WILLIAM BLAKE AND HIS ILLUSTRATIONS TO *THE DIVINE COMEDY*

I. HIS OPINIONS UPON ART

William Blake was the first writer of modern times to preach the indissoluble marriage of all great art with symbol. There had been allegorists and teachers of allegory in plenty, but the symbolic imagination, or, as Blake preferred to call it, 'vision,' is not allegory, being 'a representation of what actually exists really and unchangeably.' A symbol is indeed the only possible expression of some invisible essence, a transparent lamp about a spiritual flame; while allegory is one of many possible representations of an embodied thing, or familiar principle, and belongs to fancy and not to imagination: the one is a revelation, the other an amusement. It is happily no part of my purpose to expound in detail the relations he believed to exist between symbol and mind, for in doing so I should come upon not a few doctrines which, though they have not been difficult to many simple persons, ascetics wrapped in skins, women who had cast away all common knowledge, peasants dreaming by their sheepfolds upon the hills, are full of obscurity to the man of modern culture; but it is necessary to just touch upon these relations, because in them was the
fountain of much of the practice and of all the precept of his artistic life.

If a man would enter into 'Noah's rainbow,' he has written, and 'make a friend' of one of 'the images of wonder' which dwell there, and which always entreat him 'to leave mortal things,' 'then would he arise from the grave and meet the Lord in the air'; and by this rainbow, this sign of a covenant granted to him who is with Shem and Japhet, 'painting, poetry and music,' 'the three powers in man of conversing with Paradise which the flood "of time and space" did not sweep away,' Blake represented the shapes of beauty haunting our moments of inspiration: shapes held by most for the frailest of ephemera, but by him for a people older than the world, citizens of eternity, appearing and reappearing in the minds of artists and of poets, creating all we touch and see by casting distorted images of themselves upon 'the vegetable glass of nature'; and because beings, none the less symbols, blossoms, as it were, growing from invisible immortal roots, hands, as it were, pointing the way into some divine labyrinth. If 'the world of imagination' was 'the world of eternity,' as this doctrine implied, it was of less importance to know men and nature than to distinguish the beings and substances of imagination from those of a more perishable kind, created by the phantasy, in uninspired moments, out of memory and whim; and this
could best be done by purifying one's mind, as with a flame, in study of the works of the great masters, who were great because they had been granted by divine favour a vision of the unfallen world from which others are kept apart by the flaming sword that turns every way; and by flying from the painters who studied 'the vegetable glass' for its own sake, and not to discover there the shadows of imperishable beings and substances, and who entered into their own minds, not to make the unfallen world a test of all they heard and saw and felt with the senses, but to cover the naked spirit with 'the rotten rags of memory' of older sensations. The struggle of the first part of his life had been to distinguish between these two schools, and to cleave always to the Florentine, and so to escape the fascination of those who seemed to him to offer the sleep of nature to a spirit weary with the labours of inspiration; but it was only after his return to London from Felpham in 1804 that he finally escaped from 'temptations and perturbations' which sought to destroy 'the imaginative power' at 'the hands of Venetian and Flemish Demons.' 'The spirit of Titian'—and one must always remember that he had only seen poor engravings, and what his disciple, Palmer, has called 'picture-dealers' Titians'—was particularly active in raising doubts concerning the possibility of executing without a model; and when once he had

William Blake and his Illustrations.
raised the doubt it became easy for him to snatch away the vision time after time'; and Blake's imagination 'weakened' and 'darkened' until a 'memory of nature and of the pictures of various schools possessed his mind, instead of appropriate execution' flowing from the vision itself. But now he wrote, 'O glory, and O delight! I have entirely reduced that spectrous fiend to his station'—he had overcome the merely reasoning and sensual portion of the mind—'whose annoyance has been the ruin of my labours for the last twenty years of my life. . . . I speak with perfect confidence and certainty of the fact which has passed upon me. Nebuchadnezzar had seven times passed over him, I have had twenty; thank God I was not altogether a beast as he was. . . . Suddenly, on the day after visiting the Truchsessen Gallery of pictures'—this was a gallery containing pictures by Albrecht Dürer and by the great Florentines—'I was again enlightened with the light I enjoyed in my youth, and which had for exactly twenty years been closed from me, as by a door and window shutters. . . . Excuse my enthusiasm, or rather madness, for I am really drunk with intellectual vision whenever I take a pencil or graver in my hand, as I used to be in my youth.'

This letter may have been the expression of a moment's enthusiasm, but was more probably rooted in one of those intuitions of
coming technical power which every creator feels, and learns to rely upon; for all his greatest work was done, and the principles of his art were formulated, after this date. Except a word here and there, his writings hitherto had not dealt with the principles of art except remotely and by implication; but now he wrote much upon them, and not in obscure symbolic verse, but in emphatic prose, and explicit if not very poetical rhyme. In his Descriptive Catalogue, in The Address to the Public, in the notes on Sir Joshua Reynolds, in The Book of Moonlight—of which some not very dignified rhymes alone remain—in beautiful detached passages in The M.S. Book, he explained spiritual art, and praised the painters of Florence and their influence, and cursed all that has come of Venice and Holland. The limitation of his view was from the very intensity of his vision; he was a too literal realist of imagination, as others are of nature; and because he believed that the figures seen by the mind’s eye, when exalted by inspiration, were ‘eternal existences,’ symbols of divine essences, he hated every grace of style that might obscure their lineaments. To wrap them about in reflected lights was to do this, and to dwell over-fondly upon any softness of hair or flesh was to dwell upon that which was least permanent and least characteristic, for ‘The great and golden rule of art, as of life, is this: that the more distinct, sharp and
wiry the boundary-line, the more perfect the work of art; and the less keen and sharp, the greater is the evidence of weak imitation, plagiarism and bungling.' Inspiration was to see the permanent and characteristic in all forms, and if you had it not, you must needs imitate with a languid mind the things you saw or remembered, and so sink into the sleep of nature where all is soft and melting. 'Great inventors in all ages knew this. Protogenes and Apelles knew each other by their line. Raphael and Michael Angelo and Albert Dürer are known by this and this alone. How do we distinguish the owl from the beast, the horse from the ox, but by the bounding outline? How do we distinguish one face or countenance from another but by the bounding-line and its infinite inflections and movements? What is it that builds a house and plants a garden but the definite and determinate? What is it that distinguished honesty from knavery but the hard and wiry line of rectitude and certainty in the actions and intentions? Leave out this line and you leave out life itself; and all in chaos again, and the line of the Almighty must be drawn out upon it before man or beast can exist.' He even insisted that 'colouring does not depend upon where the colours are put, but upon where the light and dark are put, and all depends upon the form or outline'—meaning, I suppose, that a colour gets its brillianc
or its depth from being in light or in shadow. He does not mean by outline the bounding-line dividing a form from its background, as one of his commentators has thought, but the line that divides it from surrounding space, and unless you have an overmastering sense of this you cannot draw true beauty at all, but only 'the beauty that is appended to folly,' a beauty of mere voluptuous softness, 'a lamentable accident of the mortal and perishing life,' for 'the beauty proper for sublime art is lineaments, or forms and features capable of being the receptacles of intellect,' and 'the face or limbs that alter least from youth to old age are the face and limbs of the greatest beauty and perfection.' His praise of a severe art had been beyond price had his age rested a moment to listen, in the midst of its enthusiasm for Correggio and the later Renaissance, for Bartolozzi and for Stothard; and yet in his visionary realism, and in his enthusiasm for what, after all, is perhaps the greatest art, and a necessary part of every picture that is art at all, he forgot how he who wraps the vision in lights and shadows, in iridescent or glowing colour, having in the midst of his labour many little visions of these secondary essences, until form be half lost in pattern, may compel the canvas or paper to become itself a symbol of some not indefinite because unsearchable essence; for is not the Bacchus and Ariadne of Titian a talisman as powerfully
charged with intellectual virtue as though it were a jewel-studded door of the city seen on Patmos?

To cover the imperishable lineaments of beauty with shadows and reflected lights was to fall into the power of his ‘Vala,’ the indolent fascination of nature, the woman divinity who is so often described in ‘the prophetic books,’ as ‘sweet pestilence,’ and whose children weave webs to take the souls of men; but there was a yet more lamentable chance, for nature has also a ‘masculine portion’ or ‘spectre’ which kills instead of merely hiding, and is continually at war with inspiration. To ‘generalize’ forms and shadows, to ‘smooth out’ spaces and lines in obedience to ‘laws of composition,’ and of painting; founded not upon imagination, which always thirsts for variety and delights in freedom, but upon reasoning from sensation which is always seeking to reduce everything to a lifeless and slavish uniformity; as the popular art of Blake’s day had done, and as he understood Sir Joshua Reynolds to advise, was to fall into ‘Entuthon Benithon,’ or ‘the Lake of Udan Adan,’ or some other of those regions where the imagination and the flesh are alike dead, that he names by so many resonant phantastical names. ‘General knowledge is remote knowledge,’ he wrote; ‘it is in particulars that wisdom consists, and happiness too. Both in art and life general masses are
as much art as a pasteboard man is human. Every man has eyes, nose and mouth; this every idiot knows. But he who enters into and discriminates most minutely the manners and intentions, the characters in all their branches, is the alone wise or sensible man, and on this discrimination all art is founded.

