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Late Victorian and Edwardian Literature 1880–1920

On the title-page of his *Past and Present* of 1843 Thomas Carlyle had quoted Schiller's strident sentiment '*Ernst ist das Leben*' ('Life is earnest'). Some seven years later, in chapter 42 of *David Copperfield*, Dickens's hero expresses the opinion that 'there is no substitute for thorough-going, ardent, and sincere earnestness'. By the closing years of the nineteenth century such mid-Victorian moral confidence had begun to sound oppressively, even comically, outmoded. Oscar Wilde, for one, mocked at the very idea in the title of his 'Trivial Comedy for Serious People', *The Importance of Being Earnest* (1895) and it was scarcely casually that Samuel Butler selected Ernest as the Christian name of the intellectually and morally flabby hero of his *The Way of All Flesh* (1903). By the 1880s, when Butler was working on his novel, the virtues of old-fashioned earnestness—which entailed moral probity, religious orthodoxy, sexual reserve, hard work, and a confident belief in personal and historical progress—were open to question or had been supplanted by a new and more probing seriousness. In retrospect, the mid-Victorians looked both wrong, and, when their influence could be escaped, funny.

Although Queen Victoria, that embodiment of matronly uprightness, reigned until January 1901, and although the last years of her reign appeared to patriotic observers to mark the apogee of national and imperial glory, 'Victorian' values, beliefs, and standards of personal and social behaviour were already being challenged, sometimes angrily, by a new generation of intellectuals and writers. The literature of the last twenty years of the century engages in an extended and various discourse which attempts to re-evaluate the assumptions of the 1850s and 1860s and to work out the implications of new concepts of liberation and evolutionary development. If the writers of the first two-thirds of the century can be seen as struggling to come to terms with a multiplicity of impressions, convictions, facts, beliefs, and unbeliefs, their immediate successors reworked ideas and sought parallels, analogues, or images in contemporary scientific thought. They also agonized over disturbing new conclusions. When the instinctive Tess Durbeyfield voices a vague but

ominous dread of 'life in general' in Hardy's *Tess of the D'Urbervilles* (1891), her interlocutor, Angel Clare, perceives that she was 'expressing in her own native phrases . . . feelings which might almost have been called those of the age—the ache of modernism'. If this aching 'modernism' produced relatively little experiment with new literary forms, it did seem to imply that inherited literary forms should be adapted to express what many writers assumed was a general unease. The stress of novelty fell on messages, not on media. If the bourgeois reader had to be shocked out of his or her complacency, as *Tess of the D'Urbervilles* shocked some of its first readers, that shock of the new seemed best administered through accepted and acceptable literary forms. Conservatism of form did not, however, serve to blunt the frequent radicalism of content.

The shift in literary tastes in the 1890s is suggested by the glance back to the period offered in May Sinclair's novel *Mary Olivier* (1919). Sinclair points to the contrast between the bookshelves of her would-be liberated heroine, who reads Hardy, Meredith, and Kipling for stimulus, and those of her unadventurous mother who prefers to relax with the novels of Anthony Trollope. The contrast between generations and attitudes is yet more pointed in George Bernard Shaw's play *You Never Can Tell* (1896) where the liberal education of an emancipated woman of the 1870s, an education based on studying Huxley, Mill, and George Eliot, is wittily dismissed as now having nothing in it which would 'prevent her marrying an archbishop'. It was not simply that certain opinions had gone out of fashion, or had been discredited, but that late Victorian readers tended to condition the idea of human progress with a prominent Darwinian question mark. Society itself was assumed to be developing according to certain laws, but they were laws which threatened old, orderly assumptions by introducing notions of flux, chance, and adaptation. The movement for women's rights, and the emergence of the so-called 'New Woman' (who, like Shaw's Mrs Clandon, rapidly became less new), was as much a cultural norm as were the vituperative parliamentary debates over the destinies of Ireland within or outside the United Kingdom and the extra-parliamentary debates concerning the likelihood of a socialist future. After the Reform Acts of 1867 and 1885, the extension of the franchise to a substantial proportion of working-class men brought nearer the prospect of future mass-politics, with the masses themselves determining the very nature of the commonwealth. The advent of popular democracy, and mass popular dissent, seemed to many observers to entail the diminution of the function and ideology of British Liberalism. It also threatened to break the old consensus politics of the mid-century. Socialism, shocking enough to Mrs Clandon, struck propagandist and partisan writers such as Shaw and Wells as the true liberating politics of the future. In 1894 even the often bland, and generally unearnest, Oscar Wilde could voice the opinion that 'we are all of us more or less socialists now-a-days'. In that 'more or less', however, lay the real dilemma of the times.

The 'Agnostic' Fiction of the Late Century

English fiction in the last two decades of the nineteenth century has all too frequently been seen as dominated by the work of the subtle, demanding, expatriate American, Henry James (1843–1916), and by that of the novelist patronizingly dismissed by James as 'the good little Thomas Hardy'. The reality is both more complex and wide-ranging. James's increasingly elusive novels took time to find a discriminating and appreciative audience, while Hardy's far more popular, but rural and provincial, stories contrast strikingly with the predominantly urban, and indeed urbane, fiction of ideas which also marks the period. Mrs Humphry Ward's novel *Robert Elsmere* appeared in 1888 and sold 40,000 copies in Britain in its first year of publication (it sold some 100,000 more in America). These sales were stimulated by a series of vexed, dismayed reviews of the book, including one by the devout former Prime Minister, W. E. Gladstone. Mary Ward (1851–1920), still generally known to her readers by her married name, was the daughter of Dr Arnold's most wayward son Thomas and the niece of Matthew Arnold. The intellectual endeavour and aspiration of these earlier Arnolds saturate her work, but so does a distinct feminine and feminist bias and an equally individual, questioning spirit.

Robert Elsmere suggests that a chasm has opened up between the Christian earnestness of Dr Arnold's Rugby and those who resolutely search for a religion and a morality beyond the closed world of dogmatic Christianity. Its hero, an Anglican priest, becomes increasingly troubled by doubts occasioned by the German 'Higher Criticism', doubts which are reinforced by his acquaintance with the infidel local squire who has belatedly pursued his studies at the 'unextinguished hearth' of the University of Berlin. Elsmere's own deconversion is slow and deliberate. It follows a refusal merely to 'look after the poor and hold his tongue', and the novel traces both an intense intellectual struggle (which is largely confined to male characters) and a strained relationship with his loving, but loyally orthodox Christian wife. When he resigns his orders, Elsmere retains his dedication to the betterment of society by finding a new mission amongst the unchurched poor of the East End of London. His is a dedication to a demythologized Jesus and to a secular 'Church'. His 'New Brotherhood of Christ', a body which espouses the principles of ethical and social improvement, nevertheless steers well clear of socialism. As a child, Ward had been alerted to the personal and social ramifications of religious controversy by her father's periodic and painful driftings between the Roman Catholic and Anglican Churches. Her novel openly discusses the religious doubts which had remained merely implicit in Elizabeth Gaskell's *North and South* and the agnosticism which had formed the often unrecognized subtext of George Eliot's fiction, but its particular force and intelligence are very much part of a new, frank, if less optimistic, culture in

which Mrs Ward is a central figure. Her later fiction includes the masterly study of the tensions between Catholicism and free-thinking, *Helbeck of Bannisdale* (1898), and *Marcella* (1894), the story of an idealistic, socialist heroine struggling with the dilemma posed by her love for an uncompromisingly Tory landowner. *Marcella* is a subtle, but ultimately ambivalent novel, one in which both love and philanthropy manage to share the ultimate victory.

The work of Samuel Butler (1835–1902) is also central to the cultural debates of the 1880s and 1890s, though Butler's best-known works, *Erewhon, Or Over the Range*, and *The Way of All Flesh*, were published respectively in 1872 and 1903. Despite his scholarly, if idiosyncratic, debates with Darwin and Darwinism (which dominate his output in the 1880s), Butler struck his contemporaries as *homo unius libri*, a man of one book. That book was his utopian fantasy *Erewhon* (its title being an anagram of 'nowhere'). It is a perplexing work, one which tends to define its terms of reference by means of negatives while relegating its positives to singularly dark corners. Its reflections back on High Victorian England remain open to various interpretation. Butler treats religion with a quizzical irreverence, rendering ridiculous the narrator's desire to convert to Christianity the natives of the country he discovered by exposing his zeal as half-hearted and his theology as decidedly quirky. Erewhon itself is no ideal alternative to England, for it is shown as an irritatingly, semi-lunatic nation where sickness is punished and crime cured, a land which lives without watches and machines and which dedicates its colleges of higher education exclusively to the study of hypothetics and 'Unreason'. Butler's posthumously published *The Way of All Flesh* offers an account of the family background and the education of Ernest Pontifex (the family being so named due to their habit of dogmatically laying down the law). The book both denounces narrow Victorian family values and attempts to stress the significance of social evolution and family influence (which had tended to be diminished by Darwinists). Its central character's struggle is to find personal integrity by escaping the browbeating of his elders, but the narrative often shows more signs of splenetic personal resentment on Butler's own part than it does of the conventional *Bildungsroman*. Ernest's career as a clergyman proves a disaster, for he is wrecked both by his own scruples and by the unscrupulousness of others. If he is not, strictly speaking, a sceptic, he emerges as a man who 'though he would not stand seeing the Christian religion made light of, he was not going to see it taken seriously'. *The Way of All Flesh* is at its sharpest and its most didactic when it evokes and damns the distorting, thwarting power of an inherited Victorian ideology which confuses theology with righteousness.

'Mark Rutherford', the name by which William Hale White (1831–1913) is still generally known, was equally concerned with a steady process of clerical and spiritual disillusionment. Hale White's background, unlike Butler's, was that of Dissent. He had trained as a Nonconformist minister, but had given up his ministry in 1854 and entered the civil service. *The Autobiography of Mark Rutherford* (1881) proclaims itself to be 'a record of weaknesses and failures' and

it attempts to delineate a provincial minister's declining religious vocation and his consequent descent into melancholia and alcoholism. Its narrative is permeated by a barely suppressed emotionalism and by an acute self-distrust which propels its narrator towards loneliness and a restless exile in London. It is in the metropolis, in the household of a publisher (loosely based on George Eliot's former patron, John Chapman), that Rutherford encounters the kind of society that 'blessedly' heals him of his 'self-despisings'. Its sequel, somewhat inaptly entitled *Mark Rutherford's Deliverance* (1885), suggests a more positive commitment to the problems of a troubled social fabric in London, a city where bourgeois civilization is seen as 'a thin film or crust lying over a volcano'. Despite this Conradian perception, no real investigation of this volcanic situation is on offer; instead, Rutherford insists on an anti-socialist drift into theological, moral, and philosophical generalization. It is never a comfortable book, ending abruptly with the untimely death of its protagonist and with the intrusion of a memorializing 'Editor'. White's *The Revolution in Tanner's Lane* (1887) moves beyond individual clerical doubt to the broader, proletarian world of the articulate artisan and the Dissenting tradesman. It discusses, sometimes powerfully, the radical, political edge of early and mid-nineteenth-century Nonconformity, or rather the blunting of that edge by petty-bourgeois aspirations to gentility and respectability. What begins as an account of the continued rumblings of French revolutionary Republicanism in Regency England, ends with the construction of a new Independent Chapel in the Tanner's Lane of the 1840s. Ironically, this is the real 'revolution' implied by the novel's title, a revolution which has narrowed down from a European sphere to the small world of provincial Cowfold; from a religion which truly dissents, to one which reconstructs itself according to the Victorian social compromise.

Walter Pater's scepticism is of a different order. Pater (1839–94), a scholar by training and inclination and an Oxford University don by profession, provoked widespread public debate due to his supposed advocacy of aesthetic hedonism in his collection of essays, *Studies in the History of the Renaissance* (1873). Such was the subversive impact of the book that Pater was obliged to withdraw the now celebrated 'Conclusion' to his argument from its second edition, fearing that it might 'possibly mislead some of those young men into whose hands it might fall'. Into the hands of impressionable young men like Oscar Wilde and W. B. Yeats it assuredly did fall, though neither came to see its profound influence on him as 'misleading'. Pater advocates a refinement of sensation in pursuit of an ultimate truth in Art and Life and in order that an ecstasy of passionate response might be maintained. In the face of the transience of life, he suggests, the cultivation of the momentary appreciation of the beautiful, and therefore of the 'truthful', could serve to fire the spirit. 'Not the fruit of experience', Pater argues, 'but experience itself, is the end.' His book is a key to the cultivated aestheticism which dominated avant-garde culture in England in the 1890s. It is also one of the first serious experiments in art history, advancing beyond

Ruskin's restrictive canons and burgeoning speculations into an analytical study of Renaissance painting. Pater was also amongst the first critics to point to the elusive smile of the Mona Lisa. *Studies in the History of the Renaissance* remains a triumphant assertion of style, a style which is dense and subtly shaped around relative clauses, phrases, and parentheses. It both offers an argument and withdraws from one, combining hesitancy and archness.

This hesitancy of expression is also evident in Pater's historical novel *Marius the Epicurean* (1885). On one level the novel seems to tell the story of the slow movement of a pagan Roman towards Christian conversion (thereby reversing the general tenor of contemporary accounts of deconversion); on another, it remains a distinctly provisional statement. The noble Marius is never in fact formally received into the Church; his is the culture of the humane and just Antonine emperors and his journey is always towards a moral coincidence with Christianity rather than to an immersion in it. Unlike Cardinal Newman's earlier *Callista* (1856), Pater's Christians have neither the best arguments nor the best tunes. Marius dies on the road to martyrdom, and the Church claims him as one of its own, but his personal faith is based, we learn, on 'one long unfolding of beauty and energy in things, upon the closing of which he might gratefully write his "*Vixi*"'. It is a Christianity unordered by theological overdistinctions and dogmatic insistences and a religion untroubled by the possibility of scholarly doubts. It is a numinous, poetic and metaphysical faith, an all-conquering creed lit by the hard, gem-like flame of the purely aesthetic.

'The Letter Killeth': Hardy, Gissing, and Moore

Thomas Hardy's fictional world is one that lacks the comfortable shapes and contours of the old theology. The Church of England is observed as still firmly rooted in a rural society, much as its buildings are part of the Wessex landscape, but its authority has been withdrawn and its physical structures are seen as now incapable of holding, framing, and interpreting a grand, but essentially discomforting, idea of the universe. Although Hardy (1840–1928) publicly fostered the impression, outlined in the second volume of his autobiography, that he was 'churchy', if not in an intellectual sense, 'but in so far as instincts and emotions ruled', there is little real evidence of this 'churchiness' in any of his novels beyond the early *Under the Greenwood Tree* (1872). His aesthetic appreciation of church architecture, fostered by his training as an architect, is steadily countered in his novels by the idea that the historic religion practised in churches is redundant. In *Far From the Madding Crowd* (1874) he contrasts the design of the great medieval barn, in which the sheep-shearing takes place, with those of a church and a castle in that 'the purpose which had dictated its original erection was the same to which it was still applied'. This is no mere reference to the liturgical changes of the Reformation, but an indication that the Christian religion as a whole has gone

the way of feudalism. At the opening of his last novel, *Jude the Obscure* (1895), 'the ancient temple of the Christian divinities' (a contorted avoidance of the word 'church') has been replaced by a 'tall new building of modern Gothic design unfamiliar to English eyes' (in Hardy's eyes, a misguided and intrusive attempt to assert the vigorous continuity of the faith). Throughout *Jude* the Christian religion, and 'Christian' morality are variously seen as stultifying and irrelevant to the complexities of modern experience. Religion serves to complicate and further frustrate the destinies of the central characters (who are 'churchy' enough themselves to have made Gothic 'Christminster Cakes'). At the climactic point in the story two clergymen are overheard discussing where they should stand liturgically at the altar, at a time when a more immediate sacrifice has been offered in the form of Jude's children. 'Good God', the traumatized Jude exclaims, 'the eastward position, and all creation groaning'.

