

Concerning Preciosity

By John M. Robertson

I

IT is permitted in these days to have doubts on all matters ; and as French critics (following the German) have set us the example of doubting the artistic infallibility of Molière, a Briton may make bold to confess to one more misgiving in regard to that great artist. It was in witnessing recently a performance of *Les Précieuses Ridicules* at the Théâtre Français that there forced itself upon me, across the slight boredom of a third seeing, a new question as to the subject-matter of that classic farce. First it took shape as a certain wonderment at the brutality of the argument, still complacently followed twenty times a year by audiences for whom, in real life or modern drama, the classic exploit of the young seigneurs and their valets would have been an enormity, supposing anything on the same scale of feeling and taste to have been done or imagined in this generation. It distantly recalled the mediæval argument in *Much Ado About Nothing*, in which the more serious scheme or masculine vengeance might be supposed to suggest to Shakspeare himself the reflection of Touchstone on some of the things devised as sport for ladies. It also recalled the recent episode of the killing of a French usher by a gang of
young

young collegians who seized him in bed, bound him, and forced him to swallow a litre of rum, whereof he died. One cannot imagine that proceeding handled as a farce for the amusement of gentlemen in these days, even without the tragic finish. But there is a distinct savour of its spirit in the farce of Molière. What M. Stapfer gently avows of the satire in *Les Femmes Savantes* must be avowed here: "Let us confess it: this is not fine. Infatuation pushed to this degree and parading itself with this effrontery is too *invraisemblable*." And we accept M. Stapfer's untranslatable phrase: "Molière à le comique *insolent*." Evidently there is a gulf fixed—except in the theatre—between the taste of the seventeenth and that of the nineteenth century.

Of course we must allow for the fact that Molière was farcing, as he generally did, as the usages and atmosphere and "optic" of the theatre forced him to do. We need hardly look there, in any age, for life-size portraits and scrupulous colour. It is with the characters as with the actors' faces: they must needs be "made-up." But if we ought to make this allowance in our criticising of Molière, we ought also to make it in our estimating of the types *he* criticised. And this his complacent audiences have never done. In the matter of *les précieuses* they have always been unquestioningly on the side of the laughers, of the farce-maker, of the young seigneurs, of the valets; and even though the whole episode be consciously set by the onlooker in the Watteau-land of last-century comedy, there always subsists a distinct impression that the *préciosité* which Molière satirised was just some such imbecility as it appears in the talk of those poor preposterous provincial young ladies of the farce. That is evidently the impression left on the complacent reader as well as on the complacent theatre-goer. It is avowed in the literary histories. Some have noticed that by adding the term "*ridicules*" Molière implied that

that all *précieuses* were not ridiculous ; but the prevailing assumption is that what he showed up was the current preciosity. Yet the fact clearly could not have been so. Supposing any one to have ever talked the jargon we hear in the farce, it could not have been such types as these. It was not perked-up middle-class Audreys, gullible by valets, blunderingly bewraying themselves, who arrived at the fine frenzy of "*Voiturez-nous les commodités de la conversation.*" No ; preciosity was not quite what the judicious Molière supposed it to be ; and the *précieuses*—and this he must have known—were not at all what he represented them.* He had merely used the immemorial stratagem of satirising the practice by fictitiously degrading the practitioners. He convicted it of gross and vulgar absurdity by first masking them in gross and vulgar absurdity. As a matter of fact, preciosity is the last fault to which gross and vulgar absurdity can attain.

II

What then is it, in essence and origin ? We can take it from two points of view. Scientifically speaking, it is an attempt to deviate widely and wilfully, waywardly, from the normal forms of

* It may easily have happened that Molière had some drawing-room impertinences to avenge. "Born of the people," as M. Lanson remarks in his excellent history, "absent from Paris for twelve years, he had been aloof from the work carried on by the upper class society in regard to the language ; and when he returned, in 1658, he retained his free and firm style, nourished on archaisms, on Italian and Spanish locutions, popular or provincial metaphors and forms of phrase. . . ." At such a style fine folks would sneer ; and Molière might not unfairly seek some dramatic revenge.

phrase

phrase in a given language. Now, as normal diction is as it were common property, and as every flagrant innovation in words or phrases is thus apt to be a trespass on the comfort of neighbours, or to seem a parade of superior intellectual wealth, it is likely to provoke more or less objection, which often rises to resentment. Ethically, then, preciosity is an assertion of individual or special personality as against the common usage of talk ; in other words, it is an expression either of egoism or of cliqueism in conversation or literature. But to call it egoism and cliqueism does not settle the matter, though both words are apt to signify decisive censure. Even when used censoriously, they point, sociologically speaking, only to some excess of tendencies which up to a certain point are quite salutary. Every step in progress, in civilisation, is won by some departure from use and wont ; and to make that departure there always needs a certain egoism, often a great deal of cliqueism. And as the expansion of language is a most important part in intellectual progress, it follows that to set up and secure that there must come into play much self-assertion, and not a little cliqueism. The new word is frowned upon by the average man as "new-fangled" whether it be good or bad : the more complex and discriminated phrase is apt to be voted pretentious, whether it be imaginative or merely priggish. And between the extreme of wooden conservatism, which is the arrest of all development, and the extreme of fantastic licence, which is unstable and unhealthy development, the only standard of wholesome innovation is that set up by the strife of the opposing forces, which amounts to a rough measure of the common literary good of the society concerned. The most extravagant forms of preciosity are sure to die, whether of ridicule or of exhaustion. The less extravagant forms are likely to have a wider vogue ; and even in disappearing may leave normal style a little brighter and freer