... As poetry admits not a letter that is insignificant, so painting admits not a grain of sand or a blade of grass insignificant, much less an insignificant blot or blur.

Against another desire of his time, derivative also from what he has called 'corporeal reason,' the desire for 'a tepid moderation,' for a lifeless 'sanity in both art and life,' he had protested years before with a paradoxical violence. 'The roadway of excess leads to the palace of wisdom,' and we must only 'bring out weight and measure in time of dearth.' This protest, carried, in the notes on Sir Joshua Reynolds, to the point of dwelling with pleasure on the thought that 'The Lives of the Painters say that Raphael died of dissipation,' because dissipation is better than emotional penury, seemed as important to his old age as to his youth. He taught it to his disciples, and one finds it in its purely artistic shape in a diary written by Samuel Palmer, in 1824: 'Excess is the essential vivifying spirit, vital spark, embalming spice of the finest art. There are many mediums in the means—none, oh, not a jot, not a shadow of a
jot, in the end of great art. In a picture whose merit is to be excessively brilliant, it can’t be too brilliant, but individual tints may be too brilliant. . . . We must not begin with medium, but think always on excess and only use medium to make excess more abundantly excessive.’

These three primary commands, to seek a determinate outline, to avoid a generalized treatment, and to desire always abundance and exuberance, were insisted upon with vehement anger, and their opponents called again and again ‘demons’ and ‘villains,’ ‘hired’ by the wealthy and the idle; but in private, Palmer has told us, he could find ‘sources of delight throughout the whole range of art,’ and was ever ready to praise excellence in any school, finding, doubtless, among friends, no need for the emphasis of exaggeration. There is a beautiful passage in ‘Jerusalem’ in which the merely mortal part of the mind, ‘the spectre,’ creates ‘pyramids of pride,’ and ‘pillars in the deepest hell to reach the heavenly arches,’ and seeks to discover wisdom in ‘the spaces between the stars,’ not ‘in the stars,’ where it is, but the immortal part makes all his labours vain, and turns his pyramids to ‘grains of sand,’ his ‘pillars’ to ‘dust on the fly’s wing,’ and makes of ‘his starry heavens a moth of gold and silver mocking his anxious grasp.’ So when man’s desire to rest from spiritual labour, and
his thirst to fill his art with mere sensation and memory, seem upon the point of triumph, some miracle transforms them to a new inspiration; and here and there among the pictures born of sensation and memory is the murmur of a new ritual, the glimmering of new talismans and symbols.

- It was during and after the writing of these opinions that Blake did the various series of pictures which have brought him the bulk of his fame. He had already completed the illustrations to Young's *Night Thoughts*—in which the great sprawling figures, a little wearisome even with the luminous colours of the original water-colour, became nearly intolerable in plain black and white—and almost all the illustrations to 'the prophetic books,' which have an energy like that of the elements, but are rather rapid sketches taken while some phantasmic procession swept over him, than elaborate compositions, and in whose shadowy adventures one finds not merely, as did Dr. Garth Wilkinson, 'the hells of the ancient people, the Anakim, the Nephilim, and the Rephaim . . . gigantic petrifications from which the fires of lust and intense selfish passion have long dissipated what was animal and vital'; not merely the shadows cast by the powers who had closed the light from him as 'with a door and window shutters,' but the shadows of those who gave them battle. He did now, however, the many designs to
Milton, of which I have only seen those to *Paradise Regained*; the reproductions of those to *Comus*, published, I think, by Mr. Quaritch; and the three or four to *Paradise Lost*, engraved by Bell Scott—a series of designs which one good judge considers his greatest work; the illustrations to Blair’s *Grave*, whose gravity and passion struggled with the mechanical softness and trivial smoothness of Schiavonetti’s engraving; the illustrations to Thornton’s *Virgil*, whose influence is manifest in the work of the little group of landscape-painters who gathered about him in his old age and delighted to call him master. The member of the group, whom I have already so often quoted, has alone praised worthily these illustrations to the first eclogue: ‘There is in all such a misty and dreamy glimmer as penetrates and kindles the inmost soul and gives complete and unreserved delight, unlike the gaudy daylight of this world. They are like all this wonderful artist’s work, the drawing aside of the fleshly curtain, and the glimpse which all the most holy, studious saints and sages have enjoyed, of the rest which remains to the people of God.’ Now, too, he did the great series, the crowning work of his life, the illustrations to *The Book of Job* and the illustrations to *The Divine Comedy*. Hitherto, he had protested against the mechanical ‘dots and lozenges’ and ‘blots and blurs’ of Woollett and Strange, but had himself used both ‘dot
and lozenge,' 'blot and blur,' though always
in subordination 'to a firm and determinate
outline'; but in Marc Antonio, certain of
whose engravings he was shown by Linnell,
he found a style full of delicate lines, a style
where all was living and energetic, strong and
subtle. And almost his last words, a letter
written upon his death-bed, attack the 'dots
and lozenges' with even more than usually
quaint symbolism, and praise expressive lines.
'I know that the majority of Englishmen are
bound by the indefinite . . . a line is a line
in its minutest particulars, straight or crooked.
It is itself not intermeasurable by anything
else . . . ' but since the French Revolution
—since the reign of reason began, that is—
'Englishmen are all intermeasurable with one
another, certainly a happy state of agreement
in which I do not agree.' The Dante series
occupied the last years of his life; even when
too weak to get out of bed he worked on,
propped up with the great drawing-book
before him. He sketched a hundred designs,
but left all incomplete, some very greatly so,
and partly engraved seven plates, of which
the 'Francesca and Paolo' is the most finished.
It is not, I think, inferior to any but the finest
in the Job, if indeed to them, and shows in
its perfection Blake's mastery over elemental
things, the swirl in which the lost spirits are
hurried, 'a watery flame' he would have called
it, the haunted waters and the huddling shapes.
In the illustrations of Purgatory there is a serene beauty, and one finds his Dante and Virgil climbing among the rough rocks under a cloudy sun, and in their sleep upon the smooth steps towards the summit, a placid, marmoreal, tender, starry rapture.

All in this great series are in some measure powerful and moving; and not, as it is customary to say of the work of Blake, because a flaming imagination pierces through a cloudy and indecisive technique, but because they have the only excellence possible in any art, a mastery over artistic expression. The technique of Blake was imperfect, incomplete, as is the technique of well-nigh all artists who have striven to bring fires from remote summits; but where his imagination is perfect and complete, his technique has a like perfection, a like completeness. He strove to embody more subtle raptures, more elaborate intuitions than any before him; his imagination and technique are more broken and strained under a great burden than the imagination and technique of any other master. 'I am,' wrote Blake, 'like others, just equal in invention and execution.' And again, 'No man can improve an original invention; nor can an original invention exist without execution, organized, delineated and articulated either by God or man... I have heard people say, “Give me the ideas; it is no matter what words you put them into”; and
others say, "Give me the designs; it is no matter for the execution." . . . Ideas cannot be given but, in their minutely appropriate words, nor can a design be made without its minutely appropriate execution." Living in a time when technique and imagination are continually perfect and complete, because they no longer strive to bring fire from heaven, we forget how imperfect and incomplete they were in even the greatest masters, in Botticelli, in Orcagna, and in Giotto.

The errors in the handiwork of exalted spirits are as the more phantastical errors in their lives; as Coleridge's opium cloud; as Villiers De L'Isle Adam's candidature for the throne of Greece; as Blake's anger against causes and purposes he but half understood; as the flickering madness an Eastern scripture would allow in august dreamers; for he who half lives in eternity endures a rending of the structures of the mind, a crucifixion of the intellectual body.