Hardy's reversal of St Paul's image of creation groaning in its birth pangs reflects his interest in geological theory and in the doubts cast on traditional interpretations of the origins of life by Charles Darwin. Hardy claimed to have been amongst the first readers of *The Origin of Species*, but much of what he learned from it appears to have rearticulated an older, peasant fatalism inherited from his Dorset forebears (the fatalism with which he later endowed Tess Durbeyfield). Darwin's vastly expanded chronology of life, his displacement of humankind from its proud assumption of superiority, and his arguments concerning natural selection and adaptation, seem merely to have confirmed Hardy's sense of a dispassionate, evolving universe and of a nature which had to be understood without recourse to the idea of a benevolent Creator. In certain ways, both his plots and the fates of his protagonists reflect these concerns. The immense process of evolution advances regardless of human bane and human blessing. Nature rarely fosters individual enlightenment and, seen in a proper perspective, it militates against any comforting belief in providence and in a sympathetic response between human beings and their environment. To Tess, 'as to not a few millions of others', Hardy remarks towards the end of *Tess of the D'Urbervilles*, there was a 'ghastly satire' in Wordsworth's confident lines: 'Not in utter nakedness | But trailing clouds of glory do we come'.

In Hardy's sprawling poetic drama, *The Dynasts* (1904–8), the petty delusions and ambitions of humankind are watched over by choric forces who, from their extended perspectives, undercut any assumption of heroic action. Napoleon achieves nothing, despite his illusion of his own greatness, and general human passivity is seen to be as worth while as any pretension to significant action. Nevertheless, the slow and painful progress of human history fascinated Hardy. History emerges in his work as a partial realization of 'universal consciousness' and as a process misunderstood both by conventional historians and by romantically speculative poets (such as Wordsworth). His most obviously 'historical' novel, *The Trumpet Major* (1880), seems ostensibly slight beside the grand sweep of *The Dynasts* (whose Napoleonic setting it

shares), but it is amongst the most carefully *located* of all Hardy's novels and it presents a supremely delicate study of characters choosing and making the wrong choices. Elsewhere in his fiction, history, geology, geography, and astronomy variously serve as macrocosmic ramifications of the human microcosm represented by an intertwined knot of individual fates. The observation of the courses of the stars, coupled with an evocation of prehistory, runs tellingly through the extraordinary *Two on a Tower* (1882), while the looming presence of Egdon Heath acts as a shaper of consciousness in the far more dramatic and disturbing *The Return of the Native* (1878). The physical peculiarity of the Isle of Slingers (Portland Bill) conditions the odd twists of the plot of *The Well-Beloved* (1892, 1897), and in *The Woodlanders* (1887) Hintock Wood is presented as somehow expressive of the 'Unfulfilled Intention which makes life what it is'. The relics of older, pre-Christian civilizations also manage to work their impassive influence. Michael Henchard's tragedy is partly enacted against the background of a Roman amphitheatre and of the pre-Roman Maiden Castle (also the setting of the short story 'A Tryst at an Ancient Earthwork'). When Tess is arrested at dawn, lying 'upon an oblong slab' at Stonehenge, the weighty pictorial significance almost topples over into the improbably theatrical (or, at the very least, cinematic). In the highly eclectic *Jude the Obscure*, the 'city of light', the visionary Christminster, gradually emerges as a human artefact, older and mightier than the historic university for which Jude vainly yearns, and older and more significant than 'Christ' or 'minster'. The city's colleges exclude Jude as much by their architecture as by their narrow admissions policy, but the Fourways, Christminster's ancient central crossroads, 'teems' with an alternative life, 'stratified, with the shades of human groups, who had met there for tragedy, comedy, farce; real enactments of the intensest kind'. Here at the Fourways, history, like the underlying rocks, has its strata, and here Jude takes his place with dons and drabs, students and gownless artisans, as a living, suffering part of the larger 'Unconscious Will' of humanity.

Hardy's novels develop from relatively relaxed, straightforward expositions of 'tragedy, comedy, farce' to what some might see as the over-complex stratification of his later work. Both *Tess of the D'Urbervilles* and *Jude the Obscure* are concerned with characters wrenched from their roots and from the communities which might have sustained, or at least tolerated, their distinctiveness. Hardy's dislocations are, however, far from simply related to character and environment. Both novels also have a narratological density which interfuses literary and biblical citation, scientific reference and allusion, philosophical speculation, superstitious hints at the chthonic and folkloric, and dark, but tentative, suggestions of genetic conditioning and even animism. The fluent, but relatively stark and disciplined, lines of Greek tragedy are here fleshed out by a prose which often seems to aspire to the freer conditions of poetry. It was in poetry that Hardy found the ultimate expression of his instinctive ambiguity and his intellectual evasiveness. It was also in these two

particular novels that his complex view of woman, as variously virgin and coquette, as endurer and *ingénue*, as actor and victim, culminates. The 1860s had witnessed the emergence of the so-called 'New Woman', educated, individualistic, but still unfulfilled by the very fact of her continued subservience to men. Through the whole range of his fiction, Hardy's women are neither metropolitan bluestockings nor university educated campaigners, yet they generally emerge as both more determined and more truly sophisticated than his male characters. They also range widely in terms of class and outlook. Tess Durbeyfield, the 'Pure Woman' of the novel's subtitle, has much of the passivity of an instinctive fatalist, but her native 'purity' is reinforced by a countering strength of will which ultimately defies male domination and bourgeois condemnation alike. Her bids for freedom are, however, all doomed. In *Jude the Obscure* Arabella Donn is presented as both crude and exploitative, but she is also singularly practical (in marked contrast to the other major characters) and a survivor against the odds. It is, however, on the complex and often self-contradictory character of Sue Bridehead that much critical attention, some of it incredulous, has been concentrated. D. H. Lawrence, for one, found her 'the production of the long selection by man of the woman in whom the female is subordinated and who therefore only seems to exist to be betrayed by their men'. Lawrence's animus appears to have been prompted by Sue's combination of fictionality and frigidity, and his narrowed perspective fails to respond to the real quality of Hardy's observation, to her intensity, her neuroticism, and her lurches between freethinking and obsessive religiosity. The deep ambiguity of her characterization in fact echoes the central ambiguity and difficulty of the novel in which she appears. Her final self-abasement before the cross in an Oxford church seems to sum up its critical exploration of the varieties of human delusion. *Jude the Obscure* suggests that it is not only the letter that killeth (as Hardy's quotation from St Paul puts it in the novel's subtitle), but that there remains a general human inability to grasp the implications of the modern spirit, a spirit which offers a painful, but more clear-sighted freedom.

Hardy's discussion of sexuality and sexual morality scandalized the professional Mrs Grundys of late Victorian England, including a Bishop of Wakefield who attempted to burn his copy of *Jude the Obscure* at his domestic fireside in midsummer. Hardy's provocative frankness was not, however, unique. There is a similar guarded openness, expressed with a pioneering zeal, in the work of the Irish writer George Moore (1852–1933). In the 1880s Moore launched a series of attacks on the censorship exercised on readers' behalfs by the great circulating libraries, principally Mudie's, which had placed a ban on his first two novels *A Modern Lover* (1883) and *A Mummer's Wife* (1885). Mudie's had pleaded the defence of the tender moral principles of the British matron; Moore appealed to the wider 'truth' of art. 'Literature and young girls', he wrote in the Preface to a translation of one of Émile Zola's novels, 'are irreconcilable elements, and the sooner we leave off trying to reconcile the

better'. The result of earlier attempts at reconciliation, he claimed, had been a new school of criticism whose criterion was: 'would you or would you not give that book to your sister of sixteen to read?' Moore, who had spent the years 1873–80 largely in Paris, mixing widely with members of the French cultural avant-garde, saw himself as in the vanguard of a British struggle for freedom from an 'illiterate censorship' and for a new realism in fiction. His early novels were written very much under the shadow of Zola (indeed, he described himself as 'Zola's ricochet in England'), and in reaction to those 'flat and conventional' English novels which he thought lacked 'observation and analysis'. Moore's mature fiction, notably *A Drama in Muslin* (1886) and *Esther Waters* (1894) suggest French influences beyond that of Zola and probe distinctly native themes and social issues. *A Drama in Muslin* is set in an Ireland still dominated by the country houses of the Anglo-Irish Ascendancy and by a Viceregal court in Dublin Castle, but it also shows a nation troubled by the often exasperated protests of its landless peasants. The outspoken, provocative, and determinedly 'realist' *Esther Waters*, which also (scarcely surprisingly) suffered a ban imposed by Mudie's Library, has a working-class heroine, forced out of her home by a drunken stepfather and obliged to work as a servant at a racing stables in Sussex. Esther is seduced, made pregnant, and abandoned. Her grim experiences are compounded by the return of her former lover, by marriage, and by his ruinous penchant for gambling. Her final destitution is relieved by a return to the now decayed racing stables where Esther finds a modicum of happiness. Moore's stylized later work has little of the goading moral radicalism of *Esther Waters*. His retelling of the Gospels from the point of view of Joseph of Arimathea in *The Brook Kerith* (1916) caused a modest stir in its time, but his most memorable and popular work written in the twentieth century was his autobiographical comedy *Hail and Farewell* (1911–14), a trilogy which looks askance at contemporaries in the literary worlds of London and Dublin.

George Gissing (1857–1903) was equally determined to press home the significance of fictional 'realism' to English readers (though his literary tastes tended to be far less Frenchified). His steady, and at times incongruous, admiration for the work of Dickens seems at odds with the gloomy and disillusioned nature of his own fiction. Despite a brief flirtation with socialism and with socialist aspirations in his first novel *Workers in the Dawn* (1880), Gissing seems generally to have rejected social panaceas and anything resembling an optimistic prospect of a political dawn. Both *The Unclassed* (1884) and *Demos: A Story of English Socialism* (1886) suggest a considerable empathy with the urban poor and powerfully evoke the miseries and degradations of slum life, but both also portray popular radicals as self-deceived and self-seeking. 'I am no friend of the people', the narrator of *The Private Papers of Henry Ryecroft* (1903) announces, 'as a force, by which the tenor of the time is conditioned, they inspire me with distrust, with fear; as a visible multitude, they make me shrink aloof, and often move to abhorrence'. Such sentiments of

'fear' and 'abhorrence' elsewhere contribute to an impression of deep resentment and personal failure which haunts most of Gissing's fiction. It is the resentment of a middle-class outsider, an exile in a nether world, whose sympathies are drawn to those who have been denied a chance of prosperity and self-improvement, but Gissing's pervasive disillusion refuses to accept any new illusions, be they religious or philosophical, social or political.

Much of Gissing's most interesting and successful work is concerned with the emancipation of women and with the complexities and difficulties of the bohemian literary life. *The Odd Women* (1893) traces the history of three impoverished sisters who cling desperately to respectability in their shabby-genteel lodgings in London. The novel's subplot offers a striking contrast to the drab limitations of the sisters in the form of the independent career of Rhoda Nunn, a strong-minded woman whose professional skill and feminist advocacy give the book a firm hint of future benevolent change which is rare enough in Gissing's fictional world. The women writers of *New Grub Street* (1891) share with the novel's central male character, the impecunious Edwin Reardon, a discouraging awareness of bitterness, waste, and exploitation in contemporary literary London. The novel does, however, serve to reinforce Gissing's somewhat old-fashioned belief in the Romantic idea of the isolated, suffering artist (even though it scrupulously eschews all romantic affectation). It is not surprising, therefore, that Gissing should have found Dickens's picture of a happy, fulfilled, and prosperous David Copperfield both unconvincing and unappealing as an 'illustration of the artistic character'. His own literary men and women have no such worldly success, though they share something of Copperfield's childhood misery. Henry Ryecroft, for example, looks back on his cold, semi-starving past, and on his struggles to write in miserable garrets and ill-lit basements. Nevertheless, Ryecroft's retrospect is flooded with something akin to achieved happiness. 'I had nothing much to complain of except my poverty', he recalls, offering his readers a contrast between the squalid, foggy, hungry London of his past and the snug, rural retreat from which he writes. Gissing's ambiguities may not be as startling, vital, and illuminating as Hardy's but they do serve to suggest something of the dilemma of the English *fin-de-siècle* writer. As Ryecroft's 'private papers' indicate, the artist was not necessarily damned by retreating into placidity and compromise.

Mystery and History: Conan Doyle, Stoker, and Stevenson

In spite of the disquieting ripples of German philosophical and theological speculation, and the moral revisionism stimulated by the example of French realist fiction, late nineteenth-century English literature remained remarkably insular in its styles and preoccupations. Its predominant concerns were with English society and its ills, with English religion and its development, and with England's position within the United Kingdom and as the centre of a still

expanding colonial and commercial Empire. There often seemed to be a full enough justification for this insularity, though not all the reasons behind the justifications were bred of success. 'Anglo-Saxondom' was still felt to matter to the exclusion of other cultures, an assumption which in part explains the growing oppositional vigour of Scottish and, in particular, Anglo-Irish literature in the period. But if England remained imperially central, it was a centre which did not hold with an absolute confidence. Horizons were, of necessity, broadening. The response to 'Greater Britain', as the Empire was sometimes fondly known, had generally been peripheral to the literature of the mid-century. In the late century it was emphatic, even though the emphasis was conditioned by disquiet. Unease, uncertainty, and a sense of strangeness haunt both the writing concerned with imperial expansion and much of the domestic discourse on social and political problems. Two contrasting movements, one outward to a wider world, and one inwards to a new social self-awareness, proved complementary. Both were responses to what Carlyle had earlier styled 'the Condition of England', a condition which now, perforce, embraced the conditions of Scotland, Wales, and Ireland as well as the colonies and the subject peoples of the Empire on which, it was proudly asserted, the sun never set.

In many interesting ways the preoccupation with social and spiritual ills, and the widespread awareness that ready answers to domestic problems were not to be found in conventional Christian teaching, made for a revival of interest in other religions, in scientific alternatives to religion, and in an anti-rational revival of Gothic extravagance. The post-Darwinian fascination with regression rather than with confident progress added a new *frisson* to the unhappy prospect of a human return to the bestial. Human destiny now seemed to have a frightening ambiguity which had been largely absent from the angelic prevision of Tennyson's *In Memoriam* and from the Whiggish progressivism of Macaulay. An obsession with crime, with anarchy, with decadence, with reversion, with the animal, or simply with the paraphernalia of horror can be seen running through the work of many of the key writers of the end of the century, writers as diverse in their styles and interests as Hardy, Wilde, Yeats, Conrad, Wells, and Stevenson.