freer, or a little subtler, for their spell of life; though on the other hand all preciosity tends to set up a reaction towards commonplace. But in any case, all forms alike represent a certain ungoverned energy, an extravagance and exorbitance of mental activity, an exorbitance which is of course faulty as such, but which has nothing in common with mere vulgar absurdity. Molière's provincial *pecques*, once more, are impossible. The victims of Mascarille and his master might have committed malapropisms, affectations, and absurdities innumerable; but they are glaringly incapable of preciosity.

III

If we trace the thing historically, this will become more and more clear. For it is much older, even in France, than the Hotel de Rambouillet or even the Pléiade. It would be safe to say that it rises periodically in all literatures. There is something of it in Euripides; and it is this element in the later Roman poets, as in the prose of Apuleius, that has brought on the whole post-Augustan literature the reproach of decadence. And this sets us questioning what it is that underlies alike the prevailing "false" style of an age later seen to have been decadent, and some of the "false" styles of an age later seen to have been vigorously progressive. We have the pedantic preciosity that is caricatured in Rabelais; the fanciful preciosity of the English and other Euphuists of the latter half of the sixteenth and the beginning of the seventeenth century; the aristocratic French preciosity of the seventeenth century—all affectations of vigorous periods; all more or less akin to the style of Claudian and Statius and Apuleius. Lastly, we have the self-willed preciosity of Mr. Meredith, who may or may not belong to an age of decadence, but who certainly writes viciously

viciously alongside of many good writers. What is the common element or symptom in all these cases ?

Clearly, as we said before, the explanation is never that of vulgar absurdity ; in all, we are dealing, it may be, with egoism, with unbalanced judgment, with juvenility of intelligence, with lopsidedness, with certain faults of character ; but in none with raw fatuity. Rather we are struck everywhere with a special sort of sensibility, a curious cleverness, an incapacity for commonplace—to say nothing of higher qualities in any one instance. Preciosity, in fact, is a misdirection of capacity, not at all a proof of incapacity for better things. And we have to look, finally, for the special conditions under which the misdirection tends most to take place. In terms of our previous conclusion, they will amount in general to some defect of regulative influence, some overbalance of the forces of individual self-will and literary sectarianism. Such defect and overbalance, it is easy to see, may arise either in a time of novelty and enterprise or in a time of dissolution, since in both there are likely to be movements of thought and fancy ill-related to the general development of judgment and knowledge. Of all the social forces which regulate the play of speech and literature, the healthiest are those of a vigorous all-round culture ; and an all-round culture is just what is lacking, in the terms of the case, alike in an epoch of decadence and in an epoch of novelty. Decadence means a lack of healthy relation among the social forces, an elevation or excessive enrichment of some elements and a degradation of others. In imperial Rome certain prior forms of intellectual and civic energy were absolutely interdicted : hence an overplus or overbalance in other forms, of which factitious literature was one. Energies repressed and regulated in one sphere could play lawlessly in another, where formerly the force of regulation had been a general discipline of common sense, now
lacking.

lacking. The former rule of old and middle-age over youth was dissolved under a *régime* which put age and youth equally in tutelage; and the faults of youth, of which injudicious and overstrained style is one, would have a new freedom of scope. A factitious literature, an art for art's sake, would tend to flourish just as superstition flourished; only, inasmuch as bad intellectual conditions tend ultimately to kill literature altogether, that soon passed from morbid luxuriance to inanition, while superstition in the same soil grew from strength to strength.

The preciosity of the Renaissance, again, is also in large part a matter of the unrestrained exuberance of youth—in this case exercising itself one-sidedly in a new world of literature, living the life of words much more than the life of things and the knowledge of things. Not only the weak heads but the headstrong would tend to be turned by that intoxication. What ultimately came about, however, was the ripening of the general taste by the persistence of conditions of free strife, which nourish common sense and make the common interest in speech prevail over the perversities of pedants. The latinising Limousin student of Rabelais's caricature* suggests in the Rabelaisian manner what the actual latinists did. He speaks of Paris as the “*inclyte et celebre academie que l'on vocite Lutece,*” and tells how “*‘nous transfretons la Sequane [= Seine] au dilucule et crepuscule; nous déambulons par les compites et quadrivies de l'urbe.’ . . . A quoy, Pantagruel dist, ‘Quel diable de langaige est cecy? Par Dieu, tu es quelque heretique’*”—the spontaneous comment of the robust Philistine of all ages. “*Segnor no, dist l'escolier, car libentissement des ce qu'il illucesce quelque minutule lesche du jour, . . . me irrorant de belle eau lustrale, grignotte d'un trançon de*

* Liv. ii. ch. 6.

