CHAPTER XXXIV

A NOTE ON WATSON'S POEMS

AMONG the minor poets of to-day, there is one figure deserving special attention—William Watson. As a minor poet his rank has been a high one from the first, and he is constantly rising to a higher place. His appearance also has some significance in relation to the general poetical movement of the century. He represents, not the romantic feeling of Rossetti and his school, nor the splendid warmth and colour and finish of Tennyson's school; rather he represents the reaction. I told you that after the romantics had exhausted their art, and the art of the English language as well, further advance became impossible, and whoever attempted to create poetry would either have to be an imitator, or would have to go back to simpler forms. Mr. Watson took the latter course, and he has won success in it. Spiritually he is a descendant of Wordsworth; the best feeling of Wordsworth glows all through him in a new form and with the colours of another time. In form he is not exactly classic, but he goes back to the models of the early nineteenth century, rarely attempting any of those more elaborate forms of verse which the Victorian period brought to the highest pitch of excellence. One of his favourite forms is the sonnet; this is perhaps the most complicated which he uses. A great deal of his work is in simpler forms. He loves quatrains—complete poems in four lines. He has attempted, not unsuccessfully, to use the very early English forms of rhymeless alliteration, the old Runic measure, in which very few moderns have excelled. Here are a few examples of this form; you will remember, from

the lecture on Anglo-Saxon poetry, the rule of values in this metre:

England my mother,
Wardress of waters,
Builder of peoples,
Maker of men,—

Hast thou yet leisure
Left for the muses?
Heed'st thou the songsmith
Forging the rhyme?

. . . .

Song is no bauble—
Slight not the songsmith,
England my mother,
Maker of men.

There are some fine stanzas in the composition from which these extracts are made, but you will see that the Runic form is not strictly preserved, and the thing, as a whole, lacks force. Tennyson and Charles Kingsley are the only two nineteenth century poets that I know of who used the Northern measure with real success. The best example in Tennyson is the translation of the "Battle of Brunanburh"; the best example in Kingsley is to be found among the songs scattered through the novels of "Hypatia" and "Hereward."

But if Watson has not always been successful with the simpler forms of verse as verse, he has sometimes been remarkably successful in the direction of imagination and force. He has given us a very remarkable composition entitled, "The Dream of Man," which deserves attention especially because it was inspired by the new evolutional philosophy. In this poem the poet considers the great problem of Pain in the universe—why it exists, what would happen if it could be entirely suppressed. Accepting the existence of a God as creator, he imagines the future of man in a new way. The figure of God is necessary for the

dramatic conception which follows. Man conquers all the obstacles which Nature and his own weaknesses oppose to progress. He learns how to vanquish disease, how to conquer tempests, and how to render danger no longer possible. He even conquers pain — that is, he learns how to relieve all physical pain. But moral pain remains, and the dread of death. Death is a power which he cannot oppose. He can do almost everything else that he pleases, except make himself immortal. He discovers even means of communication with other solar systems, and extends his influence into other planets; but death is always with him. He determines to make one last tremendous battle against death. In the meantime he has forgotten the existence of God, who has been watching all his progress, but in whom he has almost ceased to believe. When God observes that man is about to fight against death, he thinks it is time to warn him. He shows himself to the spirit of man and speaks:

"O great in thine own conceit,
I will show thee thy source, how humble, thy goal, for a god how unmeet."

Thereat, by the word of the Maker the Spirit of Man was led
To a mighty peak of vision, where God to His creature said:
"Look eastward toward time's sunrise." And, age upon age untold,
The Spirit of Man saw clearly the Past as a chart out-rolled,—
Beheld his base beginnings in the depths of time, and his strife
With beasts and crawling horrors for leave to live, when life
Meant but to slay and to procreate, to feed and to sleep, among
Mere mouths, voracities boundless, blind lusts, desires without tongue,
And ferocities vast, fulfilling their being's malignant law,
While nature was one hunger, and one hate, all fangs and maw.

This, of course, is the vision of the evolutionist looking back to the past, and holding that man, evolved from a speck of protoplasm, passed gradually upward from the very lowest forms of life, through innumerable transformations, before reaching the state of intelligence. But the

period especially referred to in these lines is the period before maternal love showed itself, the period preceding the appearance of the mammalia or milk-giving animals. Then indeed Nature was, as the poet says, only hunger and lust. Reason had not yet gleamed. For the moment that he first perceives this vision of his own past, man feels a little humble, and his pride is abased. But very soon he turns to God with a reproach upon his lips, saying, "Is not this fact the proof of my divinity? If I have been able to rise up from such depths, shall I not be able in the future to rise far beyond them? I am not ashamed." God answers, "Look now to the future that you talk about; I will give you the power to see." Then man looks, and he perceives the great periods of disintegration and of dissolution which philosophers tell us about, the periods when worlds become old and suns burn dim, and are finally extinguished for ever in the infinite night. For evolution does not mean only a development; it likewise means a decline. Here, however, there is a slight criticism to be made upon the poet's idea. There are two great phases of evolution correctly suggested by him; but there is a vaster phase of the subject which, unlike George Meredith, he does not appear to have perceived.