The spectacular and sensational popular literature of crime, which had been a feature of mid-Victorian Britain, retained much of its currency in the late century (as the widespread speculation about the character and identity of Jack the Ripper might serve to suggest). The narrator of H. G. Wells's story *Tono Bungay* (1909) recalls the excitement of reading the street-literature of his youth in Kent in the 1880s: 'one saw there smudgy illustrated sheets, the *Police News* in particular, in which vilely-drawn pictures brought home to the dullest intelligence an interminable succession of squalid crimes, women murdered and put in boxes, buried under floors, old men bludgeoned at midnight by robbers, people thrust suddenly out of trains, happy lovers shot, vitrioled, and so forth by rivals.' This was, in part, the stuff of the cheap criminal fiction

pioneered by G. W. M. Reynolds let alone of the darker sides of Dickens and Wilkie Collins, but its ramifications in the 1880s and 1890s have left more lasting traces on the popular imagination. Sir Arthur Conan Doyle's story *A Study in Scarlet* introduced Sherlock Holmes to the reading public in 1887, but the vast success of Holmes, the super-perceptive scientific amateur who runs rings around plodding police detectives, really dates from the series of short stories published from 1891 in the *Strand Magazine*. Conan Doyle (1859–1930) resented being thought of solely as the creator of Holmes, but it was in these stories that he captured an impression of a foggy, disordered London, a city of mayhem, mystery, and murder, which will always continue to overshadow any larger view of his work. His historical fiction, in particular *Micah Clarke* (1889) and *The Exploits of Brigadier Gerard* (1896), or his Jules Verne-ish Professor Challenger stories such as *The Lost World* (1912), have great flair, but none of them has quite the brilliance of the accounts of Holmes's mind pitted against an international subclass of criminals and working in uneasy tandem with his slower-witted memorializer, Dr Watson.

Holmes reads signs and interprets them according to a process which combines logical deduction with leaps of the imagination. No such applied science can outwit the malevolent power released in England by a shipwreck at Whitby, described in Bram Stoker's *Dracula* (1897). Stoker (1847–1912), a Dubliner by birth and the personal manager to the great actor Sir Henry Irving, managed to combine in his remarkable novel a pronounced theatricality with something of the Irish Gothic of Maturin's *Melmoth the Wanderer*. *Dracula* is a masterpiece of horripilation. Its carefully wrought narrative intermixes diaries, letters, journals, and extracts from newspapers, suggesting a new kind of myth-making which moves beyond the moral dilemmas explored in *Frankenstein* into the realm of the parahuman and the purely superstitious. The novel is charged with sexuality—a perverted and exploitative sexuality—and with a pervasive sense of mental and spiritual disturbance. If the outward and visible signs of the Christian faith ultimately triumph over darkness, they often seem but token gestures designed to ward off a profound and recurrent spiritual malaise.

Robert Louis Stevenson (1850–94) was, despite his singular fascination with horror, a writer of a far greater variety and invention. Stevenson is one of a group of distinctively Scottish writers who flourished in the last years of the century and who used small-town settings, and the Scots vernacular, to reinforce a precise sense of Scottish place. If their roots lie in the work of Scott and Galt, this so-called 'Kailyard School' was also determinedly 'modern' (it also included J. M. Barrie, Ian Maclaren (1850–1907) and E. S. Crockett (1860–1914)). Stevenson's work is far from parochial and indeed is often at its most remarkable when it is detached from Scotland or when it looks sideways, or retrospectively, at Scottish issues. The mystery story *The Strange Case of Dr Jekyll and Mr Hyde* (1886) is a case in point. It stands apart from the rest of his fiction, reaching back through its disparate, disbelieving narrative voices to a variety of English precedents, and yet, through its examination of the divided

self, nodding to the great Scottish example of what can only be called Calvinist Gothic, Hogg's *Confessions of a Justified Sinner*. Despite the Scots names of many of its characters, *Dr Jekyll and Mr Hyde* is set in England and centres on the horrid possession of a successful London physician. Stevenson wrote his uncanny story in an oddly placid exile, amid the villas of the English seaside, but the fact of his severance from Scotland and from urban life may well have provided the stimulus to his evident fascination with the widening gap between the respectable worlds of Jekyll and his *alter ego*, Hyde. It is a story of agonizingly disparate perceptions and actions which leads ultimately to Jekyll's suicide as the only effective release from the predatory Hyde.

It is, however, in his Scottish historical fiction that Stevenson's less speculatively fanciful imagination comes to the fore. Again there is an evident debt to tradition (in this case to Sir Walter Scott), and to a marked division between ways of seeing and acting (here between then and now). Gone is Scott's urge to find a historical and fictional compromise in order to justify the idea of progressive evolution. *Kidnapped* (1886) and its sequel *Catriona* (1893) are set in eighteenth-century Scotland, a nation riven by Jacobite divisions and older resentments, and both novels deal with deception, suspicion, injustice, and obligatory flight. Neither ends with any sense of achieved serenity and purpose or with any emphasis on historic justice or justification. *The Master of Ballantrae: A Winter's Tale* (1889), written in Stevenson's self-imposed exile in the South Seas, is narrated episodically by a family steward, Ephraim Mackellar, who, like the reader, is drawn into a duality of response to the central characters, two politically and emotionally divided brothers. The story, set yet again in the aftermath of the Jacobite rebellion of 1745, follows the twists and turns of an intensely fraught family relationship which has larger implications for the historic tensions within Scottish culture. Stevenson's romantic fascination with travel, with the dangerous side of things and with the exotic, evident enough in his famous boys' story *Treasure Island* (1883), culminated in his South Sea adventures *The Beach at Falesá* (1893) and *The Ebb Tide* (1894), both of which offer indictments of the malign effects of eighteenth-century colonialism as a new variation on piracy.

'Our Colonial Expansion': Kipling and Conrad

Rudyard Kipling (1865–1936), the apostrophizer of 'The White Man's Burden' (a poem addressed, incidentally, to the American imperial mission in the Philippines), has all too often been seen as the noisiest popular apologist for the climactic expansion of the British Empire. The closing years of the nineteenth century were marked by the European grab for Africa and by European rivalries as to which power could manage to grab most territory. Given its existing footholds, Britain did pretty well out of the enterprise, cementing it with effective influence over Egypt and, following Kitchener's

victory at Omdurman in 1898, extending Anglo-Egyptian influence over the Sudan. Though the wars against Boer settlers in South Africa were brought to an end in 1902 with an uneasy compromise over British influence in the colony, the wars themselves had by no means always gone Britain's way. For Kipling—assuming, as he periodically did, the voice of the ordinary British infantry, 'Tommy Atkins'—the African campaigns were more a matter of slog than of swashbuckling and Africa itself not so much a burden as a pain in the feet:

> We're foot—slog—slog—slog—sloggin' over Africa—
> Foot—foot—foot—foot—sloggin' over Africa—
> (Boots—boots—boots—boots—movin' up and down again!)
> There's no discharge in the war!

Kipling, born in Bombay, was, however, always more stimulated by the idea of the British imperial adventure in India than by the less romantic drive to acquire a colonial hegemony over Africa. He proved the most perceptive observer of the quirky anomalies of the British Raj in the relatively peaceful and prosperous period between the suppression of the Mutiny of 1857–8 and the growth of independence movements at the beginning of the twentieth century.

It would be difficult to describe Kipling as a cerebral writer. The social and moral dilemmas, the religious or irreligious scruples, and the alternative pulls of decadence and despair, which are evident in the work of his British-based contemporaries, seem at first sight to be quite absent from both his prose and his jingling, jingoistic verse. His work rapidly gained esteem both in Britain and in British India in the 1880s, and his particularly privileged place in English letters was internationally acknowledged in 1907 when he became the first British Nobel Laureate. Nevertheless, Kipling was in many ways an outsider, a colonial articulator of a commonsensical, almost proverbial, philosophy and a conservative upholder of the powers that be, but not a cultivator of the styles and codes of the London literary scene. The poet of 'If' and of the Jubilee poem 'Recessional' seems to sit uneasily in an anthology of the often effete poetry of the 1890s, and Kipling's deliberately 'plain' story-telling can seem flat, even coarse, beside the stylistic refinements of a Pater and a Wilde or the complex allusiveness of a James. His bluff, no-nonsense cruder side as a Cockney versifier is wittily summed up in Max Beerbohm's cartoon of a tweedy, drunken poet taking 'a bloomin' day aht, on the blasted 'eath, along with Britannia 'is gurl'.

Kipling is not, however, an untroubled apologist for the common man's idea of Empire and of the colonial races. His values may well be those of a world of masculine action, but he is also a writer who, at his best, is always alert to subtleties, to human weakness, to manipulation, vulnerability, and failure. India with its empty spaces and its densely overcrowded cities, its hill-stations and its hot deserts, its princely states and its cantonments, conditioned him; its ancient, mutually severed cultures fascinated, rather than overwhelmed him

(as is the case with some other English writers). He retained the detachment of a European outsider, but he tried to see India from the inside, not as a curious interloper or as an obsessed neophyte. In his greatest literary achievement—the short stories which he began publishing in the mid-1880s—he demonstrated an extraordinary variety, tact, and vitality of tone; he moves from ghost-stories to tales of flirtation and adultery, from isolation to communal riot, and from the fear of death to the waste of life and talent. His 'soldiers three', Privates Mulvaney, Ortheris, and Learoyd, are pragmatic and stoical survivors, coping with the divergent promptings of the discipline of their regiment and the multiple confusions of India. A similar soldierly individualism marks the story 'The Man Who Would Be King', a clever and entertaining intermixture of freemasonry and unsanctioned extensions of the Pax Britannica.

Kipling may have wholeheartedly acquiesced to the idea of Empire and to the élite world of the British Babas of India, but he also points steadily and clearsightedly to both the merits and the demerits of the colonial regime. English children sent back 'home' for education suffer excruciatingly (as Kipling himself did) in his short story, 'Baa Baa Black Sheep', but none of his grown-up sahibs seem to exude the smug superiority of E. M. Forster's. They know that they cannot properly assimilate to native India, but they tend to recognize, as Kipling's Mrs Mallows puts it, that 'You can't focus anything in India'. His large-scale attempt at multifocusing, the novel *Kim* (1901), allows for many voices and conflicting traditions, exploring a fictional India through the cultural and geographical wanderings of its boy-hero, the orphan son of an Irish colour-sergeant. Kim awkwardly bridges the gap between rulers and ruled, serving both a Tibetan Lama as his disciple and the British Secret Service as a spy in the 'Great Game' which the sahibs are playing against the Russians to the north. The Lama, who expresses himself in an archaic, biblical English, is given an end to his spiritual search, but the end of Kipling's narrative leaves the destiny of his disciple much more ambiguous. *Kim* poses questions about identity and the problems of race, religion, isolation, loneliness, and courage. The Lama, who claims to see through actuality, believes that freedom lies in withdrawal. Kim may be left with the feeling that his more worldly soul is 'out of gear with its surroundings—a cog-wheel unconnected with any machinery', but he also senses, in a more practical and down-to-earth way, that 'Roads were meant to be walked on, houses to be lived in, cattle to be driven, fields to be tilled, and men and women to be talked to'. Despite the kaleidoscopic nature of Kipling's India, Kim at least finds something akin to a focus.

Joseph Conrad (1857–1924) was a different kind of outsider in search of integrity. Conrad, born in Poland the son of a prominent nationalist victim of Russian repression, was naturalized as a British citizen in 1886. If he did not in any truly treasonable sense betray his homeland, and if he rarely refers directly to the Poland he had left, a sense of betrayal nevertheless haunts his work. Conrad's career as an exile had begun and developed as a merchant seaman

and it was as a writer of sea-stories set in the East Indies and the Pacific that he first attracted public attention. It was only with the appearance of his more obviously political fiction in the early years of the twentieth century that the true bent of his art became clear to a broad group of discriminating admirers. There is, however, no clear dividing line between his sea-stories and his land-stories, between tales set in European colonies and those set in an equally troubled and benighted Europe. Conrad's themes merely develop, broaden, and open up in the larger world beyond the confined, masculine world of the ship. In a dense late sea-story, *The Secret Sharer* (1909), the narrator speaks disarmingly of the 'great security of the sea as compared with the unrest of the land' and of a shipboard life which presents 'no disquieting problems'. The irony of the statement becomes obvious as this particular narrative develops, but no reader of Conrad's fiction, alert to his accounts of typhoons and tempests, of marine disasters and shipwrecks, could unprotestingly accept its validity. Nevertheless, there is a sense in which his descriptions of ship life suggest a relatively ordered society which is, by its very nature, prepared to face the challenges of an external and impersonal hostility. The ship also contains a small hierarchical society in which individual decision and responsibility take on the moral force of paramount virtue. In the sea-stories 'disquieting problems', frightful and utterly devastating as they may prove to be, do at least seem to find some kind of resolution, albeit a singularly fragile resolution.

Conrad's tales, concerned with the nature and effects of European imperialism, both economic and colonial, are of a different order to Kipling's. Conrad deals not with the multiple confrontations of India, but with the intrusion and interference of Europeans in the Pacific, in the East Indies, in South America, and in Africa. His colonizers are drawn from a variety of national backgrounds; most are disreputable, incomprehending, intolerant, and exploitative. The title character in *Lord Jim* (1900) may have proved himself a successful colonial agent and have earned himself the title of Tuan ('Lord') from his grateful subjects, but his organizing virtues are seen as countered by the lasting memory of the corruption of his predecessor and by the deception and ruthless European piracy of Gentleman Brown. In Conrad's work colonialism generally emerges as both brutal and brutalizing, alienating native and settler alike. Power is not simply corrupting, it is systematically open to abuse. In *An Outpost of Progress* (1898) 'progress' is an obvious misnomer. A newspaper from 'home' brightly discusses 'Our Colonial Expansion' (though Conrad does not locate the 'our') in terms of 'the rights and duties of civilization, of the sacredness of the civilizing work' and of 'the merits of those who went about bringing light and faith and commerce to the dark places of the earth'. There is little light. The story indicates that the 'darkness' corrupts both internally and externally, an idea which reaches its apogee in 'Heart of Darkness' (1899, 1902), a narrative which gradually unveils, layer by layer, an underlying horror. Imperialism is initially expounded as a variety of brutish idealism: 'The conquest of the earth, which mostly means taking it away from those who have a different complexion

or slightly flatter noses than ourselves, is not a pretty thing when you look at it too much. What redeems it is the idea only. An idea at the back of it; not a sentimental pretence but an idea; and an unselfish belief in the idea.' The tale, as it unwinds, exposes the lack of such an 'idea' and the remoteness of any ideal from the colonial reality. There is no redemption from 'the buying and selling gang which bosses the rotten show'. *Nostromo* (1904) (a title which implies the presence of 'our man') is concerned with silver, insurrection, and external interference in an unstable South American republic. This particularly restless narrative has an uneasy edge to it, suggesting uncertain heroism, a tottering social order, and a corruption which is both imported and exportable.