II. HIS OPINIONS ON DANTE.

As Blake sat bent over the great drawing-book, in which he made his designs to The Divine Comedy, he was very certain that he and Dante represented spiritual states which face one another in an eternal enmity. Dante, because a great poet, was 'inspired by the Holy Ghost'; but his inspiration was mingled with a certain philosophy, blown up out of his age,
which Blake held for mortal and the enemy of immortal things, and which from the earliest times has sat in high places and ruled the world. This philosophy was the philosophy of soldiers, of men of the world, of priests busy with government, of all who, because of the absorption in active life, have been persuaded to judge and to punish, and partly also, he admitted, the philosophy of Christ, who in descending into the world had to take on the world; who, in being born of Mary, a symbol of the law in Blake’s symbolic language, had to ‘take after his mother,’ and drive the money-changers out of the Temple. Opposed to this was another philosophy, not made by men of action, drudges of time and space, but by Christ when wrapped in the divine essence, and by artists and poets, who are taught by the nature of their craft to sympathize with all living things, and who, the more pure and fragrant is their lamp, pass the further from all limitations, to come at last to forget good and evil in an absorbing vision of the happy and the unhappy. The one philosophy was worldly, and established for the ordering of the body and the fallen will, and so long as it did not call its ‘laws of prudence’ ‘the laws of God,’ was a necessity, because ‘you cannot have liberty in this world without what you call moral virtue’; the other was divine, and established for the peace of the imagination and the unfallen will, and, even when obeyed
with a too little reverence, could make men sin against no higher principality than prudence. He called the followers of the first philosophy pagans, no matter by what name they knew themselves, because the pagans, as he understood the word pagan, believed more in the outward life, and in what he called 'war, prisedom, and victory,' than in the secret life of the spirit; and the followers of the second philosophy Christians, because only those whose sympathies had been enlarged and instructed by art and poetry could obey the Christian command of unlimited forgiveness. Blake had already found this 'pagan' philosophy in Swedenborg, in Milton, in Wordsworth, in Sir Joshua Reynolds, in many persons, and it had roused him so constantly and to such angry paradox that its overthrow became the signal passion of his life, and filled all he did and thought with the excitement of a supreme issue. Its kingdom was bound to grow weaker so soon as life began to lose a little in crude passion and naïve tumult, but Blake was the first to announce its successor, and he did this, as must needs be with revolutionists who have 'the law' for 'mother,' with a firm conviction that the things his opponents held white were indeed black, and that the things they held black, white; with a strong persuasion that all busy with government are men of darkness and 'something other than human life'; one is reminded of
Shelley, who was the next to take up the cry, though with a less abundant philosophic faculty, but still more of Nietzsche, whose thought flows always, though with an even more violent current, in the bed Blake’s thought has worn.

The kingdom that was passing was, he held, the kingdom of the Tree of Knowledge; the kingdom that was coming was the kingdom of the Tree of Life: men who ate from the Tree of Knowledge wasted their days in anger against one another, and in taking one another captive in great nets; men who sought their food among the green leaves of the Tree of Life condemned none but the unimaginative and the idle, and those who forget that even love and death and old age are an imaginative art.

In these opposing kingdoms is the explanation of the petulant sayings he wrote on the margins of the great sketch-book, and of those others, still more petulant, which Crabb Robinson has recorded in his diary. The sayings about the forgiveness of sins have no need for further explanation, and are in contrast with the attitude of that excellent commentator, Herr Hettinger, who, though Dante swooned from pity at the tale of Francesca, will only ‘sympathize’ with her ‘to a certain extent,’ being taken in a theological net. ‘It seems as if Dante,’ Blake wrote, ‘supposes God was something superior to the Father of Jesus; for if He gives rain to the evil and the good, and
His sun to the just and the unjust, He can never have builded Dante’s Hell, nor the Hell of the Bible, as our parsons explain it. It must have been framed by the dark spirit itself, and so I understand it.’ And again, ‘Whatever task is of vengeance and whatever is against forgiveness of sin is not of the Father but of Satan, the accuser, the father of Hell.’ And again, and this time, to Crabb Robinson, ‘Dante saw devils where I saw none. I see good only.’ ‘I have never known a very bad man who had not something very good about him.’ This forgiveness was not the forgiveness of the theologian who has received a commandment from afar off, but of the poet and artist, who believes he has been taught, in a mystical vision, ‘that the imagination is the man himself,’ and believes he has discovered in the practice of his art that without a perfect sympathy there is no perfect imagination, and therefore no perfect life. At another moment he called Dante ‘an atheist, a mere politician busied about this world, as Milton was, till, in his old age, returned to God whom he had had in his childhood.’ ‘Everything is atheism,’ he has already explained, ‘which assumed the reality of the natural and unspiritual world.’ Dante, he held, assumed its reality when he made obedience to its laws a condition of man’s happiness hereafter, and he set Swedenborg beside Dante in misbelief for calling Nature ‘the ultimate of Heaven,’ a
lowest rung, as it were, of Jacob's ladder, instead of a net woven by Satan to entangle our wandering joys and bring our hearts into captivity. There are certain curious unfinished diagrams scattered here and there among the now separated pages of the sketch-book, and of these there is one which, had it had all its concentric rings filled with names, would have been a systematic exposition of his animosities and of their various intensity. It represents Paradise, and in the midst where Dante emerges from the earthly Paradise, is written 'Homer,' and in the next circle 'Swedenborg,' and on the margin these words: 'Everything in Dante's Paradise shows that he has made the earth the foundation of all, and its goddess Nature, memory,' memory of sensations, 'not the Holy Ghost. . . . Round Purgatory is Paradise, and round Paradise vacuum. Homer is the centre of all, I mean the poetry of the heathen.' The statement that round Paradise is vacuum is a proof of the persistence of his ideas, and of his curiously literal understanding of his own symbols; for it is but another form of the charge made against Milton many years before in *The Marriage of Heaven and Hell*. 'In Milton the Father is destiny, the Son a ratio of the five senses,' Blake's definition of the reason which is the enemy of the imagination, 'and the Holy Ghost vacuum.' Dante, like other mediaeval mystics, symbolized the highest order of created beings by the fixed
stars, and God by the darkness beyond them, the Primum Mobile. Blake, absorbed in his very different vision, in which God took always a human shape, believed that to think of God under a symbol, drawn from the outer world was in itself idolatry, but that to imagine Him as an unpeopled immensity was to think of Him under the one symbol furthest from His esse, ice—it being a creation of the ruining reason, ‘generalizing’ away ‘the minute particulars of life.’ Instead of seeking God in the deserts of time and space, in exterior immensities, in what he called ‘the abstract void,’ he believed that the further he dropped behind him memory of time and space, reason builted upon sensation, morality founded for the ordering of the world; and the more he was absorbed in emotion; and, above all, in emotion escaped from the impulse of bodily longing and the restraints of bodily reason, in artistic emotion; the nearer did he come to Eden’s ‘breathing garden,’ to use his beautiful phrase, and to the unveiled face of God. No worthy symbol of God existed but the inner world, the true humanity, to whose various aspects he gave many names, ‘Jerusalem,’ ‘Liberty,’ ‘Eden,’ ‘The Divine Vision,’ ‘The Body of God,’ ‘The Human Form Divine,’ ‘The Divine Members,’ and whose most intimate expression was art and poetry. He always sang of God under this symbol:
Ideas of Good and Evil.

For Mercy, Pity, Peace, and Love,
Is God our Father dear;
And Mercy, Pity, Peace, and Love
Is man, His child and care.

For Mercy has a human heart;
Pity a human face;
And Love the human form divine;
And Peace, the human dress.

Then every man of every clime,
That prays in his distress,
Prays to the human form divine—
Love, Mercy, Pity, Peace.

Whenever he gave this symbol a habitation in space he set it in the sun, the father of light and life; and set in the darkness beyond the stars, where light and life die away, Og and Anak and the giants that were of old, and the iron throne of Satan.