Indeed, the digression which I now venture to make embodies the principal object of this lecture. It is quite as important that you should understand the philosophical weaknesses of a poet, as that you should understand his strong points. Otherwise he might be able to set up in your minds a totally wrong train of thinking. Those who have a superficial knowledge only of evolutional philosophy are apt to imagine that it teaches a definite end and a definite beginning of universes. As for a beginning, the philosophy confesses itself to be sublimely ignorant. Here it can only theorize. It is not impossible, nor even improbable, that there may have been a beginning of what we call matter, because the latest chemical science gives some evidence of the extraordinary possibility that all com-

pound forms of matter have been evolved in a totally unknown way, from simpler forms. On the other hand, we have tolerably good evidence as to how universes begin and end as systems. But this beginning or ending is only a beginning or ending of particular forms. Really an ending is utterly inconceivable. The end of one evolution is only the beginning of another. When the suns burn out and worlds crumble to dust, new suns and worlds arise from the wreck. That is the real teaching of evolutional philosophy, and it is in accord with Oriental thought. But there is more than this. It is almost certain that the history of one universe will affect the history of a succeeding universe, just as the actions and habits of our own generation must certainly have some effect upon the habits and manners of our descendants. The experience not only of mind, but even of what we call matter, have tendencies that will influence future forms of mind and matter; and thus an enormous ethical system is suggested by the real evolutional philosophy. Meredith is the only English poet who has fully expressed this truth. Watson has not even perceived it. But this fact does not prevent his poem from being very interesting in itself, because of the way it treats a problem that no philosophy can perfectly explain.

To return to the story. Man is not distressed by perceiving the future which God shows him — the end of the human race and the crumbling of the world in darkness. On the contrary, with desperate courage he proclaims, "I shall conquer death and make myself the equal of God." A tremendous time of struggle follows; but human intelligence at last wins the battle. Death is conquered; and even God is surprised.

So, to each star in the heavens, the exultant word was blown,
The annunciation tremendous, *Death is overthrown!*
And Space in her ultimate borders, prolonging the jubilant tone,
With hollow ingeminations, sighed, *Death is overthrown!*
And God in His house of silence, where He dwelleth aloof, alone,
Paused in His tasks to hearken: *Death is overthrown!*

But what is the consequence? For a short time man is very happy indeed, but only for a time. All things have become possible to him — and he has nothing more to do. He has no pleasure of hope, because there is nothing to hope for which he has not already got. He has no pleasure of effort, because there is nothing for which to make an effort. Pleasures soon become uninviting to the idle; man's intelligence has at last condemned him to eternal agonies. Then for the first time he recognizes that pleasure is impossible without pain, that they are connected inseparably as light and shadow. In a little while man becomes frightfully unhappy, cursed with eternal life and unable to use that life to any purpose. So he humbles himself at last before God, praying for only one thing, the blessed gift of death. God hears the prayer. Death is loosened and returns among men; and they welcome him as their best friend. And God says to the spirit of man in conclusion, as an explanation of all that man could not understand:

"O Man, My creature, thy lot was more blest than Mine.
I taste not delight of seeking, nor the boon of longing know.
There is but one joy transcendent, and I hoard it not but bestow.
I hoard it not nor have tasted, but freely I gave it thee—
The joy of most glorious striving, which dieth in victory."

Thus the poem proclaims that there is really no happiness worth having except the happiness of effort. This is not a commonplace saying at all. It is a very deep saying, and contains what seems to me the nearest possible approach to the truth of life. Perhaps there may occur to you, in contrast to it, the Eastern religious saying that the highest happiness is rest. But the two declarations do not really contradict each other. Rest would be the highest happiness, perhaps, for unconditioned being; but for being having form, having body, capable of joy and sorrow, pain and pleasure, rest could be of no possible value. In the last part of the poem the poet really brings us face to face with an apparent solution of the problem of pain. The verse is

sometimes rough and uneven; the poem is great only as a fancy; but as a fancy it is one of the most remarkable composed during the Victorian age; and I should therefore recommend you to read it carefully and to think about it. I also venture to say that it is the most remarkable thing which Watson has done, though by no means the most perfect. Much more perfect is a little piece, somewhat in the manner of Blake, called "World-Strangeness."

Strange the world about me lies,
  Never yet familiar grown—
Still disturbs me with surprise,
  Haunts me like a face half known.

In this house with starry dome,
  Floored with gemlike plains and seas,
Shall I never feel at home,
  Never wholly be at ease?

On from room to room I stray,
  Yet my Host can ne'er espy,
And I know not to this day
  Whether guest or captive I.

So, between the starry dome
  And the floor of plains and seas,
I have never felt at home,
  Never wholly been at ease.