Conrad's gentlemanly Polish background, and his diverse professional and intellectual interests, made for ambiguities which run through his life and work. Having been born an unwilling subject of the Russian Tsar, and having accepted exile from nationalist politics and his native language, he steadily explores and interrelates themes of guilt and dislocation. In *Under Western Eyes* (1911) he writes directly about the dangerous instabilities of society under the Russian autocracy, but his own antipathy to Russia and to things Russian renders it a somewhat wayward response to an obviously Dostoevskyan precedent. The novel's wondering narrator, an elderly English teacher of languages in Geneva, draws both on his experience of the exiled Russian student Kirylo Sidorovitch Razumov and on Razumov's diary. Razumov (whose name is derived from the Russian term 'son of reason') is a double exile in Switzerland; he has betrayed a revolutionary fellow-student to the Tsar's police, and, as his guilt remains concealed, he is acting out a lie of heroic virtue amongst a group of alienated expatriates. The narrator observes all with foreign, 'western' eyes, eyes which only partially grasp the import of Razumov's pressing need for confession and expiation. *The Secret Agent* (1907), in some ways a far more assured and far more disturbing novel, is also concerned with revolution and revolutionaries, unflatteringly observed in a murky, seedy, untidy London. In some telling ways *The Secret Agent* looks back both to Dickens (and to Dickens's policemen in particular) and to the 'sensation' fiction of the 1860s, but it also conveys a distinctly modern sense of alienation, disquiet, and dislocation. The central character, Verloc, an *agent provocateur* in the employ of a 'foreign' (but almost certainly Russian) embassy, is required by his ambassadorial handler to commit a terrorist act of 'shocking senselessness' and 'gratuitous blasphemy' by blowing up the Greenwich Meridian. Verloc may move in and out of anarchist circles, but even he is dumbfounded by the seeming absurdity of Mr Vladimir's carefully reasoned demand: 'There is learning—science. Any imbecile that has got an income believes in that. He does not know why, but he believes it matters somehow . . . All the damned professors are radicals at heart. Let them know that their great panjandrum has got to go, too, to make room for the Future of the Proletariat . . . Madness alone is truly terrifying, inasmuch as you cannot placate it either by threats, persuasion, or bribes . . . Since bombs are your means of expression, it would

be really telling if one could throw a bomb into pure mathematics. But that is impossible . . . What do you think of having a go at astronomy?' The novel veers simultaneously towards farce and tragedy, and it is expressed in a terse matter-of-fact way which, like Mr Vladimir's colloquialisms, conveys a deep sense of linguistic unease beneath an ostensibly easy and complacent surface. The fragmenting, reiterated phrases '*An impenetrable mystery*' and '*This act of madness and despair*' which troublingly echo through its last pages take on something of the restless force of the self-consciously 'Modernist' texts that the book foreshadows.

'Our Theatre in the 90s': London and Dublin

Oscar Wilde (1854–1900) was a Dubliner distinguished by both his class and his education. He was also the son of a romantically inclined mother who dabbled in sentimental nationalist verse. Wilde himself only ever flirted fancifully with what was, in the 1880s, the particularly vexed and pressing question of Irish Home Rule. Having left Dublin to study at Oxford, he seems thereafter to have aspired to shine in England and, as far as was possible, to be the central figure in a fashionable metropolitan coterie of artists, writers, and wits. He also acted out the parts of a London socialite and of an amusingly provocative social critic. Underlying all Wilde's life and work (he readily acknowledged that there was an intimate relationship between the two) there were, however, both a seriousness and an acute, but amused, awareness that he *was* acting. Wilde's homosexuality, both covertly and overtly expressed in what he wrote during the 1890s, might at first have seemed little more than a gesture to an imported French *décadence*; after the terrible fall marked by his trial and imprisonment (a fall which in some ways he seems to have deliberately courted), the alienating bias of his art became manifest. The contrived style of much of his prose, the excessive elaboration of his poetry, and the aphoristic and paradoxical wit of his plays, are all subversive. They do more than reject mid-Victorian values in life and art in the name of aestheticism; they defiantly provoke a response to difference.

Amid a welter of affectation Wilde's essays suggest that he could, when it suited him, be a perceptive, rather than simply a naughty critic. He always questions institutions, moral imperatives, and social clichés; he rarely suffers fools gladly. From the refinedly outrageous lectures he gave to Colorado miners in the early 1880s (kitted out in velvet knee-breeches) to the calculatedly annoying challenges to conventional literary morality publicly expressed during his first trial, Wilde enjoyed his chosen roles as an aesthete and an iconoclast. His Platonic dialogue *The Decay of Lying* (1889) and the two parts of *The Critic as Artist* (1890) suggest something of the aphoristic dialogue of his later comedies (though his plays would rarely allow an authoritative voice to be so pointedly interrupted, or occasionally qualified, by a convenient stooge).

The inspirer of these dialogues may have been Plato, but the sentiments are Pater's and the lexical virtuosity is characteristically Wilde's. He offers the kind of criticism which delights in snaring butterflies rather than breaking them on wheels. He can be memorably cruel (*Robert Elsmere* is squashed by the observation that it is Arnold's *Literature and Dogma* 'with the literature left out') and an initially flattering suggestion can be cleverly turned on its head ('Meredith is a prose Browning, and so is Browning'). Wilde's central arguments are, however, derived from an awareness that art is far more than a mere imitation of nature. 'A Truth in Art', he remarks in *The Truth of Masks* (1891), 'is that whose contradictory is also true'. In *The Decay of Lying* there is also a recurrent pleasure in insisting that 'the telling of beautiful untrue things, is the proper aim of Art'. Wilde's longest and most provocatively serious essay, *The Soul of Man under Socialism* (1891), does not argue primarily for a new social order or for a redistribution of property, but for a larger and expanding idea of freedom, a liberation from drudgery and the rule of machines. The future achievement of a socialist order offers the prospect of what Wilde candidly sums up elsewhere as 'enjoyment'.

Wilde's delight in provocation, and his exploration of alternative moral perspectives, mark his most important work of fiction, *The Picture of Dorian Gray* (1890). The novel's Preface presents a series of attitudinizing aphorisms about art and literature which end with the bald statement: 'All art is quite useless.' The narrative that follows is a melodramatic, Faustian demonstration of the notion that art and morality are quite divorced. It is, nevertheless, a text riven by internal contradictions and qualifications. Aestheticism is both damned and dangerously upheld; hedonism both indulged and disdained. *Dorian Gray* is a tragedy of sorts with the subtext of a morality play; its self-destructive, darkly sinning central character is at once a desperate suicide and a martyr. Wilde's stage tragedies have less interest and far less flair. His first play, *Vera: or, The Nihilists* (1880), suggests a pretty minimal mastery of theatre technique and an even thinner grasp of the Russian political realities which it attempts to dramatize. His blank-verse drama, *The Duchess of Padua* (written in Paris in 1883), never even reached the stage, while *A Florentine Tragedy*, begun in 1894 when Wilde was at the height of his powers, remained unfinished until 1897. Quite the most powerful and influential of his tragedies, *Salome*, was written in French and translated into English in 1894 by Wilde's lover, Lord Alfred Douglas. The play, which draws on the Bible account of the death of John the Baptist and on Flaubert's story *Herodias*, was not produced in England until 1931 (a victim both of its outrageous treatment of Bible history and of its author's reputation). The striking, overwrought imagery of *Salome*, and its shocking juxtapositions of repulsion and sexual desire, of death and orgasm, were particularly powerfully transformed in the German version which became the libretto of Richard Strauss's revolutionary opera of 1915.

Wilde's comedies of the 1890s have a far surer place in the theatre. *The Importance of Being Earnest* (1895) has indeed been accorded an unchallenged

canonical status which is witnessed by its probably being the most quoted play in the English language after *Hamlet*. *Lady Windermere's Fan: A Play about a Good Woman* (1892) was Wilde's first supreme success on the London stage. It has distinct parallels with its comic successor, *A Woman of No Importance* (1893), in that it centres on the discovery of a dire secret and is at its most animated and conspicuously Wildean in the witty speeches of a dandified male aristocrat. Both plays have a noticeable feminist bias in that they stress the innate strength of their central female characters, a strength which draws on, and finally masters, a certain puritanism. In April 1895, at the time of Wilde's arrest, charged with illegal homosexual practices, both the carefully plotted *An Ideal Husband* (1895) and its successor *The Importance of Being Earnest* were playing to large London audiences. As the scandal developed, first Wilde's name was removed from the hoardings outside the theatres, then the runs of both plays were abruptly terminated. The real achievement of these plays lies neither in their temporary notoriety, nor really in their polished and anti-sentimental surfaces, but in their undercurrents of boredom, disillusion, alienation and, occasionally, real feeling. In both, despite their delightful evocations of flippancy and snobbery, and despite their abrupt shifts in attitudes and judgements, Wilde triumphed in capturing a fluid, intensely funny, mood of 'irresponsibility' which challenges all pretension except that of the artifice of the plays themselves.

Sir Arthur Wing Pinero's career had a steady professionalism about it which the more flamboyant Wilde's lacked. Pinero's dramatic challenges are based on convention rather than on the undercutting of convention. He had relatively little of Wilde's brilliance and none of his personal tragedy. Pinero (1855–1934) knew the theatre and its audiences intimately (he had worked as a professional actor in the 1870s and 1880s), and his admiration for the traditions and potential of his profession is affectionately displayed in his retrospect on the mid-Victorian stage, *Trelawny of the 'Wells'* (1898). *Trelawny* uses the theatre to speak about the theatre and actors to play actors; it both recognizes the artificiality of dramatic representation and affirms that the drama is a central expression of human value. It was, however, in his high-society dramas, most notably *The Second Mrs Tanqueray* (1893), that Pinero most boldly questioned both received conventions of sexual morality and standard theatrical representation of such conventions. Through the character and situation of Paula Tanqueray he also, somewhat tentatively, criticizes the secondary status of women and the assumptions made about women's roles in a male-dominated society. *The Second Mrs Tanqueray* remains a highly effective play despite, rather than because of, the melodramatic shock of Paula's climactic suicide.

Pinero's gestures towards a new sexual frankness suggest the degree to which the English theatre was edging towards the still dangerous openness of Ibsen. George Bernard Shaw, a far more fervent admirer of Ibsen than was Pinero, recorded that the initial London responses to the new drama in the late 1880s and early 1890s were vituperative. The first reviews of *Ghosts* outdid each

other in bandying abusive terms such as 'morbid', 'putrid', 'literary carrion', and 'perilous nonsense'. By the time of the composition of the Preface to the second edition of Shaw's essay *The Quintessence of Ibsenism* in 1912 the dramatic climate had changed. As Shaw (1856–1950) insisted, Ibsen's work had helped stir the awareness in men 'that in killing women's souls they had killed their own' and had consequently 'appealed to the rising energy in the revolt of women against idealism'. Shaw's proposed collaboration on a play with Ibsen's English translator, William Archer, came to nothing, but the spirit of Ibsen, if not the letter, is evident throughout his own long career as a dramatist. It is perhaps most decisive in determining the line of men-mastering, no-nonsense, strong-willed women that he created. Nevertheless, much of Shaw's own instinct for dramatic action derives not from a new Nordic precedent but from the more established, but no less challenging, traditions of musical theatre and the Mozartian and Wagnerian opera in particular. *Man and Superman* (1905) acknowledges its debts to Mozart's *Don Giovanni*; and Wagner's innovatory music-dramas of the *Ring*-cycle were, Shaw explains in the *The Perfect Wagnerite* (1898), readily interpretable as analyses of modern rather than mythological realities. 'The dwarfs, giants and gods are dramatizations of the three main orders of men', he insists, the dwarfs representing 'the instinctive, predatory, lustful, greedy people'; the giants were 'the patient, toiling, stupid, respectful, money-worshipping people'; the gods 'the intellectual, moral, talented people who devise and administer States and Churches'. This Wagnerian scheme, further informed by a reading of Marxian theory and by Shaw's own wilful self-contradictoriness, shaped the criticism of slum-landlordism in his first play, *Widowers' Houses* (1892), but although imported ideas helped him to revolutionize the staid London theatre of the 1890s, Shaw was as much drawing from the native tradition as reacting against it. His dramatic criticism of 1895–8 may demonstrate his repudiation of the styles of acting and production still popular with audiences and impresarios, but it also stresses the extent to which his own bent was for comedy, a comedy which might develop less from the example of his fellow Irishman, Wilde, than from the novels of Dickens. 'To Ibsen', he wrote, 'from beginning to end, every human being is a sacrifice, whilst to Dickens he is a farce'. Though Shaw rarely used the devices of farce, he clearly continued to aspire to a dramatic reflection of Dickens's comic energy, social diversity, political observation, and subversive power to deflate pomposity.

Shaw remains the most inventively unpredictable, if scarcely the most delicate, playwright in the English tradition (it is harder to fit him into a specifically Irish tradition). His plays also reveal a forthright intellectual confidence which is lacking in much of the cautious, agnostic, depressive writing of his non-dramatic London contemporaries. Shaw presupposes that history can be illuminating, that the present can be vigorously reforming, and that the future (whether Darwinistically determined or not) will be exciting rather than exacting. His drama is not so much didactic as instructive; his arguments fuse elements of socialism, science, and philosophy in a way which continues to vex

socialists, scientists, and philosophers; his dialogue can move easily, but disconcertingly, from broad comedy to anguish and declaration and back again to comedy; his protagonists have a vivid, if at times coarse, energy. His settings, like his preoccupations, may be predominantly those of the England of the turn of the twentieth century, but he continues to surprise, to nag, and to provoke at the turn of the twenty-first.

Shaw's early plays, *The Philanderer* and the far more assured *Mrs Warren's Profession* (both written in 1893), fell victims to the Lord Chamberlain's censorship and had to wait until the early 1900s for private productions (*Mrs Warren's Profession* received its licence for *public* performance only in the mid-1920s!). Of such official censorship Shaw complained in 1898 in the Preface to the published version of the two plays, classifying them, together with *Widowers' Houses*, as what he called 'Unpleasant Plays'. *Mrs Warren's Profession* boldly confronts two contemporary women's issues: the future professional careers of educated, would-be independent women, and the oldest profession, female prostitution. The arguments of the play suggest the propriety of both vocations, but its internal tensions derive from the juxtaposition of a liberated daughter, Vivie Warren, and her unashamed, brothel-keeping mother who sees 'the only way for a woman to provide for herself decently is for her to be good to some man that can afford to be good to her'. The play ends not with reconciliation, compromise or empty gestures of feminine solidarity, but with a slammed door and an isolated Vivie happily engrossed in her work. Shaw was justly proud of this 'unpleasant' play, but his discovery that, as he put it, 'the New Drama, in England at least, was a figment of the revolutionary imagination' virtually obliged him to write an alternative series of 'pleasant' plays for the commercial theatre. *Arms and the Man: An Anti-Romantic Comedy* (1894) sets out to subvert ideas of soldierly and masculine heroism in a fanciful Balkan setting; *Candida: A Mystery* (1897) turns Ibsen's *A Doll's House* upside down within the context of a Christian Socialist household; and the cleverly diverting *You Never Can Tell* (1899) allows for the happy, liberating victory of a new generation over the old.

In the opening years of the twentieth century Shaw's 'revolutionary imagination' began to realize its ambition to create a 'New Drama' on the stage of the Royal Court Theatre in London. In the seasons organized between 1904 and 1907 the Royal Court performed *John Bull's Other Island* (one of Shaw's rare direct treatments of Ireland and the Irish), *Man and Superman*, and *Major Barbara*. The 1905 production of *Man and Superman* daringly introduced an on-stage motor car in Act II, but omitted the vast, sprawling post-Nietzschean argument (or 'arias') of Act III (an act, set in an infernal afterlife, which transforms the play's characters into those of *Don Giovanni*). *Major Barbara* (also of 1905), which explores the conflict and the ultimate mutual assent of a strong-willed father and his equally strong-minded daughter, disturbed many of Shaw's socialist friends with its quizzical espousal of the idea of the future reconstruction of society by an energetic, highly-motivated, power-manipulating minority. Manipulation of a

different order figures in *Pygmalion* (1913), ostensibly a withdrawal from politics and philosophy, but in fact a carefully worked study of the developing relationship between a 'creator' and his 'creation' (it possibly shares this 'grotesque' idea with Dickens's *Great Expectations*). Shaw's work written during and after the Great War both extends earlier styles and ideas and indirectly meditates on the cataclysm that the war represented. The wartime *Heartbreak House* (1920), described as a 'Fantasia in the Russian Manner on English Themes', plays in an unmistakably Shavian way with Chekhovian *ennui* and uncertainty. It also develops the theme, laid out earlier in *The Perfect Wagnerite*, of three contending orders of men (and women) finally destroying the 'predatory' burglar and the 'money-worshipping millionaire, Mangan, in a purgative Zeppelin raid. The god-like survivors are last seen in their Valhalla, looking forward to another explosive twilight. The real strengths of the play lie not in its symbolism, but in its powerful and subtle series of encounters between characters in which each in turn has to come to terms with disillusion and some kind of 'heartbreak'. For all its heavy-handedness *Saint Joan* (1923), celebrating (but scarcely in a churchy way) the recent canonization of the French military heroine, Joan of Arc, is an extraordinarily mobile, and versatile play. Its resourceful central character, far from appearing trapped by her visions, or by medieval or modern Catholicism, is presented as a remarkably self-aware, self-asserting woman. Joan is 'saintly' not in the sentimental sense, but by merit of the effect she has on others and in her willingness to give her life for the freedom opened up to her by her convictions.

