In poetry proper the magnificent success of *The Faërie Queene* had in one sense no second ;

but it was surrounded with a crowd of productions hardly inferior in their own way, the chief being the result of the great and remarkable sonnet outburst of the last decade of the century. The doggerel of the earlier years had almost entirely disappeared, and in its place appeared the perfect concerted music of the stanzas (from the sonnet and the Spenserian downwards), the infinite variety of the decasyllable, and the exquisite lyric snatches of song in the dramatists, pamphleteers, and music-book writers. Following the general law already indicated, the formal advance in prose was less, but an enormous stride was made in the direction of applying it to its various uses. The theologians, with Hooker at their head, produced almost the first examples of the measured and dignified treatment of argument and exposition. Bacon (towards the latter end it is true) produced the earliest specimens of his singular mixture of gravity and fancy, pregnant thought and quaint expression. History in the proper sense was hardly written, but a score of chroniclers, some not deficient in narrative power, paved the way for future historians. In imaginative and miscellaneous literature the fantastic extravagances of Lyly seemed as though they might have an evil effect. In reality they only spurred ingenious souls on to effort in refining prose, and in one particular direction they had a most unlooked for result. The imitation in little by Greene, Lodge, and others, of their long-winded graces, helped to popularise the pamphlet, and the popularisation of the pamphlet led the way to periodical writing—an introduction perhaps of doubtful value in itself, but certainly a matter of no small importance in the history of literature. And so by degrees professional men of letters arose—men of letters, professional in a sense, which had not existed since the days of the travelling Jongleurs of the early Middle Ages. These men, by working for the actors in drama, or by working for the publishers in the prose and verse pamphlet (for the latter form still held its ground), earned a subsistence which would seem sometimes to have been not a mere pittance, and which at any rate when folly and vice did not dissipate it, kept

them alive. Much nonsense no doubt has been talked about the Fourth Estate ; but such as it is, for good or for bad, it practically came into existence in these prolific years.

The third period, that of vigorous manhood, may be said to coincide roughly with the reign of James I., though if literary rather than political dates be preferred, it might be made to begin with the death of Spenser in 1599, and to end with the damnation of Ben Jonson's *New Inn* just thirty years later. In the whole of this period till the very last there is no other sign of decadence than the gradual dropping off in the course of nature of the great men of the preceding stage, not a few of whom, however, survived into the next, while the places of those who fell were taken in some cases by others hardly below the greatest, such as Beaumont and Fletcher. Many of the very greatest works of what is generally known as the Elizabethan era—the later dramas of Shakespere, almost the whole work of Ben Jonson, the later poems of Drayton, Daniel, and Chapman, the plays of Webster and Middleton, and the prose of Raleigh, the best work of Bacon, the poetry of Browne and Wither—date from this time, while the astonishingly various and excellent work of the two great dramatists above mentioned is wholly comprised within it. And not only is there no sign of weakening, but there is hardly a sign of change. A slight, though only a slight, depression of the imaginative and moral tone may be noticed or fancied in those who, like Fletcher, are wholly of the period, and a certain improvement in general technical execution testifies to longer practice. But Webster might as well have written years earlier (hardly so well years later) than he actually did ; and especially in the case of numerous anonymous or single works, the date of which, or at least of their composition, is obscure, it is very difficult from internal evidence of style and sentiment to assign them to one date rather than to another, to the last part of the strictly Elizabethan or the first part of the strictly Jacobean period. Were it not for the occasional imitation of models, the occasional reference to dated facts, it would be not so much difficult as impossible. If there seems to

be less audacity of experiment, less of the fire of youth, less of the unrestrainable restlessness of genius eager to burst its way, that, as has been already remarked of another difference, may not improbably be mainly due to fancy, and to the knowledge that the later efforts actually were later as to anything else. In prose more particularly there is no change whatever. Few new experiments in style were tried, unless the *Characters* of Overbury and Earle may be called such. The miscellaneous pamphlets of the time were written in much the same fashion, and in some cases by the same men, as when, forty years before Jonson summoned himself to "quit the loathed stage," Nash had alternately laughed at Gabriel Harvey, and savagely lashed the Martinists. The graver writers certainly had not improved upon, and had not greatly changed, the style in which Hooker broke his lance with Travers, or descanted on the sanctity of law. The humour-comedy of Jonson, the romantic *drame* of Fletcher, with the marmoreally-finished minor poems of Ben, were the nearest approaches of any product of the time to novelty of general style, and all three were destined to be constantly imitated, though only in the last case with much real success, during the rest of our present period. Yet the post-Restoration comedy is almost as much due to Jonson and Fletcher as to foreign models, and the influence of both, after long failing to produce anything of merit, was not imperceptible even in Congreve and Vanbrugh.