By thus contrasting Blake and Dante by the light of Blake’s paradoxical wisdom, and as though there was no important truth hung from Dante’s beam of the balance, I but seek to interpret a little-understood philosophy rather than one incorporate in the thought and habits of Christendom. Every philosophy has half its truth from times and generations; and to us one-half of the philosophy of Dante is less living than his poetry, while the truth Blake preached and sang and painted is the root of the cultivated life, of the fragile perfect blossom of the world born in ages of leisure.
and peace, and never yet to last more than a little season; the life those Phæacians, who told Odysseus that they had set their hearts in nothing but in ‘the dance and changes of raiment, and love and sleep,’ lived before Poseidon heaped a mountain above them; the lives of all who, having eaten of the Tree of Life, love, more than did the barbarous ages when none had time to live, ‘the minute particulars of life, the little fragments of space and time, which are wholly flooded by beautiful emotion because they are so little they are hardly of time and space at all. ‘Every space smaller than a globule of man’s blood,’ he wrote, ‘opens into eternity of which this vegetable earth is but a shadow.’ And again, ‘Every time less than a pulsation of the artery is equal’ in its tenor and value ‘to six thousand years, for in this period the poet’s work is done, and all the great events of time start forth, and are conceived: in such a period within a moment, a pulsation of the artery.’ Dante, indeed, taught, in the ‘Purgatorio,’ that sin and virtue are alike from love, and that love is from God; but this love he would restrain by a complex eternal law, a complex external Church. Blake upon the other hand cried scorn upon the whole spectacle of external things, a vision to pass away in a moment, and preached the cultivated life, the internal Church which has no laws but beauty, rapture and labour. ‘I know of no other Christianity,
and of no other gospel, than the liberty, both of body and mind, to exercise the divine arts of imagination, the real and eternal world of which this vegetable universe is but a faint shadow, and in which we shall live in our eternal or imaginative bodies when these vegetable mortal bodies are no more. The Apostles knew of no other gospel. What are all their spiritual gifts? What is the divine spirit? Is the Holy Ghost any other than an intellectual fountain? What is the harvest of the gospel and its labours? What is the talent which it is a curse to hide? What are the treasures of heaven which we are to lay up for ourselves? Are they any other than mental studies and performances? What are all the gifts of the gospel, are they not all mental gifts? Is God a spirit who must be worshipped in spirit and truth? Are not the gifts of the spirit everything to man? O ye religious! discountenance every one among you who shall pretend to despise art and science. I call upon you in the name of Jesus! What is the life of man but art and science? Is it meat and drink? Is not the body more than raiment? What is mortality but the things relating to the body which dies? What is immortality but the things relating to the spirit which lives immortally? What is the joy of Heaven but improvement in the things of the spirit? What are the pains of Hell but ignorance, idleness, bodily lust, and the
devastation of the things of the spirit? Answer this for yourselves, and expel from amongst you those who pretend to despise the labours of art and science, which alone are the labours of the gospel. Is not this plain and manifest to the thought? Can you think at all, and not pronounce heartily that to labour in knowledge is to build Jerusalem, and to despise knowledge is to despise Jerusalem and her builders? And remember, he who despises and mocks a mental gift in another, calling it pride, and selfishness, and sin, mocks Jesus, the giver of every mental gift, which always appear to the ignorance-loving hypocrites as sins. But that which is sin in the sight of cruel man is not sin in the sight of our kind God. Let every Christian as much as in him lies engage himself openly and publicly before all the world in some mental pursuit for the building of Jerusalem.' I have given the whole of this long passage because, though the very keystone of his thought, it is little known, being sunk, like nearly all of his most profound thoughts, in the mysterious prophetic books. Obscure about much else, they are always lucid on this one point, and return to it again and again. 'I care not whether a man is good or bad,' are the words they put into the mouth of God, 'all I care is whether he is a wise man or a fool. Go put off holiness and put on intellect.' This cultivated life, which seems
to us so artificial a thing, is really, according to them, the laborious re-discovery of the golden age, of the primeval simplicity, of the simple world in which Christ taught and lived, and its lawlessness is the lawlessness of Him 'who being all virtue, acted from impulse and not from rules,'

And His seventy disciples sent
Against religion and government.

The historical Christ was indeed no more than the supreme symbol of the artistic imagination, in which, with every passion wrought to perfect beauty by art and poetry, we shall live, when the body has passed away for the last time; but before that hour man must labour through many lives and many deaths. 'Men are admitted into heaven not because they have curbed and governed their passions, but because they have cultivated their understandings. The treasures of heaven are not negations of passion but realities of intellect from which the passions emanate uncurbed in their eternal glory. The fool shall not enter into heaven, let him be ever so holy. Holiness is not the price of entering into heaven. Those who are cast out are all those who, having no passions of their own, because no intellect, have spent their lives in curbing and governing other people's lives by the various arts of poverty and cruelty of all kinds. The modern Church
crucifies Christ with the head downwards. Woe, woe, woe to you hypocrites.' After a time man has 'to return to the dark valley whence he came and begin his labours anew,' but before that return he dwells in the freedom of imagination, in the peace of the 'divine image,' 'the divine vision,' in the peace that passes understanding and is the peace of art. 'I have been very near the gates of death,' Blake wrote in his last letter, 'and have returned very weak and an old man, feeble and tottering but not in spirit and life, not in the real man, the imagination which liveth for ever. In that I grow stronger and stronger as this foolish body decays. . . . Flaxman is gone, and we must all soon follow, every one to his eternal home, leaving the delusions of goddess Nature and her laws, to get into freedom from all the laws of the numbers,' the multiplicity of nature, 'into the mind in which every one is king and priest in his own house.' The phrase about the king and priest is a memory of the crown and mitre set upon Dante's head before he entered Paradise. Our imaginations are but fragments of the universal imagination, portions of the universal body of God, and as we enlarge our imagination by imaginative sympathy, and transform with the beauty and peace of art, the sorrows and joys of the world, we put off the limited mortal man more and more and put on the unlimited
‘immortal man.’ ‘As the seed waits eagerly watching for its flower and fruit, anxious its little soul looks out into the clear expanse to see if hungry winds are abroad with their invisible array, so man looks out in tree, and herb, and fish, and bird, and beast, collecting up the fragments of his immortal body into the elemental forms of everything that grows. . . . In pain he sighs, in pain he labours in his universe, sorrowing in birds over the deep, or howling in the wolf over the slain, and moaning in the cattle, and in the winds.’

Mere sympathy for living things is not enough, because we must learn to separate their ‘infected’ from their eternal, their satanic from their divine part; and this can only be done by desiring always beauty, the one mask through which can be seen the unveiled eyes of eternity. We must then be artists in all things, and understand that love and old age and death are first among the arts. In this sense he insists that ‘Christ’s apostles were artists,’ that Christianity is Art,’ and that ‘the whole business of man is the arts.’ Dante, who deified law, selected its antagonist, passion, as the most important of sins, and made the regions where it was punished the largest. Blake, who deified imaginative freedom, held ‘corporeal reason’ for the most accursed of things, because it makes the imagination revolt from the sovereignty of beauty and pass under the
sovereignty of corporeal law, and this is 'the captivity in Egypt.' True art is expressive and symbolic, and makes every form, every sound, every colour, every gesture, a signature of some unanalyzable imaginative essence. False art is not expressive, but mimetic, not from experience but from observation, and is the mother of all evil, persuading us to save our bodies alive at no matter what cost of rapine and fraud. True art is the flame of the last day, which begins for every man, when he is first moved by beauty, and which seeks to burn all things until they become 'infinite and holy.'

III. THE ILLUSTRATIONS OF DANTE.

The late Mr. John Addington Symonds wrote—in a preface to certain Dante illustrations by Stradanus, a sixteenth-century artist of no great excellence, published in phototype by Mr. Unwin in 1892—that the illustrations of Gustave Doré, 'in spite of glaring artistic defects, must, I think, be reckoned first among numerous attempts to translate Dante's conceptions into terms of plastic art.' One can only account for this praise of a noisy and demagogic art by supposing that a temperament, strong enough to explore with unfailing alertness the countless schools and influences of the Renaissance in Italy, is of necessity a little lacking in delicacy of judgment and in the finer substances of emotion. It is
more difficult to account for so admirable a scholar not only preferring these illustrations to the work of what he called 'the graceful and affected Botticelli,'—although 'Doré was fitted for his task; not by dramatic vigour, by feeling for beauty, or by anything sterling in sympathy with the supreme poet's soul, but by a very effective sense of luminosity and gloom'—but preferring them because 'he created a fanciful world, which makes the movement of Dante's *dramatis personae* conceivable, introducing the ordinary intelligence into those vast regions thronged with destinies of souls and creeds and empires.' When the ordinary student finds this intelligence in an illustrator, he thinks, because it is his own intelligence, that it is an accurate interpretation of the text, while work of the extraordinary intelligences is merely an expression of their own ideas and feelings. Doré and Stradatus, he will tell you, have given us something of the world of Dante, but Blake and Botticelli have built worlds of their own and called them Dante's—as if Dante's world were more than a mass of symbols of colour and form and sound which put on humanity, when they arouse some mind to an intense and romantic life that is not theirs; as if it was not one's own sorrows and angers and regrets and terrors and hopes that awaken to condemnation or repentance while Dante treads his eternal pilgrimage; as if any poet or
painter or musician could be other than an enchanter calling with a persuasive or compelling ritual, creatures, noble or ignoble, divine or daemonic, covered with scales or in shining raiment, that he never imagined, out of the bottomless deeps of imaginations he never foresaw; as if the noblest achievement of art was not when the artist enfolds himself in darkness, while he casts over his readers a light as of a wild and terrible dawn.