Shaw's work for the Royal Court seasons of 1904–7 was paralleled by the contemporaneous appearance there of plays by two less strikingly talented English innovators, Harley Granville-Barker (1877–1946) and John Galsworthy (1867–1933). Granville-Barker, who had played Marchbanks in the 1900 production of *Candida*, and who later made a particular reputation for himself as a director of, and critical commentator on, Shakespeare, met with some success with *The Voysey Inheritance* in 1905, but had his play *Waste* (1907) banned by the censorious Lord Chamberlain. Galsworthy's best plays, like his famous sequence of novels, *The Forsyte Saga* (1906–22), are concerned with class-consciousness, and class conflict, a pressing theme in a period persuaded that it might well be on the brink of a social revolution. *The Silver Box* (1906) deals with the opposition of two families, one rich, one poor, their mutual alienation being complicated by the theft of the box of the title. Galsworthy's often stilted later plays tend to have stark, one-word titles expressive of their once urgent themes. *Strife* (1909), *Justice* (1910), and *Loyalties* (1922) are avowedly propagandist, using the bourgeois theatre to confront bourgeois audiences with the need to examine their social consciences. Each had its telling effect in its time, Winston Churchill, then Home Secretary, being so moved with the human suffering represented in *Justice* that he abolished solitary confinement in prisons. Galsworthy's evident compassion for the victims of an uncaring society, alas, often reeks of sentimentality; his political impartiality, admirable

enough in its time perhaps, now seems awkward by the very nature of its uncomfortable fence-sitting.

In the plays of J(ames) M(atthew) Barrie, W(illiam) B(utler) Yeats and John Millington Synge a clear distinction emerges between the first, a Scottish writer resident in London and happy to work for the London stage (where he enjoyed a considerable success), and the two Irish playwrights who were determined to establish an alternative dramatic tradition in Dublin. Although Barrie (1860–1937) never severed his Scots roots, and although he steadily returned to Scottish themes and subjects in his work, he never seems to have aimed at evolving a distinctively 'national' style, let alone a nationalist theatre. His early fiction, notably in the essays and stories collected as *Auld Licht Idylls* (1888) and the novel, *The Little Minister* (1891), are provincial in their setting and vivid enough in their use of Scots speech and in their presentation of uniquely Scottish institutions (though when he dramatized *The Little Minister* for London audiences in 1897, he sacrificed much of the story's restlessness and darkness). Barrie's most interesting stage works exploit shifts in time and yet more radical changes of scene. *The Admirable Crichton* (1902) moves from the Mayfair drawing-room of Lord Loam to a desert island, where the sterling qualities of Loam's butler, Crichton, fully declare themselves. It is a play about class traits rather than class and, as Granville-Barker somewhat cruelly observed, it is eminently the work of 'a Scotsman living in luxurious, snobbish England'. The enduringly popular *Peter Pan* shifts from a Bloomsbury nursery to Never Land and centres on the essentially displaced figure of Peter, locked in his perpetual, escapist, mother-loving, sexless boyhood (the part has traditionally been played by a woman). Barrie's fascination with the power of myth and magic also shapes his *Dear Brutus* (1917) and the extraordinary *Mary Rose* (1920). The first play explores might-have-beens and the determining nature of the self, while the second hauntingly explores the mysterious disappearance and reappearance of its title character on a Hebridean island. It is an indeterminate and elusive play, intermixing Celtic Twilight with a good deal of Scotch Mist.

When in 1897 W. B. Yeats (1865–1939) was planning and determining the nature of an Irish theatrical renaissance, he wrote to the mother/father figure of the Celtic Revival, the Scottish writer 'Fiona Macleod' (the pseudonym of William Sharp (1855–1905)). His ambition, he told Sharp, was to achieve a 'poetical or legendary drama' which would have 'no realistic or elaborate, but only symbolic and decorative setting'. The acting, he added, 'should have an equivalent distance to that of the play from common realities'. Yeats's letter was an appeal to a fellow devotee of Celtic and occult alternatives to the drab materialism of modern English culture. It also marks a turning away from the 'common realities' of Ibsen's work and from Yeats's own earlier theatrical experiment, *The Countess Kathleen* (1892). This episodic, poetic drama, which combined folkloric elements with a nationalism fuelled by ancient and modern memories of injustice, had been chosen to inaugurate the Irish Literary

Theatre in 1899 (the play was extensively revised in 1912). Yeats's original ambition had been to create a national dramatic style which would function on both a popular and a refinedly 'literary' level; as his ideas evolved, he shifted towards a concept of theatre which might draw from Irish traditions, both Celtic and Christian, and which might provide a focus for future national, and nationalist, aspiration. The acquisition of the Abbey Theatre in Dublin in 1904 gave Yeats and his associates (Lady Gregory, George Moore, and J. M. Synge) the base, if not the sympathetic audiences, that they required.

Yeats's sequence of plays concerned with the ancient hero Cuchulain began with *On Baile's Strand* in 1903. It was through this developing sequence that he began to explore the possibilities of an innovatory stage technique. The earlier plays have a certain stylization in which characters reflect abstract ideas and in which psychological 'realism' is broken down into oppositions, shadows, and reflections. A further breakthrough was initiated in 1913 by Ezra Pound's recommendation to him to study the 'distinguished, indirect, symbolic' patterns of Japanese Noh drama. The 'aristocratic' Noh also suggested to Yeats the possibilities of a freer symbolic and ritual drama, one that could harness and redirect the experimental methods already evolved by the innovative stage-designer Edward Gordon Craig (1872–1966). *At the Hawk's Well* (1916) moved away from direct reference to legend, and transfigured Cuchulain into a series of patterned words and symbols, a transfiguration emphasized by light effects and by the use of masks, dance, and the music of a drum, a gong, and a zither. The play's climax is a ritualistic dance. The two short late plays, *Purgatory* and *The Death of Cuchulain* (both 1939), suggest a further experimental move beyond Noh into bare stages, hauntings, and disconcerting shifts of time-perspective.

Synge's more conventionally shaped plays, written in the brief period between 1903 and the writer's death in 1909, create their singular effects through a language which struck its first Dublin audiences as 'strange'. Synge (1871–1909) too sought to minimize conventional action, but his stress fell less on ritual than on distinctive ways of speaking which echo the rhythms of the English of Western Ireland, a language moulded by an underlying Gaelic syntax and by the seepage of provincial Catholicism. Yeats's observation that Synge's English 'blurs definition, clear edges and everything that comes from the will' is particularly apposite to *Riders to the Sea* (1904), a short 'poetic' play which suggests the perennial failure of those who work with and on the sea. Character and action are subsumed in something approaching a choric flow which, through a series of reiterated similes, expresses a submissive fatalism. In *The Tinker's Wedding* (1903–7), *The Well of the Saints* (1905), and his masterpiece, *The Playboy of the Western World* (1907) Synge perfected a distinctively Irish comic form, one far removed from the stock Irishisms of Dion Boucicault and English Victorian convention. If the plays reject the 'joyless and pallid words', which Synge regarded as symptomatic of the modern realism of Zola and Ibsen, they turn instead to the example of the London comedies of the seventeenth century and transform an essentially slick, urban dialogue into

something both more lilting and wild. The remote Mayo coastline, on which *The Playboy of the Western World* is set, serves to confine an isolated rural community, one which is disturbed by the arrival of a fugitive, a supposed parricide. Words, and the illusion words create, dominate the action. Christy Mahon's prestige depends not upon a fulfilled deed but on his recounting of a deed which has failed to succeed; his final departure with his thrice 'resurrected' father is accompanied by a final, triumphant act of myth-making in which he declares that he goes away 'like a gallant captain with his heathen slave'. Nothing could be farther from the world of Oscar Wilde.

The Edwardian Age

To some nostalgic observers the short reign of King Edward VII (1901–1910) seemed like an autumnal idyll, an era of international peace, internal security, and relative prosperity. It was a period ushered in by the conclusion of the South African War in 1902 and by the consolidation of Britain's imperial possessions; to some it seemed to have symbolically closed, not with the end of the King's reign, but with the death of Captain Scott and his party in the Antarctic (having failed to reach the South Pole before the better organized Norwegian, Amundsen) in March 1912 and, a month later, with the terrible loss of life as the 'unsinkable' *Titanic* sank in the North Atlantic. For Thomas Hardy, the latter disaster had a horrible inevitability:

> And as the smart ship grew
> In stature grace and hue,
> In shadowy silent distance grew the Iceberg too.
>
> Alien they seemed to be:
> No mortal eye could see
> The intimate welding of their later history . . .

Scott's failure and death and the sinking of a great British passenger liner on its maiden voyage seemed somehow, darkly, to prepare the nation for what were to be yet greater checks to its pride and confidence during the war of 1914–18. Yet to look back on the Edwardian period as somehow cut off from what was to happen in 1914 is to misread history grossly. King Edward might have been happy with the popularly bestowed title of the 'Peacemaker', and even happier with the pomp and circumstance of State visits and intimate and avuncular chats with his numerous close relatives amongst the ruling dynasties of Europe, but in Britain at least policies were made by Cabinets not kings, and the drift of history was far from being in Britain's control.

Despite the reality of its international prestige and power, Britain's economic and military success was now relative. Its rate of economic growth was stagnating, especially when compared to those of the United States and Germany, and its much vaunted naval supremacy was being actively

challenged by the rapid expansion of the Imperial German Navy. With the launch in 1906 of the *Dreadnought*, a revolutionary new type of 'all-big-gun' battleship, an armaments race began in earnest. If older types of battleship were now obsolete, Britain's aim of automatically outnumbering other naval powers became redundant (Germany laid down its own Dreadnought-type battleship, the *Nassau*, in 1907; the United States, France, and Japan rapidly followed suit). Military history was being 'welded' and those eyes that chose to see could readily recognize that a larger and more disastrous convergence beyond that of a ship and an iceberg was becoming inevitable.

The nation ruled by King Edward was far from consolidated and at peace with itself. The Irish question still festered, and though little political progress was made in the first decade of the twentieth century, when a third Home Rule Bill was introduced in Parliament in 1912 it aroused such determined opposition in Ulster that by 1914 Ireland seemed to be on the verge of civil war. Perhaps the most urgent political question of the Edwardian years was that of women's suffrage. The Women's Social and Political Union was formed in 1903 and between 1906 and 1914 the union undertook increasingly militant action to further its cause. Laws, some of them trivial, were broken, women were arrested, tried, imprisoned, and, most objectionably to public opinion, force-fed when on hunger strike. Though largely 'respectable' and middle class in inspiration, the suffragette movement was the first truly galvanizing force in the lives of a wide spectrum of British women for, as one activist later put it, it provided 'our education in that living identification of the self and with the corporate whole'. If war in 1914 put an end to organized suffrage agitation, it provided, through the significant contribution of women workers to the war-effort, the real catalyst to change. In March 1917 the Prime Minister himself moved the resolution of a bill which would include a limited franchise for women. The Representation of the People Act became law in February 1918 giving the vote to women over the age of 30 (the age qualification was reduced to 21 in 1928). It was, however, evident in all the parliaments of King Edward's reign that the old political status quo was beginning to fragment. In 1900 representatives from all the socialist groupings in Britain had set up the Labour Representation Committee with the professed aim of establishing 'a distinct Labour Group in Parliament'. In the election of 1906 some nineteen candidates supported by the LRC gained parliamentary seats and the new 'Labour Party' emerged, initially providing vital support for the social reforms embarked on by the governing Liberal Party. These reforms included in 1908 the introduction of old-age pensions (of 5 shillings a week for men of over 70) and in 1909 a so-called 'People's Budget' which proposed raising money to pay for both pensions and armaments from higher land taxes and death duties. When the Budget was rejected by the landowning interest represented by the House of Lords, an extended constitutional crisis erupted. The crisis was only resolved by the Liberal election victory in 1910 and by the introduction of the Parliament Act which effectively deprived the Upper

House of all power over money bills and limited its subsequent influence over all other legislation.

The 'golden age' of King Edward's reign was not always an illusion, but it was certainly a reality only for the relatively privileged. In some significant ways the early years of the twentieth century were marked by a triumphant Englishness, or at the very least by the confident swagger and independence of English architecture and English music. It was the age of 'the English house' and of a supremely sophisticated domestic style most readily associated with the name of Edwin Lutyens (though Lutyens was far from alone in perfecting it). It was also the age of the Garden City and of experiments with urban, suburban, and rural planning which have profoundly affected both how the English look at themselves and how foreigners look at the English. These architectural advances, which took Britain to the forefront of international innovation in design, also touched the lives of men and women of all classes. Their innate 'folksiness' was complemented by an eclectic and exultant revival of the baroque style which did not simply change the character of the centre of London but gave a touch of flamboyance to cities the length and breadth of the island. This flamboyance is also noticeable in the central works of the greatest British composer to emerge since the days of Purcell, Edward Elgar. Elgar's two symphonies of 1908 and 1911 have their moments of profound melancholy (the second symphony is dedicated to the memory of Edward VII), but they exude also a confident sense of the fact that English music had at last come of age. Whereas much of the energy of his composer contemporaries had been worthily directed towards the incorporation of national folk-music traditions into an orchestral mainstream, Elgar was, as he knew, a British music-maker with European roots and an emphatically European style. His work has a spaciousness which can variously be seen as a complement both to the restless, grandiloquent energy and to the introspective insecurities of Edwardian Britain.

The Edwardian Novel

In the mainstream English fiction of the early 1900s the religious doubts of the preceding twenty years, and the reaction against Victorian repression and social or familial oppression, are gradually marginalized. There remained a pervasive desire to articulate the unsaid and to give voice to formerly silent social groups—to women above all—and also to the often conventional, generally ignored petty bourgeoisie. The common man (and woman) briefly moved to centre stage before being ushered off again according to the élitist tastes of the Modernists. Although 'Modernist' writing, which has its roots in the early 1900s, looked to formal experiment, to verbal pyrotechnics, to synchronic play, and to the extraordinary in character and expression, more traditional writers, most notably Arnold Bennett and H. G. Wells, developed

existing lines of story-telling and diachronic movement in order to delineate the 'ordinary'. To Arnold Bennett, writing in his disappointingly unadventurous study *The Author's Craft* (1914), the mind of the ideal novelist should be 'permeated and controlled by common sense'. This 'common sense' precluded a break with a received view of character and with the supposed stability of the narrative form. For both Bennett and Wells the acceptance of literary convention brought considerable popular and financial success (Bennett's *The Card* of 1911, for example, sold fifteen thousand copies within three years of publication). It also later entailed the overshadowing of their reputations by the canonical acceptance of the work of those of their younger contemporaries whose self-propagandizing had established 'Modernist' principles as the leading ideas of the new age.

