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JOURNEY FROM ROMANCE

Recent Trends in English Literature

UNLESS the complete dominion of Romanticism over the creative part of English letters during the nineteenth century is properly appreciated it is impossible to understand the more recent trends in English literature. Most of these trends are struggles of one kind or another to break clear of this curious influence which penetrated deeply into the literary habits of thought and imagination of the British. Over these tendencies the world war also has had an influence. These aspects are discussed in this article by ROY CAMPBELL, a South African poet who has attained a considerable reputation in England.

ENGLISH literature, like almost every other literature, is only just beginning to emerge from the shadow of the great Romantics of the early 19th Century. It was with them that poets and authors ceased to conceive of themselves as craftsmen and artists, and began to think of themselves as prophets, high-priests, teachers and reformers—a heresy which is still spoiling much good talent. Incidentally, about the only English author for the last century-and-a-half whose writings effected any real reforms, was, paradoxically enough, first and foremost a craftsman and an artist—Dickens. Up to the last war Britain was still more or less dominated intellectually by Romantic standards inherited and accepted unquestioningly for nearly 150 years. Though the normal vehicle of expression had changed from poetry to prose and free verse, the difference was only superficial. The centrifugal longing for "otherness," which is the Romantic Spirit, was still there. The Romantic Spirit is that which sacrifices the rule to the exception, the immediate to the remote, the obvious to the occult, the whole to the part, the direct to the indirect, the native to the foreign, and the present to some idealised past or Utopian future.

The writers under whose influence most modern authors were brought up, were nearly all obsessed by this form of escape from the real and the immediate, which drove them to Utopianise politically and socially, like Shaw; or scientifically, like Wells, both of whom subjected the present to a hypothetical future. Wells, however, lived to see many of his dreams realised, and the shock of it nearly broke his heart. Let us hope that Shaw will be spared a similar misfortune. The most interesting form of this centrifugality in time is when it faces both ways like Janus, as in the case of William Morris, the great mentor of the Romantics who was the prototype of the modern prophetic Utopianist. Viewed one way, he is a mediaeval knight in cast-iron breeches and a tin-hat, gazing nostalgically into the tapestry of an idealised past. Viewed the other way, he is an ardent, ultra-modern demagogue, gazing as rapturously into an equally impossible future.

Escape in Time and Space

The illusion of a material paradise and the perfectibility of human society at some other time, has claimed by far the greatest number of escapists. But there is a similar phenomenon to the escape in time; and that is the escape



ALDOUS HUXLEY

Escape from a brave new world

in space, equally dependent upon credulousness, which led to the frantic tourism and globe-trotting of D. H. Lawrence in order to try to identify himself with what was most alien to him; to immolate everything he could understand on the shrine of what he could not understand, the mind and the religion of the savage, which those very fine Europeans who do understand, usually treat with greater reserve. There is a far more dignified form of avoiding the evident and the actual which was very gracefully practised by Henry James and Virginia Woolf. It really amounts almost to a compromise with reality rather than a complete escape. Theirs is an oblique approach to the obvious, which is ultimately avoided, sometimes at the very verge of contact—in the former case by lengthy circumlocution, and in the latter by a deviation of the attention to some other impending actuality which has to be glanced at and avoided in its turn. Henry James and Virginia Woolf are therefore not out-and-out escapists; but they are masters of that *indirectness* which is one of the main ingredients of Romanticism. All these writers had a considerable effect on the generation of English writers that is now at its zenith and it is not surprising that the escapism that has been inherited should still be rioting in their veins though in such patent and often laughable forms that it promises to extinguish itself in one last blaze of incongruous extravagance.

Britain found herself, at the beginning of the war, intellectually at the

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