de quelque missique precation de nos sacrificules. . . . Je revere des olympicoles. Je venere patricialement le supernel astripotens. Je dilige et redame mes proximes." After which Pantagruel comments again, "Je croy qu'il nous forge ici quelque langaige diabolique et qu'il nous charme comme enchanteur.' A quoy dist un de ses gens : 'Seigneur, sans nulle doubtte ce gallant veult contrefaire la langue des Parisiens, mais il ne fait que escorcher le latin, et cuide ainsi Pindariser ; et il lui semble bien qu'il est quelque grand orateur en françois, parce qu'il dedaigne l'usage commun de parler.'" And when Pantagruel, anticipating Molière, has proceeded to "escorcher" the offender, Rabelais tells how the latter after a few years died in a certain manner, "ce que faisant la vengeance divine, et nous demonstant ce que dist le philosophe, et Aulu Gelle, qu'il nous convient parler selon le langaige usité, et, comme disoit Octavian Auguste, qu'il fault éviter les motz espaves, en pareille diligence que les patrons de navires evitent les rochers de la mer." It was Caius and not Octavian ; but no matter. Rabelais's own book, with its rich store of "motz usités" and "espaves," gave the French people a sufficiency of "langaige" to live by ; and the vainer pedantries passed, as they needs must, leaving their memory not only in Rabelais's caricature but, after all, in his own exuberant vocabulary,* as in that of Montaigne, whose French speech was inevitably enriched by that other which his father had made for him equally a mother tongue.

IV

A far subtler preciosity is that which we find flourishing as Euphuism in England under Elizabeth, and as a more grotesque perversion

* This is duly noted by M. Lanson.

perversion of fancy in the later "metaphysical" poets down till the Restoration, and even after that. The development throughout is perfectly intelligible. In its beginnings, Euphuism is evidently for England the tumultuous awakening of a modern nation to the sense of the possession of a living and growing modern speech, such as had taken place in Italy some generations before, and in France but recently. In all three nations successively we see the same comparison of the new language with the dead tongues, the same claim to compete with the Greeks and Romans, even while imitating them. And Lyly represents once more the exuberance of youth and strength playing one-sidedly on a newly-gained world of words and books, unsobered by experience and hard thinking. It is a world with more words than knowledge, with a vocabulary constantly widening itself from the stores of other tongues, and an imagination constantly kept on the stretch by the impact of other literatures. Artistic judgment could not quite keep pace with the accumulation of literature, even in the greatest brain of the time. For Shakspeare is not only euphuistic in his youth, even when bantering Euphuism; he retains to the last some of the daring exorbitance of speech which is the essential quality of Euphuism; only with the difference that the later style is strengthened by a background of past passion and vital experience, as well as chastened by intellectual discipline. Here beyond question preciosity can be seen to be a creative and liberating force, and far from a mere riot of incompetence. Even where the Elizabethan drama escapes the direct charge of preciosity, it is visibly warmed and tinted by that tropic neighbourhood; its very freedom of poetic phrase is made wider by the modish licence of the surrounding aristocratic world, in which Euphuism is as it were a many-coloured fashion of speech on a par with the parade of splendid costume.

costume. M. Taine has well seen, in the case of the Elizabethan Euphuism, what Molière has prevented us from seeing in the case of the later French preciosity, that it is the foppery of power and pride, not of folly.

“A new, strange, and overcharged style has been formed, and is to prevail until the Revolution, not only in poetry but also in prose, even in sermons and ceremonial addresses; a style so conformable to the spirit of the time that we meet it at the same period throughout Europe, in Ronsard and D'Aubigné, in Calderon, Gongora, and Marini. In 1580 appeared *Euphues, the Anatomy of Wit*, by Lyly, which was the manual, the masterpiece, and the caricature of the new style, and which was received with a universal admiration. . . . The ladies knew by heart all the phrases of Euphues, singular phrases, far-fetched and sophisticated, which are as enigmas for which the author seems determinedly to seek the least natural and the most remote expressions, full of exaggerations and antitheses, where mythological allusions, reminiscences of alchemy, metaphors from botany and astronomy, all the medley, all the pell-mell of erudition, travel, mannerism, rolls in a deluge of comparisons and conceits. Do not judge it from the grotesque painting made of it by Sir Walter Scott. His Sir Piercy Shafton is but a pedant, a cold and dry imitator; and it is warmth and originality that give to this language an accent and a living movement: it must be conceived not dead and inert, as we have it to-day in the old books, but springing from the lips of ladies and young lords in doublets broidered with pearls, vivified by their vibrating voices, their laughter, the light of their eyes, and the gesture of the hands that play with the hilt of the sword or twist the mantle of satin. . . . They amuse themselves as do to-day nervous and ardent artists in a studio. They do not speak to convince or comprehend, but to content their high-strung imagination. . . . They play with words, they twist and deform them, they cast up sudden perspectives, sharp contrasts, which leap out, stroke upon stroke, one after the other,

other, to infinity. They throw flower on flower, tinsel on tinsel; everything that glitters gives them pleasure; they gild and embroider and plume their language as they do their clothes. Of clearness, of order, of good sense, they have no thought; it is a festival and it is a riot: absurdity pleases them."*