As H. G. Wells generously acknowledged through the narrator of his *The New Machiavelli* (1911), there were hordes of men in 'the modern industrial world' who had 'raised themselves up from the general mass of untrained, uncultured poorish people in a hard industrious selfish struggle', but it was only in Arnold Bennett's novels that he had ever found a picture of them. These self-made, self-admiring small capitalists were now of a different breed from Dickens's Rouncewells and Gaskell's Thorntons, but they were generally despised by writers who rejected their enterprise, their vulgarity, and their belief in the virtue of work and reward. Bennett (1867–1931) is not habitually a fictional delineator of financial success, but he can be a meticulous analyst of the motives behind thrift, solidity, hard work, and public virtue. In this his models were, ironically enough, the great French anti-bourgeois writers Flaubert, Maupassant, and Zola rather than Dickens or Gaskell. His own affection for France and the French tradition gave him, as the Parisian episodes in *The Old Wives' Tale* suggest, a usefully detached perspective on his own birthplace, and the real focus of his fiction, the five drab towns of the Staffordshire Potteries.

Bennett's work oscillates interestingly between the poles of an insistent provinciality and domesticity and a taste for the exotic and the peregrinatory. Many of his novels either describe, or merely contain, a hotel, that temporary centre of a wanderer's life, that home-from-home that is never home. An overwritten early work, *Grand Babylon Hotel* (1902), and a late documentary novel, *Imperial Palace* (1930), indicate something of the continuing force of his fascination, but the sections of *The Old Wives' Tale* dealing with Sophia Scales's Paris *Pension* and with the two sisters' sojourn at Buxton serve to ramify the idea of the hotel as a no man's land of comfort, tidiness, and impersonality. Bennett's finest fiction works through the establishment of contrasts, between situation and aspiration, between enclosure and flight, between endurance and escape, between security and insecurity. The sequence of three novels set in the Five Towns, *Clayhanger* (1910), *Hilda Lessways* (1911), and *These Twain* (1916), are haunted by Darius Clayhanger's memories of the humiliation of the workhouse and by his son Edwin's attempts to escape from the cloying world of

his father's respectable business. Bennett's masterpiece, *The Old Wives' Tale* (1908), traces the divergent fortunes of two sisters from the mid- to the late nineteenth century against the backgrounds of a slowly and unwillingly changing English industrial town and the turbulent Paris of the 1860s and 1870s. The small and provincial are counterbalanced by the metropolitan and the sophisticated, and generations conflict, converge, divide, and die. Bennett intricately relates his characters to the shaping topography, geography, class, and culture that surrounds them, but he always brings them back to acquired habit, the parochiality, and to plod. Similar qualities, exposed in a drab London setting, distinguish *Riceyman Steps* (1923). This post-First World War novel recalls physical and spiritual loss and wounding, but it centres on the limited ambitions and perceptions of a suburban bookseller, his wife, and his barely literate servant. The narrowness of the world Bennett describes is silently contrasted with that of the dusty and unopened books on the shelves of a shop whose contents are finally dispersed. Throughout the book the arbitrariness of commercial value is suggested (even down to a possessive attachment to the shop's dust) but its final pages allow for a questioning of literary value, of words on the page and the act of reading them. Without being a classic 'Modernist' text *Riceyman Steps* unobtrusively suggests many of the central experimental ideas of contemporary Modernism.

The work of H(erbert) G(eorge) Wells (1866–1946) has many parallels with that of the shop-keeping world of Bennett, but it has a far more evident political edge and a sometimes perversely 'scientific' programme. Wells is one of the few English writers to be well read in modern science and in the scientific method; he was also ambiguously persuaded both of the advantages of a socialistically and scientifically planned future and of the inherently anti-humanist bent of certain aspects of scientific progress. His science-fiction novels, *The Time Machine* (1895), *The Island of Dr Moreau* (1896), and *The War of the Worlds* (1898), still function as alarmist prophecies a century after their first publication. *The Island of Dr Moreau* is a chilling, almost Swiftian, fable of vivisection and genetic engineering. Moreau, a tyrannical exile on a Pacific island, is also a post-Darwinist Frankenstein, torturing and metamorphizing animals in his 'House of Pain' only to be destroyed as his horrid creations revert to their brutal types.

Wells's English social fiction contrasts starkly with such fantasies though even here science and men of science have leading roles. In *Tono Bungay* (1909) that role is divided between two Ponderevos: the small-town apothecary uncle who makes a fortune out of a spurious wonder-tonic, and the experimental nephew who re-establishes the lost family fortune by building battleships. Wells's socialism, a wayward, belligerent, and questioning socialism, also runs through his most demanding stories. In *Tono Bungay* the narrator moves between three Englands: the defunct, privileged world of the country house, the narrow perspectives of the draper's shop, and the heady exhilaration of market capitalism and invention. All three are found wanting, but he remains

unpersuaded by an English brand of socialism which 'has always been a little bit too human, too set about with personalities and foolishness'. There is an individualism about Wells's arguments and the characters who mouth them which matches that of his sometime friend and Fabian socialist colleague, Shaw. In *Kipps: The Story of a Simple Soul* (1905) the critique of capital is more emphatic, and the socialist characters more sympathetic and influential, but the nation and the society observed in the book are seen as ruled by Stupidity 'like the leaden goddess of the Dunciad, like some fat, proud flunkey, like pride, like indolence, like all that is darkening and heavy and obstructive in life'. It is a stupidity which, it seems, no ideals can pierce. Even in the generally optimistic *The History of Mr Polly* (1910) the muddling nature of English society can be avoided only when the narrative endorses a fantasy of escape into a rural idyll. Wells's last major novel, before he retreated into writing the popular histories and digests of science with which he entertained his readers for thirty years, is *The New Machiavelli* of 1911. It is in part a personal testament, written from the point of view of a pragmatic Member of Parliament, as well as a perceptive account of parliamentary life in the early years of the twentieth century. Like *Ann Veronica* (1909) the book is forthright in its discussion of marriage and of women's rights, describing, very much from a male perspective, a 'gradual discovery of sex as a thing collectively portentous that I have to mingle with my statecraft if my picture is to be true'. It also contains sops for the supporters of women's suffrage, forcibly stating a case for the ceasing of 'this coddling and browbeating of women' and for the 'free and fearless' participation of women 'in the collective purpose of mankind'.

May Sinclair (1863–1946) became an active fighter for women's suffrage in 1908 and her fiction provided a useful vehicle for the expression of contemporary women's private and public aspirations. As an early reader of the theories of Sigmund Freud and his disciples, and as an admirer of what she recognized as the 'stream of consciousness' technique employed by Dorothy Richardson in her long sequence of novels *Pilgrimage*, Sinclair also investigated the new possibilities of women's 'psychological' fiction. *The Three Sisters* (1914) loosely parallels the story of the Brontë sisters but moves the period forward to the late nineteenth century and allows for amatory and marital complexities beyond that of a factual biography. Escape from the limiting life of a country parsonage also becomes a major thematic idea. A far more detailed study of individual repression and expression is provided in *Mary Olivier: A Life* (1919), a novel which traces the expanding consciousness of a middle-class girl, the youngest child in a family of boys. The opening of the story, which introduces the sharp sensory perceptions of a baby, bears a striking similarity to the technique used by Joyce in *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man* (1914–15). *Mary Olivier* deals subtly with the parent–child relationship, and especially with a daughter's strained love for her clinging, intellectually limited mother. It also movingly describes the slowly burgeoning career and reputation of a woman writer in literary London in the early years of the century.

E(dward) M(organ) Forster's six published novels are almost exclusively concerned with Edwardian middle-class perceptions and imperceptions. Forster (1879–1970), later a close associate of the so-called 'Bloomsbury Group', intermixes a sharp, observant, and sometimes bitter social comedy with didactic narrative insistence on the virtues of tolerance and human decency. His concern with the awakening of repressed sexuality, which was looked at from a heterosexual viewpoint in his first three novels—*Where Angels Fear to Tread* (1905), *The Longest Journey* (1907), and *A Room with a View* (1908)—was also treated in Forster's homosexual novel, *Maurice* (finished in 1914, but, on its author's insistence, published only after his death in 1971). *A Room with a View* contains some particularly trenchant observation of the smugness of English visitors to Florence before moving its major characters and their preoccupations back to the comfortable pretentiousness of Edwardian Surrey. It is essentially a love-story, but one shaped around reiterated contrasts between, on the one hand, English emotional repression and, on the other, the freedom of the spirit, suggested by the music of Beethoven, and the freedoms allowed to the passions by the far more 'civilized' Italians. Forster's relatively simple moral equations are explored with rather less subtlety in *Maurice*, a novel inspired, he explains in a 'Terminal Note' added to the manuscript in 1960, by his visits to the libertarian philosopher, Edward Carpenter (1844–1929), a 'Whitmannic poet whose nobility exceeded his strength'. *Maurice* is less a direct reflection of Carpenter's ideas than a nostalgic evocation of undergraduate friendship which steadily degenerates into fantasy when the hero's quest is satisfied by the nocturnal visitation of a young gamekeeper who appears through a fortuitously open window.

In its modest way *Maurice* offers a brave questioning of contemporary taboos (though they were no longer exactly taboos by the time of its publication). Its questioning of class-prejudices, class-assumptions, and local snobberies is, however, more half-hearted. This is a problem which also subtly besets *Howards End* (1910). Forster makes great, and often implied, narrative play with the novel's terse epigraph ('Only connect . . .'), forming and unforming a series of connections between characters and between what he sees as antipathetic cultures of business and the intellect. *Howards End* is carefully located in a society which lacks both confidence and spiritual idealism, but its narrative gestures often seem precariously agnostic rather than constructively connected (it contains a particularly awkward section which analyses Beethoven's Fifth Symphony in terms of dancing gnomes).

Forster's most ambitious and persuasive novel, *A Passage to India*, was published in 1924 following a period in which he had acted as secretary and companion to the Maharaja of Dewas Senior. The novel offers a distinctly less generous and complacent picture of the Raj and its British servants than had Kipling. The British form an élite, cut off by their ill-founded sense of racial, social, and cultural superiority from the multiple significance of the native civilizations of India, while maintaining the class-distinctions and petty

snobberies of 'home'. Throughout the story connections fail, doomed by race, class, colonialism, and religion. At the core of the novel Forster leaves a hiatus, a considered narrative gap in which an assault either happens, or doesn't happen, or is enacted by someone other than the man who is later accused of it. This hiatus takes on the force of a disjuncture which in turn enhances other disjunctures, silences, and assaults on a reader's consciousness. Forster may at times appear to patronize his British and his Indian characters alike, and he may place too great a stress on humanism which is aspired to rather than realized, but *A Passage to India* contains a fluency of references and a far deeper questioning of the human muddle he saw around him than any other of his novels.

G(ilbert) K(eith) Chesterton's two 'Edwardian' novels, *The Napoleon of Notting Hill* (1904) and *The Man Who was Thursday: A Nightmare* (1908), have a narrative playfulness about them which is generally missing from the often glum political fiction of the period. Both are fantasies which lack substantial 'realist' characters and character psychologies. The first is set in the future, the second in an anarchic present. Both propose, withdraw, advocate, and undermine social panaceas and easy political formulae. In *The Napoleon of Notting Hill* Chesterton's anti-centralist, anti-authoritarian, anti-theoretical prejudices serve to shape a utopian romance about an independent London ruled from an undistinguished inner suburb. Chesterton (1874–1936) produces a far more taxing and paradoxical fable in *The Man Who Was Thursday*. It is a story of London artists and London anarchists and it is cleverly made up of receding layers of deception and artifice; characters and roles prove to be as malleable as are the barriers between the diverse locations through which the plot moves (from leafy suburbia to secret hideaway to Leicester Square). The final solution to the mystery posed by the narrative appears to lie in a coalescence of the Christian God with rampant human individualism. It is a disturbing and eccentric book, both drawing on tradition and traditionally told, but moving towards the fragmentation and narrative game-playing of those Modernists amongst whom the down-to-English-earth Chesterton would have found himself in odd company. His own literary tastes, as his sometimes perceptive, if over-neat and aphoristic, criticism shows, were finally rooted in mid-Victorian England (he produced a particularly good study of Dickens in 1906). His social prejudices, evident in his jolly later verse and his often presumptuous essays, were based on a nostalgic, Cobbett-like, vision of a lost, happy, Catholic England of beef, frothy beer, and good cheer.

The Poetry

To many contemporaries, the poetry of the 1880s and 1890s was dominated by the later work of those poets whose reputations had been made some thirty or forty years earlier. The prolific, if sometimes impenetrable, later verse of

Browning and Tennyson continued to flow until their respective deaths in 1889 and 1892. On Tennyson's death, Queen Victoria, seeking advice on whom to appoint as the new Poet Laureate, was informed that Swinburne was the best living poet in her dominions (an opinion generally shared by the literary Establishment). Given Swinburne's notoriety, his appointment proved impossible to contemplate, though, as Oscar Wilde noted in *The Idler*: 'Mr Swinburne is already the Poet Laureate. The fact that his appointment to this high post has not been degraded by official confirmation renders his position all the more unassailable.' The job went to probably the worst candidate, the Tory rhymster Alfred Austin (1835–1913), a poet whose tenure of the laureateship was perhaps the dimmest and most risible in history.

The verse of the younger generation of poets was of a distinctly diverse kind, ranging from the often raucous balladry of Kipling to the effete, adjectival experiments of French-inspired decadents and the poised lyricism of the 'Rhymers' Club. Kipling's verse enjoyed a considerable popular success, particularly so as it appeared to give a voice to the otherwise inarticulate; to those supposed to be lacking in 'poetry' (that is, to ordinary soldiers and to the figures whom Chesterton later typed as 'the man on the Clapham omnibus'). Kipling used the role of a citizen-narrator in order to express what he took to be the appropriate middle-brow sentiments of the hour on such subjects as the old Queen's Jubilee ('Recessional'), the Empire ('The Ballad of East and West'), the trusty imperial subject ('Gunga Din'), or uppity women ('The Female of the Species' and 'The Ladies'). Wilde's verse, limited in scope and quality as it is, is also of an utterly different order, precise, refined, impressionistic, indeterminate. Lyrics such as 'Les Ballons' (1887) or 'Symphony in Yellow' (1889) suggest a poet wearing his sensibility, as well as his heart, upon his velvet sleeve and parading the notion that all beauty, common and uncommon, leaves him swooning. A completely different Wilde, one now vulnerable and protesting, emerges in *The Ballad of Reading Gaol* (1898).

> With slouch and swing around the ring
> We trod the Fools' Parade!
> We did not care: we knew we were
> The Devil's Own Brigade:
> And shaven head and feet of lead
> Make a merry masquerade.
>
> We tore the tarry rope to shreds
> With blunt and bleeding nails;
> We rubbed the doors, and scrubbed the floors,
> And cleaned the shining rails;
> And, rank by rank, we soaped the plank,
> And clattered with the pails.

If Wilde's term of imprisonment with hard labour nearly broke his spirit, it served at least to release from him a stark bluntness of expression.

A(lfred) E(dward) Housman (1859–1936) published only two volumes of verse in his lifetime (though a further 94 poems were published posthumously). Most of Housman's poetry is closely related to the form and the often tragic or elegiac mood of the traditional ballad. Housman himself maintained that he was also working under the influence of Shakespeare and of the *Volkslied* poetry of Heinrich Heine. The 63 poems assembled as the loose sequence entitled *A Shropshire Lad* (1896) show a scrupulous avoidance of richness and archness, though no attempt is made to represent them as the confessions of a rustic accustomed to his regional idiom. The poems are various in subject, setting, and speaker but they are linked by repeated themes (notably scenes of country wooing and events associated with soldiering) and by glancing references to Shropshire place-names and landscapes. Throughout Housman's work there is also a poignant sense of loss and lost illusions, the mood most famously caught in lyric 40 of *A Shropshire Lad*:

> Into my heart an air that kills
> From yon far country blows:
> What are those blue remembered hills,
> What spires, what farms are those?
>
> That is the land of lost content,
> I see it shining plain,
> The happy highways where I went
> And cannot come again.