Let us therefore put away the designs to The Divine Comedy, in which there is 'an ordinary intelligence,' and consider only the designs in which the magical ritual has called up extraordinary shapes, the magical light glimmered upon a world, different from the Dantesque world of our own intelligence in its ordinary and daily moods, upon a difficult and distinguished world. Most of the series of designs to Dante, and there are a good number, need not busy any one for a moment. Genelli has done a copious series, which is very able in the 'formal' 'generalized' way which Blake hated, and which is spiritually ridiculous. Penelli has transformed the 'Inferno' into a vulgar Walpurgis night, and a certain Schuler, whom I do not find in the biographical dictionaries, but who was apparently a German, has prefaced certain flaccid designs with some excellent charts, while Stradanus has made a series for the 'Inferno,' which has so many of the more material and unessential powers of
art, and is so extremely undistinguished in conception, that one supposes him to have touched in the sixteenth century the same public Doré has touched in the nineteenth.

Though with many doubts, I am tempted to value Flaxman’s designs to the ‘Inferno,’ the ‘Purgatorio,’ and the ‘Paradiso,’ only a little above the best of these, because he does not seem to have ever been really moved by Dante, and so to have sunk into a formal manner, which is a reflection of the vital manner of his Homer and Hesiod. His designs to *The Divine Comedy* will be laid, one imagines, with some ceremony in that immortal wastepaper-basket in which Time carries with many sighs the failures of great men. I am perhaps wrong, however, because Flaxman even at his best has not yet touched me very deeply, and I hardly ever hope to escape this limitation of my ruling stars. That Signorelli does not seem greatly more interesting except here and there, as in the drawing of ‘The Angel,’ full of innocence and energy, coming from the boat which has carried so many souls to the foot of the mountain of purgation, can only be because one knows him through poor reproductions from frescoes half mouldered away with damp. A little-known series, drawn by Adolph Stürler, an artist of German extraction, who was settled in Florence in the first half of this century, are very poor in drawing, very pathetic and powerful in invention, and full of most interesting
pre-Raphaelitic detail. There are admirable and moving figures, who, having set love above reason, listen in the last abandonment of despair to the judgment of Minos, or walk with a poignant melancholy to the foot of his throne through a land where owls and strange beasts move hither and thither with the sterile content of the evil that neither loves nor hates, and a Cerberus full of patient cruelty. All Stürler’s designs, have, however, the languor of a mind that does its work by a succession of delicate critical perceptions rather than the decision and energy of true creation, and are more a curious contribution to artistic methods than an imaginative force. The only designs that compete with Blake’s are those of Botticelli and Giulio Clovio, and these contrast rather than compete; for Blake did not live to carry his ‘Paradiso’ beyond the first faint pencillings, the first thin washes of colour, while Botticelli only, as I think, became supremely imaginative in his ‘Paradiso,’ and Clovio never attempted the ‘Inferno’ and ‘Purgatorio’ at all. The imaginations of Botticelli and Clovio were overshadowed by the cloister, and it was only when they passed beyond the world or into some noble peace, which is not the world’s peace, that they won a perfect freedom. Blake had not such mastery over figure and drapery as had Botticelli, but he could sympathize with the persons and delight in the scenery of the ‘Inferno’ and
the 'Purgatorio' as Botticelli could not, and could fill them with a mysterious and spiritual significance born perhaps of mystical pantheism. The flames of Botticelli gave one no emotion, and his car of Beatrice is no symbolic chariot of the Church led by the gryphon, half eagle, half lion, of Christ's dual nature, but is a fragment of some mediæval pageant pictured with a merely technical inspiration. Clovio, the illuminator of missals, has tried to create with that too easy hand of his a Paradise of serene air reflected in a little mirror, a heaven of sociability and humility and prettiness, a heaven of women and of monks; but one cannot imagine him deeply moved, as the modern world is moved, by the symbolism of bird and beast, of tree and mountain, of flame and darkness. It was a profound understanding of all creatures and things, a profound sympathy with passionate and lost souls, made possible in their extreme intensity by his revolt against corporeal law, and corporeal reason, which made Blake the one perfectly fit illustrator for the 'Inferno' and the 'Purgatorio'; in the serene and rapturous emptiness of Dante's Paradise he would find no symbols but a few abstract emblems, and he had no love for the abstract, while with the drapery and the gestures of Beatrice and Virgil, he would have prospered less than Botticelli or even Clovio.

1897.
SYMBOLISM IN PAINTING

In England, which has made great Symbolic Art, most people dislike an art if they are told it is symbolic, for they confuse symbol and allegory. Even Johnson’s Dictionary sees no great difference, for it calls a Symbol ‘That which comprehends in its figure a representation of something else’; and an Allegory, ‘A figurative discourse, in which something other is intended than is contained in the words literally taken.’ It is only a very modern Dictionary that calls a Symbol ‘the sign or representation of any moral thing by the images or properties of natural things,’ which, though an imperfect definition, is not unlike ‘The things below are as the things above’ of the Emerald Tablet of Hermes! The Faerie Queene and The Pilgrim’s Progress have been so important in England that Allegory has overtopped Symbolism, and for a time has overwhelmed it in its own downfall. William Blake was perhaps the first modern to insist on a difference; and the other day, when I sat for my portrait to a German Symbolist in Paris, whose talk was all of his love for Symbolism and his hatred for Allegory, his definitions were the same as William Blake’s, of whom he knew nothing. William Blake has written, ‘Vision or imagination’—meaning symbolism by these words—‘is a representation of what actually exists, really or unchangeably.'
Fable or Allegory is formed by the daughters of Memory.’ The German insisted with many determined gestures, that Symbolism said things which could not be said so perfectly in any other way, and needed but a right instinct for its understanding; while Allegory said things which could be said as well, or better, in another way, and needed a right knowledge for its understanding. The one thing gave dumb things voices, and bodiless things bodies; while the other read a meaning—which had never lacked its voice or its body—into something heard or seen, and loved less for the meaning than for its own sake. The only symbols he cared for were the shapes and motions of the body; ears hidden by the hair, to make one think of a mind busy with inner voices; and a head so bent that back and neck made the one curve, as in Blake’s ‘Vision of Bloodthirstiness,’ ‘to call up an emotion of bodily strength; and he would not put even a lily, or a rose, or a poppy into a picture to express purity, or love, or sleep, because he thought such emblems were allegorical, and had their meaning by a traditional and not by a natural right. I said that the rose, and the lily, and the poppy were so married, by their colour and their odour, and their use, to love and purity, and sleep, or to other symbols of love and purity and sleep, and had been so long a part of the imagination of the world, that a symbolist
might use them to help out his meaning Symbolism without becoming an allegorist. I think I quoted the lily in the hand of the angel in Rossetti’s ‘Annunciation,’ and the lily in the jar in his ‘Childhood of Mary Virgin,’ and thought they made the more important symbols, the women’s bodies, and the angels’ bodies, and the clear morning light, take that place, in the great procession of Christian symbols, where they can alone have all their meaning and all their beauty.

It is hard to say where Allegory and Symbolism melt into one another, but it is not hard to say where either comes to its perfection; and though one may doubt whether Allegory or Symbolism is the greater in the horns of Michael Angelo’s ‘Moses,’ one need not doubt that its symbolism has helped to awaken the modern imagination; while Tintoretto’s ‘Origin of the Milky Way,’ which is Allegory without any Symbolism, is, apart from its fine painting, but a moment’s amusement for our fancy. A hundred generations might write out what seemed the meaning of the one, and they would write different meanings, for no symbol tells all its meaning to any generation; but when you have said, ‘That woman there is Juno, and the milk out of her breast is making the Milky Way,’ you have told the meaning of the other, and the fine painting, which has added so much irrelevant beauty, has not told it better.
All Art that is not mere story-telling, or mere portraiture, is symbolic, and has the purpose of those symbolic talismans which mediæval magicians made with complex colours and forms, and bade their patients ponder over daily, and guard with holy secrecy; for it entangles, in complex colours and forms, a part of the Divine Essence. A person or a landscape that is a part of a story or a portrait, evokes but so much emotion as the story or the portrait can permit without loosening the bonds that make it a story or a portrait; but if you liberate a person or a landscape from the bonds of motives and their actions, causes and their effects, and from all bonds but the bonds of your love, it will change under your eyes, and become a symbol of an infinite emotion, a perfected emotion, a part of the Divine Essence; for we love nothing but the perfect, and our dreams make all things perfect, that we may love them. Religious and visionary people, monks and nuns, and medicine-men and opium-eaters, see symbols in their trances; for religious and visionary thought is thought about perfection and the way to perfection; and symbols are the only things free enough from all bonds to speak of perfection.