Of the fourth period, which practically covers the reign of Charles I. and the interregnum of the Commonwealth, no one can say that it shows no signs of decadence, when the meaning of that word is calculated according to the cautions given above in noticing its poets. Yet the decadence is not at all of the kind which announces a long literary dead season, but only of that which shows that the old order is changing to a new. Nor if regard be merely had to the great names which adorn the time, may it seem proper to use the word decadence at all. To this period belong not only Milton, but Taylor, Browne, Clarendon, Hobbes (four of the greatest

names in English prose), the strange union of learning in matter and quaintness in form which characterises Fuller and Burton, the great dramatic work of Massinger and Ford. To it also belongs the exquisite if sometimes artificial school of poetry which grew up under the joint inspiration of the great personal influence and important printed work of Ben Jonson on the one hand, and the subtler but even more penetrating stimulant of the unpublished poetry of Donne on the other—a school which has produced lyrical work not surpassed by that of any other school or time, and which, in some specially poetical characteristics, may claim to stand alone.

If, then, we speak of decadence, it is necessary to describe with some precision what is meant, and to do so is not difficult, for the signs of it are evident, not merely in the rank and file of writers (though they are naturally most prominent here), but to some extent in the great illustrations of the period themselves. In even the very best work of the time there is a want of the peculiar freshness and spontaneity, as of spring water from the rock, which characterises earlier work. The art is constantly admirable, but it is almost obtrusively art—a proposition which is universally true even of the greatest name of the time, of Milton, and which applies equally to Taylor and to Browne, to Massinger and to Ford, sometimes even to Herrick (extraordinary as is the grace which he manages to impart), and almost always to Carew. The lamp is seldom far off, though its odour may be the reverse of disagreeable. But in the work which is not quite so excellent, other symptoms appear which are as decisive and less tolerable. In the poetry of the time there appear, side by side with much exquisite melody and much priceless thought, the strangest blotches, already more than once noticed, of doggerel, of conceits pushed to the verge of nonsense and over the verge of grotesque, of bad rhyme and bad rhythm which are evidently not the result of mere haste and creative enthusiasm but of absolutely defective ear, of a waning sense of harmony. In the drama things are much worse. Only the two dramatists already mentioned, with the

doubtful addition of Shirley, display anything like great or original talent. A few clever playwrights do their journey-work with creditable craftsmanship. But even this characteristic is wanting in the majority. The plots relapse into a chaos almost as great as that of the drama of fifty years earlier, but with none of its excuse of inexperience and of redeeming purple patches. The characters are at once uninteresting and unpleasant; the measure hobbles and staggers; the dialogue varies between passages of dull declamation and passages of almost duller repartee. Perhaps, though the prose names of the time are greater than those of its dramatists, or, excluding Milton's, of its poets, the signs of something wrong are clearest in prose. It would be difficult to find in any good prosè writer between 1580 and 1625 the shameless anomalies of arrangement, the clumsy distortions of grammar, which the very greatest Caroline writers permit themselves in the intervals, and sometimes in the very course of their splendid eloquence; while, as for lesser men, the famous incoherences of Cromwell's speeches are hardly more than a caricature of the custom of the day.

Something has yet to be said as to the general characteristics of this time—characteristics which, scarcely discernible in the first period, yet even there to be traced in such work as that of Surrey and Sackville, emerge into full prominence in the next, continue with hardly any loss in the third, and are discernible even in the “decadence” of the fourth. Even yet they are not universally recognised, and it appears to be sometimes thought that because critics speak with enthusiasm of periods in which, save at rare intervals, and as it were by accident, they are not discernible at all, such critics are insensible to them where they occur. Never was there a grosser mistake. It is said that M. Taine, in private conversation, once said to a literary novice who rashly asked him whether he liked this or that, “Monsieur, en littérature j'aime tout.” It was a noble and correct sentiment, though it might be a little difficult for the particular critic who formulated it to make good his claim to it as a motto. The ideal critic un-

doubtedly does like everything in literature, provided that it is good of its kind. He likes the unsophisticated tentatives of the earliest minstrel poetry, and the cultivated perfection of form of Racine and Pope; he likes the massive vigour of the French and English sixteenth centuries, and the alembicated exquisiteness of Catullus and Carew; he does not dislike Webster because he is not Dryden, or Young because he is not Spenser; he does not quarrel with Sophocles because he is not Æschylus, or with Hugo because he is not Heine. But at the same time it is impossible for him not to recognise that there are certain periods where inspiration and accomplishment meet in a fashion which may be sought for in vain at others. These are the great periods of literature, and there are perhaps only five of them, with five others which may be said to be almost level. The five first are the great age of Greek literature from Æschylus to Plato, the great ages of English and French literature in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, the whole range of Italian literature from Dante to Ariosto, and the second great age of English from the *Lyrical Ballads* to the death of Coleridge. It is the super-eminent glory of English that it counts twice in the reckoning. The five seconds are the Augustan age of Latin, the short but brilliant period of Spanish literary development, the Romantic era in France, the age of Goethe in Germany, including Heine's earlier and best work, and (with difficulty, and by allowance chiefly of Swift and Dryden) the half century from the appearance of *Absalom and Achitophel* to the appearance of *Gulliver* and *The Dunciad* in England. Out of these there are great men but no great periods, and the first class is distinguished from the second, not so much by the fact that almost all the greatest literary names of the world are found in it, as because it is evident to a careful reader that there was more of the general spirit of poetry and of literature diffused in human brains at these times than at any other. It has been said more than once that English Elizabethan literature may, and not merely in virtue of Shakespere, claim the first place even among the first