The mood is not simply nostalgic. Love-making is interrupted by suicide, by murder, by death in battle, even by public execution (which is dwelt on in some detail). The generally heterosexual reference is shot through with a sublimated, but none the less fatalistic, homoeroticism which appears to render all emotional or sexual commitment unfulfilled, elusive, or ambiguous. In the extraordinary lyric 47 a male lover, 'the carpenter's son', dies on the gallows, he says, 'for love'. But this is no Christ. He dies futilely, advising other 'lads' and 'comrades' to adopt a 'shrewdness' in love. In lyric 42 a tempting, alluring 'merry guide', the embodiment of the pagan Hermes, leads the narrator onward 'with lips that brim with laughter', through a changing landscape. But he never responds. Housman, a Professor of Classics at London University, rusticizes and Anglicizes both his subjects and his sources, allotting a bucolic English voice to the Roman poet Terence (a voice 'friending' us 'in a dark and cloudy day') and translating Horace's celebrated *Diffugere nives* ('the snows are fled away') with a sad closing reference to the 'love of comrades'.

Charlotte Mew (1869–1928) was also troubled by images of unfulfilment, death, and burial. Mew's allusive short stories, the first of which appeared in 1894 in one of the celebrated 1890s anthologies, *The Yellow Book*, deal with defeat and with unrequited, but not always sexual, love. Her two volumes of verse which appeared in 1916 and 1929 suggest a new variety of perception and expression, much of it self-consciously impressionistic. As in the short stories,

Mew's narrators are both male and female. The striking title poem of the first volume, *The Farmer's Bride*, has a rustic male speaker who incomprehendingly describes the failure of his marriage and the withdrawal of his bride into herself (the idea of mental aberration recurs in the poems 'Ken' and 'On the Asylum Road'). In other poems religion is both suspected and embraced, the need for a response to God in 'Madeleine in Church' being conditioned by a passionate exaltation of the transitory beauty of the world and of worldly things. The influence of Emily Brontë (on whose verse Mew published an essay in 1904), and of Christina Rossetti, is subtly transmuted both in her overtly religious lyrics and in those poems which suggest an elusive love or amatory betrayal.

The one major writer of an older generation whose poetry seemed to chart quite new territory in the opening years of the twentieth century was Thomas Hardy. Having ostensibly abandoned fiction after the public furore over *Jude the Obscure*, Hardy gave the impression of embarking on a new career as a prolific poet (his first volume appeared in 1898; his last in the year before his death). It would seem likely, however, that many of the poems in his first volume had been written much earlier. The agnosticism which so marks his novels takes on a new shaping power in the poetry, but the awkwardness, the strain, the conflicting perceptions and arguments, and the plethora of information in the late fiction are all controlled and disciplined within the succinct and varied verse forms that Hardy evolved. In the poem with which he nervously greeted the new century, 'The Darkling Thrush', landscape has its old impersonality, but it is shot through with suggestive hints of a strange anthropomorphism. 'Every spirit upon earth' seems to share a lack of fervour with the speaker. It is the lustily singing thrush that stirs spirits amid the 'growing gloom':

> So little cause for carolings
> Of such ecstatic sound
> Was written on terrestrial things
> Afar or nigh around,
> That I could think there trembled through
> His happy good-night air
> Some blessed Hope, whereof he knew
> And I was unaware.

The 'I' is left unaware, no longer dictating, undermining, or reinforcing impressions or interpretations. Hardy's poetry moves away from what in the fiction had seemed the pressing need to be literal or to offer explanation.

Much of the poetry in the early volumes recalls images, scenes, or incidents from a personal past and an immediate history which touches other histories, geographic, geological, architectural, and demographic. Love recalled is love lost, sometimes deliberately, sometimes perversely, and perception is frequently accompanied by a process of disillusion. Lovers meet ecstatically and part in misunderstanding or are sundered by incomprehending time. A

great deal of critical and biographical attention has been focused on the elegiac poems of the period 1912–13 published in *Satires of Circumstance, Lyrics and Reveries* (1914). These poems in part celebrate, and in part expiate, the memory of the poet's first wife, Emma. Despite the volume's title (which embraces some earlier poems also published in it) the poetry of this period tends to reject the 'satiric' mode which Hardy himself acknowledged to be 'harsh'. Just as he returned physically to Cornwall to revisit spots where he had courted Emma forty years earlier, so there is a remaking of experience which is now conditioned by the awareness that so much has changed. The recalling voice, as in 'At Castle Boterel', is that of an older man but incidentals too, like the weather or the foliage, indicate the differences which divide then from now. In 'Under the Waterfall' (a poem shaped on the page to resemble the cascade it describes) the act of plunging an arm into cold water in a porcelain wash-basin brings back the memory of lovers picnicking beside a waterfall and losing a wineglass in the water:

> . . . There the glass still is.
> And, as said, if I thrust my arm below
> Cold water in basin or bowl, a throe
> From the past awakens a sense of that time . . .
>
> By night, by day, when it shines or lours,
> There lies intact that chalice of ours,
> And its presence adds to the rhyme of love
> Persistently sung by the fall above.
> No lip has touched it since his and mine
> In turns therefrom sipped lovers' wine.

The woman speaker's earlier use of the painful word 'throe' suggests that though the glass may have remained intact under the waterfall, the pledges once made in it have since been shattered. The water may sing continuously of a lost day of love, but the poem appears to recall the transience of love itself.

Hardy's huge and impressive expanse of lyric verse (all told, he wrote nearly a thousand poems) reveals an extraordinary metrical inventiveness and a technical mastery of a variety of forms. The style is plain, although there is a clear delight in the occasional deployment of lexical and phrasal obsolescence and in a play with localized 'Wessex' words which can serve to jolt a reader with the unexpected. An 'easy' reading can also be interrupted, challenged, or transformed by a word or idea which modifies what has been assumed or taken for granted. Commonplace meditations on mutability or time can be radically ramified by a fresh suggestion at mid-point in the poetic structure or by a closing stanza by means of which new connections are made or unmade. In 'The Phantom Horsewoman', for example, a reader is obliged to reconsider and reinterpret the meanings of 'phantom', of 'he' and 'she' and 'they' as the poem's perspectives shift. A later poem, 'During Wind and Rain', contrasts moments of fulfilment with the steady obliterations of human memory. Each

human achievement, however simple or loving, is wrecked like summer blooms torn by an autumnal storm, and the echoed refrain which interrupts each stanza ('ah, no; the years O!') seems to express a wider, impersonal regret. At the climactic point the two visions coincide in a glimpse of a tombstone in the excoriating rain: 'Ah no; the years, the years; |Down their carved names the rain-drop ploughs.' Time is allowed one of his many triumphs.

The poetry of W. B. Yeats is rooted in a nineteenth-century tradition very different to Hardy's. Where Hardy frequently dwells on the cool disillusion of an informed agnostic and on the lost, but uncertain rapture of an elderly lover, Yeats attempts to assert the power of a mystical vision and an often passionate sexuality and sensuality. Hardy is a sceptical delineator of incident; Yeats a seeker of redefinitions, verbal as much as intellectual. Hardy attempts to suggest philosophical detachment in his poetry; Yeats presses for commitment, political and spiritual. Where Hardy is austere, Yeats implodes conflicting traditions and indicates, through a complex range of symbols, the outlines of new systems of thought and perception. Yeats, who refers to himself in 'Coole Park and Ballylee, 1931' as one of 'the last romantics' who had chosen 'for theme | Traditional sanctity and loveliness', continued to find a fresh vitality and variety in the potential explored by earlier generations of Romantics, projecting the mysticism of Blake and the symbolism of Rossetti into a newly suggestive poetry.

'I have desired', Yeats wrote in his essay *The Celtic Twilight* (1893), 'like every artist, to create a little world out of the beautiful, pleasant and significant things of this marred and clumsy world.' His early poetry, published in the volumes of 1889, 1893, and 1899, mixes post-Paterian aestheticism with a Celticism which is both nationalistic and escapist. As in the contemporary French culture of Maeterlinck and Debussy, Celtic legend offered an alternative way of seeing and representing the world, a non-classical, anti-urban, anti-mechanical, and anti-material intermixture of the physical and the metaphysical and of the sensual and the spiritual. Yeats's verse of the 1890s exploits a languorous repetition, learned from Tennyson and Swinburne, and calls for withdrawals into ideal landscapes, like that of Innisfree, or for driving with Fergus into 'the deep wood's shade'. The self-evident Irishness of these poems emerged from a context which, if thoroughly sympathetic to Celtic imaginings, was not itself exclusively Irish. The Rhymers' Club, whose members and meetings Yeats recalls in his *The Trembling of the Veil* (1922, incorporated in 1926 into *Autobiographies*), consisted of a loose gathering of friends with common interests and literary ambitions. To the honoured memory of Lionel Johnson (1867–1902) Yeats returned with affection throughout his own writing career. Johnson, a poet rhetorically inclined to explore Irish roots and the significance of his conversion to Roman Catholicism, can be both witty and delicate. Other members of the Club included Ernest Dowson (1867–1900) (the author of the haunting, non-committal 'Non sum qualis eram bonae sub regno Cynarae'), the gifted Scottish ballad poet John Davidson (1857–1909), and Arthur Symons

(1865–1945). All are minor lyric poets whose significance is related to the particular *fin-de-siècle* context in which they worked rather than to English literature as a whole. The once influential Catholic apologist, Francis Thompson (1859–1907), the author of the ornate Swinburnian metaphorical poem, *The Hound of Heaven* (1893), made one appearance at the Club but never formally joined it. As Yeats later wrote: 'We read our poems to one another and talked criticism and drank a little wine. I sometimes say when I speak of the club, "We had such-and-such ideas, such-and-such a quarrel with the great Victorians, we set before us such-and-such aims", as though we had many philosophical ideas. I say this because I am ashamed to admit that I had these ideas and that whenever I began to talk of them a gloomy silence fell upon the room.' If Yeats here casts himself in the role of prime mover and bardic spokesman of a group of tavern wits, it is perhaps because he was aware, when he wrote the passage in 1922, that he was the survivor of an otherwise doomed generation and the one member whose art and ideas had developed and flourished.

The lullabies and the minstrelsy of faerie diminish in importance in the verse Yeats wrote after 1900. A suggestive poetry of vaguely perceived alternative visions gives way to a deeper speculation about love and the nature of the universe and to a political intensity inspired by an Ireland which had emerged from the haze of myth. The Ossianic is supplanted by the hermetic. Yeats always professed to see the world as in a state of perpetual flux. He also suggested that poets should share that flux by recognizing that poetic language was shaped and adapted by the shifting structures of culture and society. His translation of Jonathan Swift's Latin epitaph, worked into the poem of that name of 1933, dares the 'word-besotted traveller' to imitate a writer 'lacerated' by 'savage indignation'. The dare was taken up in the volumes entitled *The Wild Swans at Coole* (1919), *Michael Robartes and the Dancer* (1921), *The Tower* (1928), and *The Winding Stair and other Poems* (1933), volumes that contain poems which range in subject-matter from revolutionary politics to personal regret, from an evocation of an ideal past to prophecy, from private agonizing over the process of ageing to a celebration of cultural history. Yeats's progress as a poet can be compared to that of a man speaking in a succession of voices; his styles redefine his preoccupations and his images and they variously express the system of art and symbols that he announced in his highly speculative essay *A Vision* (1926, 1937).

Yeats opens the poem 'Vacillation', written in 1932, with the words 'Between extremities | Man runs his course'. The poem presents an argument framed by contraries and complements, dialogues between soul and heart and evocations of the active, public domain of the soldier and the withdrawal of the meditating saint. Although he rejected much of the new philosophy of the centuries which his life spanned, the agnostic materialism of the nineteenth as much as the psychology, the physics, and the revolutionism of the twentieth, his later poetry proclaims the independence of the artist who creates and expounds a new

spirituality. References to mythology and to Christianity, to Homer and Dante, to Rome, Byzantium, or the quattrocento stand as points of reference within a new unity of vision which projects emblems of perfection and of the perfectibility of the soul. His visions are not always serene. In the tense sonnet, 'Leda and the Swan', for example—the rape of Leda by a superb, mastering bird—he transfers the sense of violation from the half-willing woman to the long-term consequences of the rape: the future ruin of Troy and the murder of Agamemnon:

> A sudden blow: the great wings beating still
> Above the staggering girl, her thighs caressed
> By the dark webs, her nape caught in his bill,
> He holds her helpless breast upon his breast.
>
> How can those terrified vague fingers push
> The feathered glory from her loosening thighs?
> And how can body, laid in that white rush,
> But feel the strange heart beating where it lies?
>
> A shudder in the loins engenders there
> The broken wall, the burning roof and tower
> And Agamemnon dead.
> Being so caught up,
> So mastered by the brute blood of the air,
> Did she put on his knowledge with his power
> Before the indifferent beak could let her drop?

Sexist and phallocentric the poem may be, but for Yeats the enactment of the joining of the human and the divine transforms the intimate into the public, the woman's violation into a wider human tragedy. Other poems written in the 1920s share this divided vision of destiny and history. 'The Second Coming' suggests that a fearful revelation is at hand ('Things fall apart; the centre cannot hold; | Mere anarchy is loosed upon the world, | The blood-dimmed tide is loosed, and everywhere | The ceremony of innocence is drowned'). Alternatively the soul-making explored in 'The Tower' and 'Sailing to Byzantium' looks back either to an idealized Ireland or to the hieratic stillness of an iconic culture:

> O sages standing in God's holy fire
> As in the gold mosaic of a wall,
> Come from the holy fire, perne in a gyre,
> And be the singing-masters of my soul.
> Consume my heart away; sick with desire
> And fastened to a dying animal
> It knows not what it is; and gather me
> Into the artifice of eternity.

Where Yeats had begun his career assuming masks, he ended it fashioning masks for actors and dwelling on an art that had the potential to open up to eternity.

As an Irishman anxious to forge new loyalties, Yeats was famously detached from the British cause and British sympathies during the First World War. Unlike many of his class and religion in Ireland, he felt no moral obligation to be a combatant, nor was that obligation ever enforced by law (though conscription into the armed forces was introduced in Britain in January 1916, Ireland was exempted). When asked to write a war poem he later responded in a verse declaration that it was better 'in times like these | A poet's mouth be silent'. In 'An Irish Airman Foresees His Death' he produced a particularly impressive war poem, if one that expresses an indifference to other men's causes while still indulging in an exhilaration for 'this tumult in the clouds'. From the spring of 1916 he was properly preoccupied with the consequences of the 'terrible beauty' born of the Easter Rising in Dublin and not with the interminable slaughter on the Somme or at the Ypres Salient.