Wagner's dramas, Keats' odes, Blake's pictures and poems, Calvert's pictures, Rossetti's pictures, Villiers De L'Isle Adam's plays, and the black-and-white art of Mr. Beardsley and
Mr. Ricketts, and the lithographs of Mr. Symbolism Shannon, and the pictures of Mr. Whistler, in Painting and the plays of M. Maeterlinck, and the poetry of Verlaine, in our own day, but differ from the religious art of Giotto and his disciples in having accepted all symbolisms, the symbolism of the ancient shepherds and star-gazers, that symbolism of bodily beauty which seemed a wicked thing to Fra Angelico, the symbolism in day and night, and winter and summer, spring and autumn, once so great a part of an older religion than Christianity; and in having accepted all the Divine Intellect, its anger and its pity, its waking and its sleep, its love and its lust, for the substance of their art. A Keats or a Calvert is as much a symbolist as a Blake or a Wagner; but he is a fragmentary symbolist, for while he evokes in his persons and his landscapes an infinite emotion, a perfected emotion, a part of the Divine Essence, he does not set his symbols in the great procession as Blake would have him, ‘in a certain order, suited’ to his ‘imaginative energy.’ If you paint a beautiful woman and fill her face, as Rossetti filled so many faces, with an infinite love, a perfected love, ‘one’s eyes meet no mortal thing when they meet the light of her peaceful eyes,’ as Michael Angelo said of Vittoria Colonna; but one’s thoughts stray to mortal things, and ask, maybe, ‘Has her lover gone from her, or is he coming?’ or ‘What predestinated
unhappiness has made the shadow in her eyes? If you paint the same face, and set a winged rose or a rose of gold somewhere about her, one's thoughts are of her immortal sisters, Piety and Jealousy, and of her mother, Ancestral Beauty, and of her high kinsmen, the Holy Orders, whose swords make a continual music before her face. The systematic mystic is not the greatest of artists, because his imagination is too great to be bounded by a picture or a song, and because only imperfection in a mirror of perfection, or perfection in a mirror of imperfection, delight our frailty. There is indeed a systematic mystic in every poet or painter who, like Rossetti, delights in a traditional Symbolism, or, like Wagner, delights in a personal Symbolism; and such men often fall into trances, or have waking dreams. Their thought wanders from the woman who is Love herself, to her sisters and her forebears, and to all the great procession; and so august a beauty moves before the mind, that they forget the things which move before the eyes. William Blake, who was the chanticleer of the new dawn, has written: 'If the spectator could enter into one of these images of his imagination, approaching them on the fiery chariot of his contemplative thought, if . . . . he could make a friend and companion of one of these images of wonder, which always entreat him to leave mortal things (as he must know), then would he arise from
the grave, then would he meet the Lord in the air, and then he would be happy.' And again, 'The world of imagination is the world of Eternity. It is the Divine bosom into which we shall all go after the death of the vegetated body. The world of imagination is infinite and eternal, whereas the world of generation or vegetation is finite and temporal. There exist in that eternal world the eternal realities of everything which we see reflected in the vegetable glass of nature."

Every visionary knows that the mind's eye soon comes to see a capricious and variable world, which the will cannot shape or change, though it can call it up and banish it again. I closed my eyes a moment ago, and a company of people in blue robes swept by me in a blinding light, and had gone before I had done more than see little roses embroidered on the hems of their robes, and confused, blossoming apple-boughs somewhere beyond them, and recognised one of the company by his square black, curling beard. I have often seen him; and one night a year ago, I asked him questions which he answered by showing me flowers and precious stones, of whose meaning I had no knowledge, and he seemed too perfected a soul for any knowledge that cannot be spoken in symbol or metaphor.

Are he and his blue-robed companions, and their like 'the Eternal realities' of which we are the reflection 'in the vegetable glass of
nature, or a momentary dream? To answer is to take sides in the only controversy in which it is greatly worth taking sides, and in the only controversy which may never be decided.

1898.
THE SYMBOLISM OF POETRY.

'Symbolism, as seen in the writers of our day, would have no value if it were not seen also, under one disguise or another, in every great imaginative writer,' writes Mr. Arthur Symons in *The Symbolist Movement in Literature*, a subtle book which I cannot praise as I would, because it has been dedicated to me; and he goes on to show how many profound writers have in the last few years sought for a philosophy of poetry in the doctrine of symbolism, and how even in countries where it is almost scandalous to seek for any philosophy of poetry, new writers are following them in their search. We do not know what the writers of ancient times talked of among themselves, and one bull is all that remains of Shakespeare's talk, who was on the edge of modern times; and the journalist is convinced, it seems, that they talked of wine and women and politics, but never about their art, or never quite seriously about their art. He is certain that no one, who had a philosophy of his art or a theory of how he should write, has ever made a work of art, that people have no imagination who do not write without forethought and afterthought as he writes his own articles. He says this with enthusiasm, because he has heard it at so many comfortable dinner-tables, where some one had mentioned 165
through carelessness, or foolish zeal, a book whose difficulty had offended indolence, or a man who had not forgotten that beauty is an accusation. Those formulas and generalizations, in which a hidden sergeant has drilled the ideas of journalists and through them the ideas of all but all the modern world, have created in their turn a forgetfulness like that of soldiers in battle, so that journalists and their readers have forgotten, among many like events, that Wagner spent seven years arranging and explaining his ideas before he began his most characteristic music; that opera, and with it modern music, arose from certain talks at the house of one Giovanni Bardi of Florence; and that the Pleiade laid the foundations of modern French literature with a pamphlet. Goethe has said, ‘a poet needs all philosophy, but he must keep it out of his work,’ though that is not always necessary; and certainly he cannot know too much, whether about his own work, or about the procreative waters of the soul where the breath first moved, or about the waters under the earth that are the life of passing things; and almost certainly no great art, outside England, where journalists are more powerful and ideas less plentiful than elsewhere, has arisen without a great criticism, for its herald or its interpreter and protector, and it may be for this reason that great art, now that vulgarity has armed itself and multiplied itself, is perhaps dead in England.
All writers, all artists of any kind, in so far as they have had any philosophical or critical power, perhaps just in so far as they have been deliberate artists at all, have had some philosophy, some criticism of their art; and it has often been this philosophy, or this criticism, that has evoked their most startling inspiration, calling into outer life some portion of the divine life, of the buried reality, which could alone extinguish in the emotions what their philosophy or their criticism would extinguish in the intellect. They have sought for no new thing, it may be, but only to understand and to copy the pure inspiration of early times, but because the divine life wars upon our outer life, and must needs change its weapons and its movements as we change ours, inspiration has come to them in beautiful startling shapes. The scientific movement brought with it a literature, which was always tending to lose itself in externalities of all kinds, in opinion, in declamation, in picturesque writing, in word-painting, or in what Mr. Symons has called an attempt ‘to build in brick and mortar inside the covers of a book’; and now writers have begun to dwell upon the element of evocation, of suggestion, upon what we call the symbolism in great writers.

II

In ‘Symbolism in Painting,’ I tried to describe the element of symbolism that is in
pictures and sculpture, and described a little the symbolism in poetry, but did not describe at all the continuous indefinable symbolism which is the substance of all style.

There are no lines with more melancholy beauty than these by Burns—

'The white moon is setting behind the white wave,
And Time is setting with me, O!'

and these lines are perfectly symbolical. Take from them the whiteness of the moon and of the wave, whose relation to the setting of Time is too subtle for the intellect, and you take from them their beauty. But, when all are together, moon and wave and whiteness and setting Time and the last melancholy cry, they evoke an emotion which cannot be evoked by any other arrangement of colours and sounds and forms. We may call this metaphorical writing, but it is better to call it symbolical writing, because metaphors are not profound enough to be moving, when they are not symbols, and when they are symbols they are the most perfect, because the most subtle, outside of pure sound, and through them one can the best find out what symbols are. If one begins the reverie with any beautiful lines that one can remember, one finds they are like those by Burns. Begin with this line by Blake—

'The gay fishes on the wave when the moon sucks up the dew';
or these lines by Nash—

‘Brightness falls from the air,
Queens have died young and fair,
Dust hath closed Helen’s eye’;

or these lines by Shakespeare—

‘Timon hath made his everlasting mansion
Upon the beached verge of the salt flood;
Who once a day with his embossed froth
The turbulent surge shall cover’;

or take some line that is quite simple, that gets its beauty from its place in a story, and see how it flickers with the light of the many symbols that have given the story its beauty, as a sword-blade may flicker with the light of burning towers.