Allowing for differences of time and culture and class, this holds more or less true of preciosity always. It is a wilful play of bias. In an age in which culture is mainly scholarly and imaginative, and science and criticism are only nascent, the tendency will go far to colour all literature; and, as innovation goes on in form with little or no deepening of thought, the licence of expression goes from bad to worse, poetry giving place to pedantry and technicality and verbal metaphysic, till the test of skill has come to be strangeness of expression, and polite literature in general is become a masquerade, remote from all actuality of feeling and conduct. This occurred in England during the seventeenth century, in which we pass from Shakspeare and Spenser to Donne and Cowley; and in which the admirable new art of the young Milton, a brain of supreme artistic faculty nourished on a long study of antiquity and vitalised by new and intense living interests, is still neighboured by the perfectly vicious art of the young Dryden, whose culture is so much slighter and whose interests are so much shallower, and whose first verses are masterpieces of bad taste. Milton shows us the long sway of the fantastic verbalist ideal in scattered phrases which partly mar his strong art—though not more than do some of his plunges into a crude simplicity, such as the famous "No fear lest dinner cool." The weaker Dryden shows it at his outset, in his complete acceptance of the fantastic ideal.

What

* *Histoire de la Littérature Anglaise*, i. 276-279.

What had happened in the interval between Shakspeare and Milton was the diversion of the mass of mental energy from imaginative to ratiocinative literature, from questions of æsthetics and poetry to questions of life and conduct ; so that the drama passed to ineptitude in the hands of weak imitators, and poetry became essentially a pastime, though one pursued by some intelligences of remarkable eccentric power. The great work of Milton marks the reaction that might have been made under a continued Puritan *régime*, could that have escaped the freezing influence or judaising fanaticism in this any more than in the other arts ; the concrete literature of the Restoration and the next century was the reaction possible in the political circumstances. Dryden's early verses on the death of a young lord from the small-pox mark the limit of endurance. As M. Taine puts it, "the excess of folly in poetry, like the excess of injustice in politics, prepares and predicts revolutions." * And from the preciosity of literary specialists we pass rapidly to the language and the sentiment of the new man of the world, coloured only by the reminiscence of the preciosities of the past. Literature becomes the interest, if not of all, at least of all men and women of any education ; and language conforms of necessity to common sense and common thought. The reign of preciosity, which is wayward one-sidedness and strenuous limitation, is over. It may be that the new literary commonweal is relatively commonplace, charmless, and unsubtle in its speech and thinking ; but none the less it has the strength which comes of standing on Mother Earth. Its tongue is the tongue of a new philosophy, a new science, a new criticism, and a new prose fiction ; and in these exercises lies the gymnastic which will later redeem the new-fashioned poetry itself from the

new

* iii. 164.

new preciosity that is to overtake it when it in turn becomes but a pastime and a technique.

V

The common-sense literature of the "age of prose and reason" in England, however, represents not merely the reaction against the previous preciosity of extravagance; it connects with the movement of regulation in France, with the campaign of Molière and Boileau against the preciosity of their time—that which Molière burlesqued and degraded in his farce. Here we come to a preciosity that seems in a manner the contrary of that of the Euphuists, seeing that it is consciously rather a fastidious process of purification and limitation than one of audacious adventure in language. But the essential characteristic remains the same; it is still an innovation, a manifestation of egoism and cliquism in taste; only the egoism is that of a very select and exclusive type, a taste which has passed through times of commotion, and calls with its unemployed nervous energy for elegance and finesse; the cliquism is that of certain fastidious members and hangers-on of a formal and aristocratic court or upper four hundred. The new preciosity has the period of vigorous euphuism behind it, in the earlier energetic and expansive literature of Ronsard and Montaigne. In the euphuism of the sixteenth century the intellectual limitation or one-sidedness was that involved in a lop-sided culture, in a cultivation of language and fancy without a proportional knowledge of things or analysis of thinking. Limited on those sides, the mind played the more energetically and extravagantly in the phrasing of what ideas it had. In the Hotel Rambouillet the limiting principle is seen to be an ideal of *bon ton*. The new preciosity is thus indirect and fantastic with a difference. Seeking

to

to refine even on the habit of elaborate and artificial expression which had never ceased to prevail since the outburst of modern poetic literature in the previous century, it is not creative but restrictive, save in so far as the rejection of common speech involves a resort to the fantastic. It expresses, in fine, mainly the effort of a new upper class—formed since the close of the wars of religion—to make for itself a fitting literary atmosphere, free of the associations of the despised common life outside. It further partly represents, just as the expansive preciosity of the previous century had done, the influence of Italian models; the superior refinement of Italy being now as much felt by a class craving for elegance as the greater literateness of the south had been formerly felt by a generation thirsting for letters. And as seventeenth-century Italy represented above all things fanciful dilettantism, the native energy of Italian literature being destroyed, the French dilettantists could draw thence only a liminary inspiration. Thus, in so far as they swayed the new academy and the new literature, they undoubtedly impoverished the French language in point of colour and force, while giving it elegance and precision. But then, as we saw, the same thing was done in England later by the Restoration writers and the Popean school, who represented at once the reaction against Elizabethan and later preciosity and the final French reaction against the preciosity of the *salon*. The English reactionists were liminary in a less degree, because it chanced that England did not become aristocratised and royalised nearly so fully as France; and a constant upcrop of middle-class intelligence kept the language more robust and informal. Yet in England also, under the rule of a sophisticated common sense, as in Boileau's France under the same rule, there was limitation of the intellectual life, with the old result. Poetry and drama fell into, and for two generations adhered to, new stereotyped and
factitious

factitious forms, which again fostered preciosity of a kind, the preciosity of artificial and falsetto style. So much is there in common between an apparent contraction and an apparent expansion in human progress.