In editing *The Oxford Book of Modern Verse* in 1934 Yeats notoriously passed over the work of Wilfred Owen. For English poets, especially those younger than Yeats, the European War which began in the August of 1914 at first seemed an event to be spiritedly embraced. It could be greeted with youthful bravado and imperial confidence and celebrated with passionate pleas for the defence of the geographical entity of Britain in general and of a verdant England in particular. It is in many ways curious that a continuing avoidance of urban subject-matter in the English poetry of the opening years of the twentieth century projected a nostalgic view of an idealized landscape with the church clock stuck at ten to three. To the young men who fought in the trenches of the Western Front—poets, poetry readers, and those untouched by poetry alike—the war offered a ready enough excuse for the marginalization of domestic political problems. Men of the kidney of the pacifist, aristocratic, logician Bertrand Russell (1872–1970) were rare enough. Russell, who saw through self-justifying British 'War aims' as readily as he later saw through the specious intellectual justifications of Soviet Russia, was prepared to suffer for his pacifist convictions. The general patriotic enthusiasm of 1914 took time to waver; even longer to flounder. Feeling against the circumstances of the war, and a revulsion at its extraordinary waste, developed relatively late amongst a significant percentage of poets on active service. It was this singularly disillusioned verse which, despite Yeats's indifference, ultimately had a profound impact on the attitudes of later generations.

Edward Thomas, who was born in London in 1878, who enlisted in the Artists' Rifles in July 1915, and who was killed by a stray shell at the battle of Arras in April 1917, was a poet only for the last two and a half years of his life. The span of his work does, however, suggest a passionate feeling for the landscapes of southern England and an acute observation of the suffering occasioned by war, both at home and on the battlefield. It was as a result of conversations with the American poet Robert Frost that Thomas began to convert prose notes into poetry in 1914. Until that period he had subsisted as a critic for London journals and as a prose writer on nature in the tradition of the

anti-London ruralist Richard Jefferies (1848–1887) (of whom Thomas published a biography in 1909). Thomas's journalism and prose essays have generally received less critical attention than his poetry. His editions of George Herbert (1908) and his appreciation of the newly published work of Thomas Traherne in *The South Country* (1909) suggest something of the formative influences on the plain diction, style, and rhythm of both his prose and his poetry. *The South Country* also testifies to a special sensitivity to topography and to the history which is implicit in a humanized landscape. 'In some places', he wrote, 'history has wrought like an earthquake, in others like an ant or mole; everywhere, permanently; so that if we but knew or cared, every swelling of the grass, every wavering line of hedge or path or road were an inscription, brief as an epitaph, in many languages and characters.' This sense of multiplicity, and of an ingrained past which must be read in nature, relates humankind to the phenomena of nature and indicates the extent to which Thomas's prose feeds into his belated outpourings of verse.

The landscapes of Thomas's poetry are often haunted by the ghosts of past occupants and users (both animal and human) and they contain the evidence of exploitation, work, and decay. In 'A Tale' (of which there exist two versions) there is an ambiguous contrast between the growing blue periwinkles and the broken fragments of blue china plates amid the ruins of a cottage. In one of the poems called 'Digging', two clay pipes, one a relic of a soldier of the time of Marlborough, the other the narrator's own, are 'let down . . . into the earth' as if their clay were that of human bodies joined in a common burial. Elsewhere time marks more roughly. In 'Blenheim Oranges' (the name of a variety of apple), an old house 'with grass growing instead | Of the footsteps of life' and a modern war which turns 'young men to dung' are yoked together with an awareness of loss which is both private and public, both present and historic. The war poem known by its first line, 'As the Team's Head-Brass', observes a ploughman and his team at work. Sporadic conversation develops between the ploughman and the narrator concerning the war and the consequent dearth of rural labour, but readers are made aware of other disjunctions. Conversation is interrupted each time the ploughman returns to his furrow and the war, somewhere over a horizon, suggests other, more drastic, breakings and severances:

> '. . . Have many gone
> From here?' 'Yes.' 'Many lost?' 'Yes, a good few.
> Only two teams work on the farm this year.
> One of my mates is dead. The second day
> In France they killed him. It was back in March,
> The very night of the blizzard, too. Now if
> He had stayed here we should have moved the tree.'
> 'And I should not have sat here. Everything
> Would have been different. For it would have been
> Another world.' 'Ay, and a better, though

If we could see all all might seem good.' Then
The lovers came out of the wood again:
The horses started and for the last time
I watched the clods crumble and topple over
After the ploughshare and the stumbling team.

Thomas's sense of the encroachments of war in this poem is related to his evocations elsewhere of a transient and disappearing England, an England through which the poet passes, as in his much anthologized 'Adlestrop', merely as a traveller. The poems which deal directly with the Western Front treat death as the ultimate disrupter and destroyer of the already often violent co-operation of man and nature. A poem such as 'A Private' almost wryly notes the strangely abrupt distinction between a former ploughman, now lying dead in France, and his old habit of sleeping under English bushes when drunk. A very different address to death is suggested by 'Lights Out' where the military command of the title is translated into a journey through a dark wood 'where all must lose | Their way, however straight | Or winding'. The unnatural silence of the wood imposes a sense of loss, a loss not simply of direction but ultimately of the violated self.

Edward Thomas's poetry has only gradually won a wide audience for itself (the definitive edition of his verse appeared only in 1978); that of Rupert Brooke (1887–1915) had an immediate popular impact. It was an impact reinforced by Brooke's untimely death in the Mediterranean and by the iconic status accorded to his androgynous physical beauty. For some years after his death, Brooke's was perhaps the most reproduced image of a poet since Byron's. His pre-war poetry, most notably the cleverly urbane 'The Old Vicarage, Grantchester' of 1912, has a jesting and often colloquial nostalgia about it. The verse published posthumously in *1914 and Other Poems* (1915) including the five youthfully enthusiastic 'war sonnets' such as 'Peace', which thanks God for having 'matched us with His hour | And caught our youth, and wakened us from sleeping', and the famous 'The Soldier' ('If I should die . . .'), elicited from a fellow public-school poet the criticism 'he has clothed his attitude in fine words; but he has taken the sentimental attitude'. The critic was Charles Hamilton Sorley (1895–1915), later killed at the battle of Loos. Sorley died too young for his real individuality as a poet to have developed, but his *Marlborough and Other Poems* of 1916 ran through six editions in its first year of publication, evidence of the demand for, and response to, a certain kind of male war poetry in these years. The volume includes some striking sonnets addressed to Death, most impressively the poem beginning 'When you see Millions of the Mouthless Dead' which can be seen as anticipating the harsh disillusion of Sorley's poet successors.

In spite of the vast numbers of male combatants, and the stimulus to poetry represented by a community of soldiers and its enforced culture of male comradeship, the war and its aftermath also animated women's writing. Charlotte Mew's poem 'The Cenotaph' of 1919 was published in the second edition of her collection *The Farmer's Bride* in 1921. It is in many ways a typical memorial poem of its day, delicately apostrophizing a public, empty tomb as the focus of private mourning. The Cambridge poet Fredegond Shove's 'The Farmer' chillingly suggests the blighting of 'countless lives' amid the 'stillness, and long shivers, after death' and Margaret Postgate Cole's fine poems 'The Veteran', 'Afterwards', and 'Praematuri' centre on an acute awareness of the loss of youth and innocence and on the frightening sense of severance occasioned by the recall of the war's seemingly futile waste. Perhaps the most influential and personal of the women's books related to this dreadful period is Vera Brittain's once hugely popular memoir *Testament of Youth* (1933). Brittain (1893–1970), who served as a nurse during the war, interrupting her hard won studies at Oxford in order to do so, recalls not simply the ambitions and struggles of an educated woman, but also the tensions of waiting for news from the front and the profound emotional damage done to the bereaved by successive bereavements. The book contributed notably to an often pervasive mood of British pacifism in the troubled years immediately preceding the outbreak of the Second World War.

The two most influential autobiographies dealing with soldiers' experiences of the war were also published after a therapeutic and recuperative gap. Robert Graves's *Goodbye to All That* (1929) is experimental, quirky, and disrespectful of strict historical 'truth'. Siegfried Sassoon's trilogy—*Memoirs of a Fox-Hunting Man* (1928), *Memoirs of an Infantry Officer* (1930), and *Sherston's Progress* (1936)—written from the fictionalized point of view of 'George Sherston', records in its central volume Sassoon's celebrated 'A Soldier's Declaration'. This bold statement of July 1917 was made 'as an act of wilful defiance of military authority' because its author believed that the war was being 'deliberately prolonged by those who have the power to end it'. Sassoon also included a telling reference to the 'callous complacency' of the majority of men and women at home who had refused to comprehend the dire nature of conditions in the trenches. It was Graves who managed to persuade the War Office not to treat the Declaration as a disciplinary matter.

Sassoon's frustration and anger at the futility of the progress of the fighting is equally evident in his war poetry, poetry which emphasizes the chasm between those who make decisions, or accede to them, and those who suffer the consequences of them. He attacks not simply the Generals or the 'scarlet majors' of the poem 'Base Details', but also the incomprehending non-combatant civilians. Sassoon (1886–1967) vexedly and vividly suggests the unnaturalness (as it seemed) of life on leave from the front in 'Repression of the Experience', a simmering, restless piece which nervously gestures towards a breakdown of the mind and of the very structure of the poem. In 'Blighters', a music-hall entertainment provides a similar mockery of patriotism rather than any chance of relaxation, and in the ironic 'The Glory of Women' the speaker accuses those who unhelpfully cannot understand what is happening. Sassoon is at his succinct best as a poet in short, blunt lyrics; when he expands his

themes, as in 'To any Dead Officer' or in the post-bellum 'To One who was with Me in the War', his ideas tend to become diffuse and his structures untidy. The bitter, satirical lyrics of 1917, such as 'The General' or the Kiplingesque 'Twelve Months After', have an iconoclastic pithiness. 'A Working Party', by contrast, allows for an elegiac memorializing of an unmemorable soldier 'accidentally' killed, and 'The Redeemer' makes play with the idea of transfiguration in an intermixture of religious and secular contexts. A soldier carrying wood is, while the light of a flare lasts, Christ-like; as the light fades, the soldier swears ('O Christ Almighty, now I'm stuck!'), surrendering his aura of the divine but retaining his suffering humanity. Sassoon's image, which has its roots in *Piers Plowman*, is also one which would be used to even more extraordinary effect by the only epic poet produced by the Great War, David Jones.

The war provided a disturbing context which forcibly transformed the often placid, elegiac, and unadorned poetry of the 1900s into a painfully observant record or a vehicle of protest. It is rarely an innovative poetry, however agonized its subjects or extraordinary its imagery. It is severely localized and the real individuality of certain war poets often shows up best when confined to anthologies of work by fellow-combatants. It is as idle to speculate as to how the work of the two most individual of these poets, Isaac Rosenberg (1890–1918) and Wilfred Owen (1893–1918), might have developed as it is to attempt to imagine Keats or Shelley as middle-aged Victorians. The two, temperamentally different and quite distinct in the traditions to which they responded, were both galvanized by their wartime experience. Rosenberg had certainly given indications of a radical poetic talent before 1914, but his poems of warfare, notably 'Break of Day in the Trenches', 'Louse Hunting', 'Returning, We Hear Larks', and 'Dead Man's Dump', suggest a kind of detached and curious fascination with the nature of war and with ravaged men and landscapes which is almost expressionist in its stark and often contrary energy. Rosenberg, who had drawn on Jewish history and mythology in much of his earlier experimental verse, remains explorative in his interest in the imagery he found around him in the desolation of the trenches. Death in 'Returning, We Hear Larks' is as natural and as dangerously deceptive as larks singing behind the battlefield:

> Death could drop from the dark
> As easily as song—
> But song only dropped,
> Like a blind man's dreams on the sand
> By dangerous tides,
> Like a girl's dark hair for she dreams no ruin lies there,
> Or her kisses where a serpent hides.

The larks seen this way, like the 'queer, sardonic rat' and the dropping poppies 'whose roots are in men's veins' in 'Break of Day in the Trenches', allow for an association of dissociated elements which looks forward to the early work of T. S. Eliot. Rosenberg's is a poetry of proto-Modernist fragmentation which discovers an objectivity in a world being physically pulled and blown apart.

Only four of Wilfred Owen's poems were published in his lifetime. His profound attraction to the work of Keats, and his debt to Keats's lushness, remain evident in one of these poems published in *Hydra*, the magazine edited by Owen during the late summer of 1917 when he was convalescing at Craiglockhart Hospital. 'Song of Songs' suggests little of the stark power that emerged in the poetry published posthumously in 1920 in an edition prepared by Sassoon, also a former fellow-patient at Craiglockhart. The finest of these war poems were written during an intense, creative period of eleven months which terminated in September 1918. Romantic exuberance no longer provided an appropriate literary model for what Owen now endeavoured to describe, though Keats's influence can still be inferred in the *Hyperion*-like vision of the unfinished 'Strange Meeting'. Owen also retained and experimented with other inherited forms and devices, notably the sonnet as in 'Anthem For Doomed Youth' and 'The Next War', and a fondness for rhyme which he developed, through half-rhyme, into para-rhyme in 'Strange Meeting' and the embittered 'Futility'. The sixteen-line 'The Parable of the Old Man and the Young' looks back, as Sassoon had done, to biblical precedent, but its real shape is determined not merely by its biblical echoes, or by its reference to modern warfare, but by its clever, disturbing, clinching, final couplet which turns the story of Abraham and Isaac on its head:

> So Abram rose, and clave the wood, and went
> And took the fire with him, and a knife.
> And as they sojourned both of them together,
> Isaac, the first-born spake, and said, My Father,
> Behold the preparations, fire and iron,
> But where the lamb for this burnt-offering?
> Then Abram bound the youth with belts and straps,
> And builded parapets and trenches there,
> And stretched forth the knife to slay his son.
> When lo! an angel called him out of heaven,
> Saying, Lay not thy hand upon the lad,
> Neither do anything to him. Behold,
> A ram, caught in a thicket by its horns;
> Offer the Ram of Pride instead of him.
> But the old man would not so, but slew his son,
> And half the seed of Europe, one by one.

There is a parallel anger at the sheer waste of human life in 'Futility', a poem which denies the reassuring Pauline associations between the stirring of seeds and the resurrection of the body. 'Dulce et Decorum Est' reverses Roman assumptions about patriotic sacrifice rather than comfortable Christian ones, by contrasting the ghastliness of death by mustard gas with the defunct

Horatian dignity which is damned as an 'old lie'. 'Strange Meeting', often conveniently interpreted as a knowing epitaph, pictures an escape from battle into 'some profound dull tunnel', a granite trench beyond a muddy trench, somehow a relic of 'titanic wars'. The poem moves to a meeting of enemies and to a mystic post-mortal reconciliation of two slaughtered soldiers:

> I am the enemy you killed, my friend.
> I knew you in this dark: for so you frowned
> Yesterday through me as you jabbed and killed.
> I parried; but my hands were loath and cold.
> Let us sleep now . . .

Owen was killed on 4 November 1918 before he had an opportunity to finish his poem. It was only a week before the Armistice which was to end 'the War to end Wars'.

In 1919 a 'Victory' medal was struck in Britain for presentation to all those soldiers who had survived what was described on its surface as 'The Great War for Civilization'. As the work of the war poets suggests, 'Civilization' had effectively floundered in the mire of the trenches or had been pitted and holed by the mechanisms and machines of modern military destruction. If Britain and the British Empire had emerged politically unscathed, the same was not true of the rest of combatant Europe, nor was it true of the minds and opinions of survivors or of those too young to fight. When the London-based American poet, Ezra Pound, wrote bitterly in *Hugh Selwyn Mauberley* (1920) of a human sacrifice in the name of 'an old bitch gone in the teeth | For a botched civilization', he was not merely summing up a hideous end of an era, he was also asserting the rights and privileges of a new literature which would attempt to sever itself from the traditions, and the 'traditional sanctities', of the old botched civilization.