All sounds, all colours, all forms, either because of their pre-ordained energies or because of long association, evoke indefinable and yet precise emotions, or, as I prefer to think, call down among us certain disembodied powers, whose footsteps over our hearts we call emotions; and when sound, and colour, and form are in a musical relation, a beautiful relation to one another, they become as it were one sound, one colour, one form, and evoke an emotion that is made out of their distinct evocations and yet is one emotion. The same relation exists between all portions of every work of art, whether it be an epic or a song, and the more perfect it is, and the more various and numerous the elements that have flowed
into its perfection, the more powerful will be the emotion, the power, the god it calls among us. Because an emotion does not exist, or does not become perceptible and active among us, till it has found its expression, in colour or in sound or in form, or in all of these, and because no two modulations or arrangements of these evoke the same emotion, poets and painters and musicians, and in a less degree because their effects are momentary, day and night and cloud and shadow, are continually making and un-making mankind. It is indeed only those things which seem useless or very feeble that have any power, and all those things that seem useful or strong, armies, moving wheels, modes of architecture, modes of government, speculations of the reason, would have been a little different if some mind long ago had not given itself to some emotion, as a woman gives herself to her lover, and shaped sounds or colours or forms, or all of these, into a musical relation, that their emotion might live in other minds. A little lyric evokes an emotion, and this emotion gathers others about it and melts into their being in the making of some great epic; and at last, needing an always less delicate body, or symbol, as it grows more powerful, it flows out, with all it has gathered, among the blind instincts of daily life, where it moves a power within powers, as one sees ring within ring in the stem of an old tree. This is maybe what
Arthur O’Shaughnessy meant when he made his poets say they had built Nineveh with their sighing; and I am certainly never certain, when I hear of some war, or of some religious excitement or of some new manufacture, or of anything else that fills the ear of the world, that it has not all happened because of something that a boy piped in Thessaly. I remember once asking a seer to ask one among the gods who, as she believed, were standing about her in their symbolic bodies, what would come of a charming but seeming trivial labour of a friend, and the form answering, ‘the devastation of peoples and the overwhelming of cities.’ I doubt indeed if the crude circumstance of the world, which seems to create all our emotions, does more than reflect, as in multiplying mirrors, the emotions that have come to solitary men in moments of poetical contemplation; or that love itself would be more than an animal hunger but for the poet and his shadow the priest, for unless we believe that outer things are the reality, we must believe that the gross is the shadow of the subtle, that things are wise before they become foolish, and secret before they cry out in the market-place. Solitary men in moments of contemplation receive, as I think, the creative impulse from the lowest of the Nine Hierarchies, and so make and unmake mankind, and even the world itself, for does not ‘the eye altering alter all’?
Ideas of
Good and
Evil.

‘Our towns are copied fragments from our breast;
And all man’s Babylons strive but to impart
The grandeur of his Babylonian heart.’

III

The purpose of rhythm, it has always seemed to me, is to prolong the moment of contemplation, the moment when we are both asleep and awake, which is the one moment of creation, by hushing us with an alluring monotony, while it holds us waking by variety, to keep us in that state of perhaps real trance, in which the mind liberated from the pressure of the will is unfolded in symbols. If certain sensitive persons listen persistently to the ticking of a watch, or gaze persistently on the monotonous flashing of a light, they fall into the hypnotic trance; and rhythm is but the ticking of a watch made softer, that one must needs listen, and various, that one may not be swept beyond memory or grow weary of listening; while the patterns of the artist are but the monotonous flash woven to take the eyes in a subtler enchantment. I have heard in meditation voices that were forgotten the moment they had spoken; and I have been swept, when in more profound meditation, beyond all memory but of those things that came from beyond the threshold of waking life. I was writing once at a very symbolical and abstract poem, when my pen fell on the ground; and as I stooped to pick it up, I remembered
some phantastic adventure that yet did not seem phantastic, and then another like adventure, and when I asked myself when these things had happened, I found that I was remembering my dreams for many nights. I tried to remember what I had done the day before, and then what I had done that morning; but all my waking life had perished from me, and it was only after a struggle that I came to remember it again, and as I did so that more powerful and startling life perished in its turn. Had my pen not fallen on the ground and so made me turn from the images that I was weaving into verse, I would never have known that meditation had become trance, for I would have been like one who does not know that he is passing through a wood because his eyes are on the pathway. So I think that in the making and in the understanding of a work of art, and the more easily if it is full of patterns and symbols and music, we are lured to the threshold of sleep, and it may be far beyond it, without knowing that we have ever set our feet upon the steps of horn or of ivory.

IV

Besides emotional symbols, symbols that evoke emotions alone,—and in this sense all alluring or hateful things are symbols, although their relations with one another are too subtle
to delight us fully, away from rhythm and pattern,—there are intellectual symbols, symbols that evoke ideas alone, or ideas mingled with emotions; and outside the very definite traditions of mysticism and the less definite criticism of certain modern poets, these alone are called symbols. Most things belong to one or another kind, according to the way we speak of them and the companions we give them, for symbols, associated with ideas that are more than fragments of the shadows thrown upon the intellect by the emotions they evoke, are the playthings of the allegorist or the pedant, and soon pass away. If I say ‘white’ or ‘purple’ in an ordinary line of poetry, they evoke emotions so exclusively that I cannot say why they move me; but if I say them in the same mood, in the same breath with such obvious intellectual symbols as a cross or a crown of thorns, I think of purity and sovereignty; while innumerable other meanings, which are held to one another by the bondage of subtle suggestion, and alike in the emotions and in the intellect, move visibly through my mind, and move invisibly beyond the threshold of sleep, casting lights and shadows of an indefinable wisdom on what had seemed before, it may be, but sterility and noisy violence. It is the intellect that decides where the reader shall ponder over the procession of the symbols, and if the symbols are merely emotional, he gazes from amid the accidents and destinies of
the world; but if the symbols are intellectual too, he becomes himself a part of pure intellect, and he is himself mingled with the procession. If I watch a rushy pool in the moonlight, my emotion at its beauty is mixed with memories of the man that I have seen ploughing by its margin, or of the lovers I saw there a night ago; but if I look at the moon herself and remember any of her ancient names and meanings, I move among divine people, and things that have shaken off our mortality, the tower of ivory, the queen of waters, the shining stag among enchanted woods, the white hare sitting upon the hilltop, the fool of faery with his shining cup full of dreams, and it may be 'make a friend of one of these images of wonder,' and 'meet the Lord in the air.' So, too, if one is moved by Shakespeare, who is content with emotional symbols that he may come the nearer to our sympathy, one is mixed with the whole spectacle of the world; while if one is moved by Dante, or by the myth of Demeter, one is mixed into the shadow of God or of a goddess. So too one is furthest from symbols when one is busy doing this or that, but the soul moves among symbols and unfolds in symbols when trance, or madness, or deep meditation has withdrawn it from every impulse but its own. 'I then saw,' wrote Gérard de Nerval of his madness, 'vaguely drifting into form, plastic images of antiquity, which outlined themselves, became
Ideas of Good and Evil.

definite, and seemed to represent symbols of which I only seized the idea with difficulty.' In an earlier time he would have been of that multitude, whose souls austerity withdrew, even more perfectly than madness could withdraw his soul, from hope and memory, from desire and regret, that they might reveal those processions of symbols that men bow to before altars, and woo with incense and offerings. But being of our time, he has been like Maeterlinck, like Villiers de L'Isle Adam in Axel, like all who are pre-occupied with intellectual symbols in our time, a foreshadower of the new sacred book, of which all the arts, as somebody has said, are begging to dream, and because, as I think, they cannot overcome the slow dying of men's hearts that we call the progress of the world, and lay their hands upon men's heart-strings again, without becoming the garment of religion as in old times.

v

If people were to accept the theory that poetry moves us because of its symbolism, what change should one look for in the manner of our poetry? A return to the way of our fathers, a casting out of descriptions of nature for the sake of nature, of the moral law for the sake of the moral law, a casting out of all anecdotes and of that brooding over scientific opinion that so often extinguished the central

176
flame in Tennyson, and of that vehemence that would make us do or not do certain things; or, in other words, we should come to understand that the beryl stone was enchanted by our fathers that it might unfold the pictures in its heart, and not to mirror our own excited faces, or the boughs waving outside the window. With this change of substance, this return to imagination, this understanding that the laws of art, which are the hidden laws of the world, can alone bind the imagination, would come a change of style, and we would cast out of serious poetry those energetic rhythms, as of a man running, which are the invention of the will with its eyes always on something to be done or undone; and we would seek out those wavering, meditative, organic rhythms, which are the embodiment of the imagination, that neither desires nor hates, because it has done with time, and only wishes to gaze upon some reality, some beauty; nor would it be any longer possible for anybody to deny the importance of form, in all its kinds, for although you can expound an opinion, or describe a thing when your words are not quite well chosen, you cannot give a body to something that moves beyond the senses, unless your words are as subtle, as complex, as full of mysterious life, as the body of a flower or of a woman. The form of sincere poetry, unlike the form of the popular poetry, may indeed be sometimes

The Symbolism of Poetry.
Idea of Good and Evil.

obscure, or ungrammatical as in some of the best of the Songs of Innocence and Experience, but it must have the perfections that escape analysis, the subtleties that have a new meaning every day, and it must have all this whether it be but a little song made out of a moment of dreamy indolence, or some great epic made out of the dreams of one poet and of a hundred generations whose hands were never weary of the sword.