For, to come back to our starting-point, even the restrictive preciosity in both countries represented after all a play of intelligence, a new exercise of thought. In rejecting parts of the irregular vocabulary of the preceding age, it rejected also the vagueness of its thought and the frequent puerility of its fancy. Its own formative preciosity, arising by way of the exclusion of the common, was of course a new puerility: and when "*voiturez-vous les commodités de la conversation,*" or anything near it, became a way of asking a servant to bring chairs, the preciosity of the *salon* had reached the point where common sense must needs protect and avenge itself, in the manner of Pantagruel if need be. After all, there may have been an obscure justice in Molière's mode of vengeance, suggesting as it did that this self-conscious torturing of a language was a fitter occupation for conceited and ignorant provincials than for noble ladies in a great capital. But the fact remains that Molière and Boileau, in their vindication of good sense against finikin absurdity, were really standing at the point of departure from which that absurdity had been reached. They stood in the main with Malherbe; and Malherbe's purism had been a judicious restrictive preciosity to begin with. The line of heredity is clear. All of the first generation of the French classicists, as M. Bourgoïn rightly insists, were touched with preciosity; and Corneille stands out not as rejecting it but as bringing it to bear on new notions, new themes, a new dramatic inspiration. And the best prose writers of the time before Pascal, as M. Brunetière again reminds us, were chronically precious in their elaborate indirectness and sophistication of phrasing.

Molière

Molière and Boileau, *bourgeois* both, though with a great difference in their culture, represented the wholesome intrusion, even in that undemocratic age, of the larger world, of the more general interest, on the mincing cliques of the court, who had now ceased to represent any fresh intellectual force; and they were keeping the language sound, in its modern form, for the coming generations who were to use it to such manifold new purpose. But when we reflect that the language of Montesquieu and Voltaire and Rousseau remains substantially the sonorous and sinewy language of Bossuet and Pascal, and that that is the language as formed in an age of restrictive preciosity; when further we recollect that the language restricted by the English writers of the Restoration and of the reign of Anne is substantially the language of Hume and Goldsmith and Sterne; we are forced to recognise once more how far is Molière's vivacious farce from letting us see what preciosity originally and essentially is; how far the thing is from being a mere vulgar silliness. It indeed needs the faculty of the Bossuets and Pascals, the Humes and Voltaires, the Sternes and Rousseaus, to save the corrected tongue from sinking to triviality; and, once more, it is only by turning finally to the common good of national speech the results of their creative revolt that individual energy and the specialism of clique justify their audacious dealings with language.

But we see that such gain has accrued to the common stock or language from preciosity again and again; and the knowledge should make us considerate, not only in our estimate of the preciosities of the past but in our reception of what looks like preciosity in the present. First, it may only be necessary neology. But even downright constructive preciosity, albeit it stands for self-will, or an excess of innovating zeal and of appetite for change, is not blank absurdity. It comes from the young, the headstrong, the

the self-absorbed, the revolutionary, the whimsical, the one-sided, the imperfectly developed ; but it never comes from mere fools—unless we are to fall back on the definition (which sometimes seems a truth) according to which fools in all ages have done a great deal for civilisation by their habit of preparing the way for the angels.

VI

It is not difficult to look with patience into the preciosities of the past, of which we have had the good and are now spared the vexation. But it is not so easy to be dispassionate before an energetic preciosity of our own day, when it is carried on by a writer whom we feel in a manner constrained to read, while recognising his preciosity for what it is. Hence many explosions of irritation over the preciosity of Carlyle, over that of Mr. Browning, over that of Mr. Swinburne, and above all over that of Mr. Meredith. There may, however, be some little compensation to be had even now from the process of classifying these forms in relation to preciosity in general, especially as they all seem to be brief if not abortive variations, not destined to dominate periods. In each of the four cases mentioned, preciosity is simply an expression of the defiant idiosyncrasy of one man, which only to a slight extent creates a school or clique. Each one had been snapped at by the critics and disregarded by the public for his idiosyncrasy at the start ; and each one—here we come to the moral lesson—has persisted and worsened in his idiosyncrasy instead of correcting it. Carlyle reached his on two lines—partly by way of reproducing the manner of talk of his strong-headed and dogmatic old father, partly by way of imitating the declamatory French writers of his youth and of the previous age, as well as the German humoristic style which alone is usually specified