class. The full justification of this assertion could only be given by actually going through the whole range of the literature, book in hand. The foregoing pages have given it as it were in *précis*, rather than in any fuller fashion. And it has been thought better to devote some of the space permitted to extract as the only possible substitute for this continual book-in-hand exemplification. Many subjects which might properly form the subject of excursus in a larger history have been perforce omitted, the object being to give, not a series of interesting essays on detached points, but a conspectus of the actual literary progress and accomplishment of the century, from 1557 to 1660. Such essays exist already in great numbers, though some no doubt are yet to write. The extraordinary influence of Plato, or at least of a more or less indistinctly understood Platonism, on many of the finer minds of the earlier and middle period, is a very interesting point, and it has been plausibly connected with the fact that Giordano Bruno was for some years a resident in England, and was acquainted with the Greville-Sidney circle at the very time that that circle was almost the cradle of the new English literature. The stimulus given not merely by the popular fancy for rough dramatic entertainments, but by the taste of courts and rich nobles for masques—a taste which favoured the composition of such exquisite literature as Ben Jonson's and Milton's masterpieces—is another side subject of the same kind. I do not know that, much as has been written on the Reformation, the direct influence of the form which the Reformation took in England on the growth of English literature has ever been estimated and summarised fully and yet briefly, so as to show the contrast between the distinctly anti-literary character of most of the foreign Protestant and the English Puritan movement on the one side, and the literary tendencies of Anglicanism on the other. The origins of Euphuism and of that later form of preciousness which is sometimes called Gongorism and sometimes Marinism have been much discussed, but the last word has certainly not been said on them. For these things, however (which are merely quoted as examples of a very numer-

ous class), there could be found no place here without excluding other things more centrally necessary to the unfolding of the history. And therefore I may leave what I have written with a short final indication of what seems to me the distinguishing mark of Elizabethan literature. That mark is not merely the presence of individual works of the greatest excellence, but the diffusion throughout the whole work of the time of a *vivida vis*, of flashes of beauty in prose and verse, which hardly any other period can show. Let us open one of the songbooks of the time, Dowland's *Second Book of Aires*, published in the central year of our period, 1600, and reprinted by Mr. Arber. Here almost at random we hit upon this snatch—

“ Come ye heavy states of night,
Do my father's spirit right ;
Soundings baleful let me borrow,
Burthening my song with sorrow :
Come sorrow, come ! Her eyes that sings
By thee, are turned into springs.

“ Come you Virgins of the night
That in dirges sad delight,
Quire my anthems ; I lo borrow
Gone nor pearl, but sounds of sorrow.
Come sorrow, come ! Her eyes that sings
By thee, are turned into springs.”

It does not matter who wrote that—the point is its occurrence in an ordinary collection of songs to music neither better nor worse than many others. When we read such verses as ‘his, or as the still more charming Address to Love given on page 122, there is evident at once the *non so che* which distinguishes this period. There is a famous story of a good-natured conversation between Scott and Moore in the latter days of Sir Walter, in which the two poets agreed that verse which would have made a fortune in their young days appeared constantly in magazines without being much regarded in their age. No sensible person will mistake the meaning of the apparent praise. It meant that thirty years of remarkable original production and of much study of

models had made possible and common a standard of formal merit which was very rare at an earlier time. Now this standard of formal merit undoubtedly did not generally exist in the days of Elizabeth. But what did generally exist was the "wind blowing where it listeth," the presence and the influence of which are least likely to be mistaken or denied by those who are most strenuous in insisting on the importance and the necessity of formal excellence itself. I once undertook for several years the criticism of minor poetry for a literary journal, which gave more room than most to such things, and during the time I think I must have read through or looked over probably not much less than a thousand, certainly not less than five or six hundred volumes. I am speaking with seriousness when I say that nothing like the note of the merely casual pieces quoted or referred to above was to be detected in more than at the outside two or three of these volumes, and that where it seemed to sound faintly some second volume of the same author's almost always came to smother it soon after. There was plenty of quite respectable poetic learning: next to nothing of the poetic spirit. Now in the period dealt with in this volume that spirit is everywhere, and so are its sisters, the spirits of drama and of prose. They may appear in full concentration and lustre, as in *Hamlet* or *The Faërie Queene*; or in fitful and intermittent flashes, as in scores and hundreds of sonneteers, pamphleteers, playwrights, madrigalists, preachers. But they are always not far off. In reading other literatures a man may lose little by obeying the advice of those who tell him only to read the best things: in reading Elizabethan literature by obeying he can only disobey that advice, for the best things are everywhere.¹

¹ In the twenty years which have passed since this book was first published, monographs on most of the points indicated on p. 459 have appeared, both in England and America.