1906.
I REMEMBER, some years ago, advising a distinguished, though too little recognized, writer of poetical plays to write a play as unlike ordinary plays as possible, that it might be judged with a fresh mind, and to put it on the stage in some small suburban theatre, where a small audience would pay its expenses. I said that he should follow it the year after, at the same time of the year, with another play, and so on from year to year; and that the people who read books, and do not go to the theatre, would gradually find out about him. I suggested that he should begin with a pastoral play, because nobody would expect from a pastoral play the succession of nervous tremors which the plays of commerce, like the novels of commerce, have substituted for the purification that comes with pity and terror to the imagination and intellect. He followed my advice in part, and had a small but perfect success, filling his small theatre for twice the number of performances he had announced; but instead of being content with the praise of his equals, and waiting to win their praise another year, he hired immediately a big London theatre, and put his pastoral play and a new play before a meagre and unintelligent audience. I still remember his
pastoral play with delight, because, if not always of a high excellence, it was always poetical; but I remember it at the small theatre, where my pleasure was magnified by the pleasure of those about me, and not at the big theatre, where it made me uncomfortable, as an unwelcome guest always makes one uncomfortable.

Why should we thrust our works, which we have written with imaginative sincerity and filled with spiritual desire, before those quite excellent people who think that Rossetti’s women are ‘guys,’ that Rodin’s women are ‘ugly,’ and that Ibsen is ‘immoral,’ and who only want to be left at peace to enjoy the works so many clever men have made especially to suit them? We must make a theatre for ourselves and our friends, and for a few simple people who understand from sheer simplicity what we understand from scholarship and thought. We have planned the Irish Literary Theatre with this hospitable emotion, and, that the right people may find out about us, we hope to act a play or two in the spring of every year; and that the right people may escape the stupefying memory of the theatre of commerce which clings even to them, our plays will be for the most part remote, spiritual, and ideal.

A common opinion is that the poetic drama has come to an end, because modern poets have no dramatic power; and Mr. Binyon
seems to accept this opinion when he says: ‘It has been too often assumed that it is the manager who bars the way to poetic plays. But it is much more probable that the poets have failed the managers. If poets mean to serve the stage, their dramas must be dramatic.’ I find it easier to believe that audiences, who have learned, as I think, from the life of crowded cities to live upon the surface of life, and actors and managers, who study to please them, have changed, than that imagination, which is the voice of what is eternal in man, has changed. The arts are but one Art; and why should all intense painting and all intense poetry have become not merely unintelligible but hateful to the greater number of men and women, and intense drama move them to pleasure? The audiences of Sophocles and of Shakespeare and of Calderón were not unlike the audiences I have heard listening in Irish cabins to songs in Gaelic about ‘an old poet telling his sins,’ and about ‘the five young men who were drowned last year,’ and about ‘the lovers that were drowned going to America,’ or to some tale of Oisin and his three hundred years in Tir nan Oge. Mr. Bridges’ Return of Ulysses, one of the most beautiful and, as I think, dramatic of modern plays, might have some success in the Aran Islands, if the Gaelic League would translate it into Gaelic, but I am quite certain that it would have no success in the Strand.
Blake has said that all Art is a labour to bring again the Golden Age, and all culture is certainly a labour to bring again the simplicity of the first ages, with knowledge of good and evil added to it. The drama has need of cities that it may find men in sufficient numbers, and cities destroy the emotions to which it appeals, and therefore the days of the drama are brief and come but seldom. It has one day when the emotions of cities still remember the emotions of sailors and husbandmen and shepherds and users of the spear and the bow; as the houses and furniture and earthen vessels of cities, before the coming of machinery, remember the rocks and the woods and the hillside; and it has another day, now beginning, when thought and scholarship discover their desire. In the first day, it is the Art of the people; and in the second day, like the dramas acted of old times in the hidden places of temples, it is the preparation of a Priesthood. It may be, though the world is not old enough to show us any example, that this Priesthood will spread their Religion everywhere, and make their Art the Art of the people.

When the first day of the drama had passed by, actors found that an always larger number of people were more easily moved through the eyes than through the ears. The emotion that comes with the music of words is exhausting, like all intellectual emotions, and few people like exhausting emotions; and therefore
actors begin to speak as if they were reading something out of the newspapers. They forgot the noble art of oratory, and gave all their thought to the poor art of acting, that is content with the sympathy of our nerves; until at last those who love poetry found it better to read alone in their rooms what they had once delighted to hear sitting friend by friend, lover by beloved. I once asked Mr. William Morris if he had thought of writing a play, and he answered that he had, but would not write one, because actors did not know how to speak poetry with the half-chant men spoke it with in old times. Mr. Swinburne’s Locrine was acted a month ago, and it was not badly acted, but nobody could tell whether it was fit for the stage or not, for not one rhythm, not one cry of passion, was spoken with a musical emphasis, and verse spoken without a musical emphasis seems but an artificial and cumbersome way of saying what might be said naturally and simply in prose.

As audiences and actors changed, managers learned to substitute meretricious landscapes, painted upon wood and canvas, for the descriptions of poetry, until the painted scenery, which had in Greece been a charming explanation of what was least important in the story, became as important as the story. It needed some imagination, some gift for day-dreams, to see the horses and the fields and flowers of Colonus as one listened to the elders gathered
about Ædipus, or to see ‘the pendent bed and procreant cradle’ of the ‘martlet’ as one listened to Duncan before the castle of Macbeth; but it needs no imagination to admire a painting of one of the more obvious effects of nature painted by somebody who understands how to show everything to the most hurried glance. At the same time the managers made the costumes of the actors more and more magnificent, that the mind might sleep in peace, while the eye took pleasure in the magnificence of velvet and silk and in the physical beauty of women. These changes gradually perfected the theatre of commerce, the masterpiece of that movement towards externality in life and thought and Art, against which the criticism of our day is learning to protest.

Even if poetry were spoken as poetry, it would still seem out of place in many of its highest moments upon a stage, where the superficial appearances of nature are so closely copied; for poetry is founded upon convention, and becomes incredible the moment painting or gesture remind us that people do not speak verse when they meet upon the highway. The theatre of Art, when it comes to exist, must therefore discover grave and decorative gestures, such as delighted Rossetti and Madox Brown, and grave and decorative scenery, that will be forgotten the moment an actor has said ‘It is dawn,’ or ‘It is raining,’ or ‘The
wind is shaking the trees'; and dresses of so little irrelevant magnificence that the mortal actors and actresses may change without much labour into the immortal people of romance. The theatre began in ritual, and it cannot come to its greatness again without recalling words to their ancient sovereignty.

It will take a generation, and perhaps generations, to restore the theatre of Art; for one must get one's actors, and perhaps one's scenery, from the theatre of commerce, until new actors and new painters have come to help one; and until many failures and imperfect successes have made a new tradition, and perfected in detail the ideal that is beginning to float before our eyes. If one could call one's painters and one's actors from where one would, how easy it would be! I know some painters, who have never painted scenery, who could paint the scenery I want, but they have their own work to do; and in Ireland I have heard a red-haired orator repeat some bad political verses with a voice that went through one like flame, and made them seem the most beautiful verses in the world; but he has no practical knowledge of the stage, and probably despises it.

May, 1899.

II

Dionysius, the Areopagite, wrote that 'He has set the borders of the nations according
to His angels.’ It is these angels, each one the genius of some race about to be unfolded, that are the founders of intellectual traditions; and as lovers understand in their first glance all that is to befall them, and as poets and musicians see the whole work in its first impulse, so races prophesy at their awakening whatever the generations that are to prolong their traditions shall accomplish in detail. It is only at the awakening—as in ancient Greece, or in Elizabethan England, or in contemporary Scandinavia—that great numbers of men understand that a right understanding of life and of destiny is more important than amusement. In London, where all the intellectual traditions gather to die, men hate a play if they are told it is literature, for they will not endure a spiritual superiority; but in Athens, where so many intellectual traditions were born, Euripides once changed hostility to enthusiasm by asking his playgoers whether it was his business to teach them, or their business to teach him. New races understand instinctively, because the future cries in their ears, that the old revelations are insufficient, and that all life is revelation beginning in miracle and enthusiasm, and dying out as it unfolds itself in what we have mistaken for progress. It is one of our illusions, as I think, that education, the softening of manners, the perfecting of law—countless images of a fading light—can create nobleness and beauty, and
that life moves slowly and evenly towards some perfection. Progress is miracle, and it is sudden, because miracles are the work of an all-powerful energy, and nature in herself has no power except to die and to forget. If one studies one's own mind, one comes to think with Blake, that 'every time less than a pulsation of the artery is equal to six thousand years, for in this period the poet's work is done; and all the great events of time start forth and are conceived in such a period, within a pulsation of the artery.'

February, 1900.