specified as having influenced him. The French influence on his style has apparently passed unnoticed ; but it will probably not be denied by those who will turn over the literature out of which he composed his *History of the French Revolution*. The essential thing is, however, that he constructed for himself a preciosity of a kind, a preciosity of dramatic manner, of dramatic pitch, of archaic style, of factitious concision, of Puritan colour, of "thees and thous," of prophetic airs and cynic humours. A few serious writers partly caught his manner—Mr. Forster and Mr. Masson, for instance ; and to some extent Kingsley and Dickens—but it says something for the independence of our age that despite the great reputation which Carlyle gradually attained, the manner never became a fashion. Even by those who admired the doctrine, it was generally recognised that such a manner could be sincere only at first hand. As for its indirect effects, we can say to-day, when it is recognisable as a preciosity of a sort, a display of wayward egoism in matters of language, that in its earlier phases it has no little artistic force, and that the sense of this has given later serious writers the courage to be more vari-coloured, more emotional, more individual in their writing than they otherwise would have been. Even such an unCarlylean book as Mill's *Liberty* probably owes something to Carlyle's example ; and perhaps Green's *Short History* owes no less, though neither exhibits any direct imitation whatever. On the other hand, the growing exaggeration of Carlyle's special preciosity with his years, showing as it did how far mere temperamental self-assertion was its motive, undoubtedly repelled part of the rising generation, and undermined his influence in advance. The "extraordinary arrogance" which Mr. Froude * confesses him to have shown in private had thus its Nemesis.

With

* *Life of Carlyle ; First Forty Years*, ii. 394.

With Mr. Browning the case is somewhat similar. His is the preciosity of a genius formed in semi-isolation, an original mind communing much with itself, and too little with vigorous and expert contemporary minds at the time when the friction of free comradeship has most disciplinary value. Such an elliptic style as his could not well have been formed at Oxford or Cambridge: even Carlyle did not write Carlylese till he went to dwell in the wilderness at Craigenputtock. Browning's style was substantially formed or hardened abroad, where the society of Mrs. Browning, herself magnetised by it and so on the way to a preciosity of her own, had no corrective influence. The poet in his prime was aloof from present-day English problems as well as from present-day English life; his poems, whether written at home or abroad, deal for the most part with either foreign or unlocalised and ideal life; and he finally impresses a reader as writing rather for himself than for any public. Public indifference and critical disrespect had for a time the effect of making him consciously antagonistic to his public—witness the apostrophes in *The Ring and the Book*—and in *Pacchiarotto* he has put on record how he felt towards some of his critics. His preciosity is thus that of an energetic, self-poised, self-absorbed, self-exiled artist, defiant of the general verdict even while obscurely craving it, and able to be so defiant by reason or financial independence; and it followed the usual course of becoming exaggerated with age. It thus falls readily in its place as a form among others. And here as usual we can trace good indirect results, while, as in the case of Carlyle, the activity of modern criticism and the modern prevalence of the common interest in speech over egoisms and cliqueisms have prevented any direct contagion of the faults. While preparing for himself the penalty of future neglect, as regards not a little of his over-abundant output, Browning has pushed contemporary English poetry towards

towards vivacity, towards variety, towards intellectuality, without setting up a Browning school even in the Browning Society. It is somewhat grievous to think of the coming neglect, after the preliminary contemporary penalty of indifference. But by such quasi-martyrdoms is progress made in the age of tolerance; and after all Browning found life abundantly sweet, and is sure of immortality for a score of things.

Of Mr. Swinburne, little need be said. His preciosity too is that of a marked idiosyncrasy of utterance—this time a superfoetation of phrase, a plethora of vocabulary. His vice of style, too, was hotly persisted in when the matter of his first volume was denounced; and a life of semi-seclusion, in uncritically sympathetic company, has excluded whatever chance there may be supposed to have been of a corrective action of normal literary intercourse or outside criticism. Thus, though we notice in his case the usual tendency of the press to pay tribute to the aging writer when his faults are no longer novel, Mr. Swinburne has partly outlived his early influence as well as the early antagonism to his work; and of him too it may be said that what was new and strong in his performance, his enlargement and special tillage of the field of rhythm, has counted for good in English poetry; while his preciosity, consisting in his tautology and his archaism, has been but slightly contagious. It was not really a new way of speaking, not really a widening of expression, so much as a congestion of it, a heaping up of words for lack of valid ideas; differing here from the other modern preciosities just mentioned, which visibly come of a sense of something special to say. Hence Mr. Swinburne has not been the main influence even in the return to archaism. The other archaistic poets of the day are so independently of his influence.

Contrasted with the exaggerated egoisms of such writers as Carlyle, Browning, and Mr. Swinburne, some recent styles that
have

have been called precious are hardly perceptible as such. That of the late Mr. Pater, for instance, has been so blamed; and probably some who so criticise it will contend that in his case the word is rightly applied, and that in the three other cases above discussed it is not. Carlyle and Browning and Mr. Swinburne, it may be said, are mannerists, not *précieux*. Mr. Pater's style, it may be said, is really precious. But this, I would answer, is a misconception arising from a one-sided idea of the nature of preciousness. There is no constant radical difference between mannerism and preciousness; but a writer may be mannered without being precious. Normal speech is tolerant of mere manner; it is either the apparent consciousness of a need to speak abnormally, or a self-absorption too complete to realise how far its utterance varies from the normal—it is one or other of these aberrations that constitutes preciousness. And it is finally true that on the one hand all special self-absorption, and on the other hand all anxiety to write in a noticeable and unusual way, tend in the direction of preciousness. Dickens's manner often approaches it; and perhaps there is a faint suspicion of it even in the delicate concern of Thackeray to be exquisitely simple, to avoid Dickens's over-ambitious way. A certain unconsciousness is the last grace of a good style. And this being so, there may be just an occasional savour of preciousness in the extreme preoccupation of Mr. Pater with his. This had the surprising result of making him commit oversights which a less anxious craftsman could hardly have fallen into—for instance, his way of running a favourite epithet to death, as when he introduces the adjective "comely," in one or other secondary or metaphorical sense, some five or six times in a few dozen pages; and the syntax of some of the more elaborate sentences in one of his last volumes gave openings to fault-finding. But Mr. Pater's style is in the main so fastidiously

unexaggerated,

unexaggerated, so guarded against all violence and all pedantry, that he must be finally cleared of the charge of either constructive or restrictive preciosity in his writing as a whole. He sought excellence in style, not singularity or self-indulgence. He was really an admirable workman in whom the need for utterance, the burden and impulse of ideas, though not small, were apt to fall short of his exceptional craving for beauty of statement.

VII

Whatever dispute there may be over the foregoing criticisms, there can be none, I think, over the judgment that Mr. Meredith's style is the most pronounced outbreak of preciosity in modern English literature. There, if ever, we may allow ourselves a quasi-Pantagruelian protest. It is indeed impossible for a reader who respects Mr. Meredith's genius to read him—or at least his later works—without irritation at his extraordinary ill-usage of language. Old admirers, going back to his earlier works, never free from the sin of preciosity, recognise that there has been an almost continuous deterioration—the fatal law of all purposive preciosity. In the earlier novels there were at times signal beauties of phrase, sentences in which the strain towards utterance was transmuted into fire and radiance, sentences of the fine poet who underlay and even now underlies that ever-thickening crust of preciosity and verbal affectation. Even in *One of Our Conquerors* there seemed, to the tolerant sense, to be still some gleams of the old flame, flashing at long intervals through the scoriæ or unsmelted speech. But in *Lord Ormont and his Aminta* neither patience nor despair can discover in whole chapters aught but the lava and cinders of language. In mere tortuosity the writing is
not

not worse ; it could not well be ; but now, after the first few chapters, one has given up hope, and instead of desperately construing endless paragraphs of gritty perversity one lightly skips every mound in the path, content to follow the movement of a striking story behind a style that in itself has become a mere affliction. With the exception of Zola's *La Terre*—hard reading for a different reason—*One of Our Conquerors* was the hardest novel to read that I ever met with ; but I have found *Lord Ormont and his Aminta* easy enough. After a few chapters I no longer sought to read Mr. Meredith. I made a hand-to-mouth *précis* of nearly every page, and soon got over the ground, only pausing at times to reassure myself that all was ill.

Hardly once, so far as I have read, do we find an important sentence really well written ; never a paragraph ; for the perpetual grimace of expression, twisting the face of speech into every shape but those of beauty and repose, is in no sense admirable. Simple statements, normal reflections, are packed into the semblance of inspired fancies and brilliant aphorisms. As thus :

“That great couchant dragon of the devouring jaws and the withering breath, known as our London world, was in expectation of an excitement above yawns on the subject of a beautiful Lady Doubtful proposing herself, through a group of infatuated influential friends, to a decorous Court, as one among the ladies acceptable. The popular version of it sharpened the sauce by mingling romance and cynicism very happily ; for the numerous cooks, when out of the kitchen, will furnish a piquant dish.”

The violent metaphor, thrust into the fore-front of the sentence to impress us in advance, remains a grinning mask which moves no more ; the dragon becomes “the numerous cooks.” And the satire baulks no less than the poetry ; for when society's problems

are

are thus admittedly contemptible, what becomes of the satirist's story based upon one of them? A few paragraphs further on we set out similarly with "the livid cloud-bank over a flowery field," which at once lapses to "the terrible aggregate social woman . . . a mark of civilisation on to which our society must hold." It is after a grievous tirade of this sort that we have the avowal: "The vexatious thing in speaking of her is, that she compels to the use of the rhetorician's brass instrument." Well, we have really heard no note concerning her that does not belong to Mr. Meredith's own orchestra; and yet when we attempt, as we are so often moved to do, a translation of the passage into sane English, it is hardly possible to save it from the air of platitude. So little security does strangeness of style give for freshness of thought.

The case is past arguing. Short of the systematic counterfeiting of the Limousin student, nearly every element that men have agreed to vituperate in preciosity is found in this insupportable idiom. And all the while we recognise it as the writing of an artist of unusual insight and originality; a novelist, if not of the very first rank, yet so powerful and so independent that to apply to him the term second-rate is not allowable. He must be classed by himself, as a master with not worse liminary prejudices than those of Balzac; with more poetic elevation than any novelist of his day; a true modern in many things, despite a fundamental unrealism in his characters and an almost puerile proclivity to old-world devices of circumstantial plot. How, then, is the egregious vice of style to be accounted for?

Why, by one or other of the antecedents which we have seen to be involved in all preciosity; and as there is and can be no Meredithian school or clique, we go at once to the solution of individual self-will, defiance of censure, persistence in eccentricity, and self-absorption in isolation. It is all sequent. His first novels,

novels, with their already eccentric style, were given to a generation unable in the main to appreciate the originality and importance of their problems and the subtlety of their treatment; and the denunciations of dull critic snettled him. In a letter to the late James Thomson, published some years ago, he spoke with due causticity of the usual spectacle of the author hailed up, with his hands tied behind his back, before the self-elected and enthroned critic, who tries and scourges him for the offence of writing his own book in his own way. Contemning those who contemned him, Mr. Meredith persisted in being cryptic, eccentric, fantastic, elliptic. As if it were not enough to be artistically too subtle for his generation, he must needs persist in being gratuitously difficult and repellent as a writer, perverting a fine faculty to the bad ambition of being extraordinary, nay, to that of seeming superior. The prompt appreciation of the few good readers did not teach him to look on the reading-public as what it is, a loose mass of ever-varying units, in which even the dullards have no solidarity: he entrenched himself in the Carlylean and Browningsque manner, personifying the multitude as one lumpish hostile entity, or organised body of similar entities. Thus when, after an interval of silence, he produced the *Egoist*, and the accumulating units of the new generation, the newer minds, appreciated the novelty of the problem and the solution so generally as to make the book the success of its year, he was understood to be cynical over the praise given to a work which was in his opinion inferior to its predecessors. The new generation has since proceeded to read those earlier works; but Mr. Meredith had fixed his psychological habits, and no sense of community with his generation could now avail to make him treat language as a common possession, which any one may rightly improve, but which no one may fitly seek to turn into impene-
trable

trable jungle for his own pleasure. Ill health may have had something to do with Mr. Meredith's æsthetic deviation from "the general deed of man"; and his contemporaries have their share of responsibility; but we must recognise in him what we have recognised behind all forms of preciosity—a specific limitation or one-sidedness, a failure to develop equably and in healthy relation to all the forces of the intellectual life. It cannot indeed be said of him that he has not grown. In his last book, despite the visible survival, in part, of the commonplace Jingoism of which he gave such surprising evidence in some violent verses eight or ten years ago, he has touched a position that is much better; and he has ventured on one solution of a sex problem which in former years he shunned. But the very lateness of these advances is a proof that he lost much by his isolation. Lesser people had got as far long ago. It has been recently told of him that he now reads in few books save the Bible and a few Greek classics—a regimen which would ill nourish even smaller minds. What he long ago confessed of himself in *Beauchamp's Career*—that he had acquired the habit of listening too much to his own voice—is now too obvious to need confessing. It all goes to produce, not only that defect of relation to current life which we see in his unhappy style, but that further defect which consists in his lapses into unreality as a novelist. For many of us there is such unreality in those devices of plot complication to which he so inveterately clings, and which so vexatiously trip up at once our illusion and our sense of his insight into the dynamic forces of character. A recent illustration is the episode of the concealment of Weyburn and Aminta in the wayside inn while their pursuers ride past—an episode which belongs to the art of Fielding and Smollett. While, however, some readers may still see no harm in these venerable expedients, every reader who knows enough to be
entitled

entitled to form a judgment must be startled by the amazing episode of the swimming-encounter of Weyburn and Aminta when the former is on his way to the Continent. That is the imagination of a man who either never knew what swimming is or has forgotten what he knew. The occurrence, as related in the novel, is an impossible dream. Mr. Meredith may be in touch with the developments of fencing—an old hobby of his—but his conception of what people do or can do in the water is pure fantasy. In this, indeed, there is pathos; and perhaps the ideal reader would see only pathos—or literary picturesque—in the kindred aberration of the novelist's prose. But when writers are still so imperfect, there can be few perfect readers.

We end by deploring, as contemporary criticism always must, a particular case of excessive preciousness, after setting out to find the soul of goodness in the thing in general. As it was in bygone instances that we could best see the element of compensation, the saving grace, it may be that the difficulty in seeing it in contemporary cases, and above all in Mr. Meredith's, is one which will lessen for posterity; though it is hard to believe that posterity, with its ever enlarging library, will have the time to ponder all of that tormented prose, supposing it to have the patience. A mis-giving arises as to whether much of Mr. Meredith must not inevitably go the way of Donne. But whether or not, his case clinches for us the lesson that is to be learned from more ancient instances; and that lesson may be summed up as consisting or ending in a new view of the meaning of democracy. It is in the democratic age that we seem to find, after all, at once the freest scope for individual literary idiosyncrasy and the least amount of harmful contagion from it—the maximum of the individual freedom compatible with a minimum of the harm. It would

thus seem that language, at least, is becoming effectively socialised. And here, let us hope, lies the security against that mild form of the malady of preciosity which is apt to follow the wide diffusion of an imperfect culture. The preciosity of democratic half-culture, in an age of knowledge, is at the worst a much less extravagant thing than the preciosities of the upper-class culture of ages in which all culture was narrow. So that the so-called process of "levelling-down," here as in other matters, turns out to give the best securities for a general levelling-up.