

THE RULE OF GENIUS

IN an age triumphant in mechanism, thought tends to run on mechanical lines—on railway lines, in fact. Sometimes we refer, with a pitying smile, to the Victorian idea of progress, which had as its favourite text ‘Go from strength to strength,’ and which was admirably epitomised by Tennyson, the characteristic Victorian poet, in such phrases as :

‘Forward, forward let us range,
Let the great world spin for ever
‘Adown the ringing groves of change’;

or :

‘Men may rise on stepping-stones
Of their dead selves to higher things’;

or a world

‘Where freedom slowly broadens down
From precedent to precedent.’

All very tidy, orderly, and regular. And all very ridiculous

We tend to smile at all this now. We now describe ‘progress’ as rhythmic; and a rhythm has its ups and downs, its systole and diastole, its oscillations. Nevertheless, the theory of evolution still binds us with its spell, though some of the Germans are beginning to question it. ‘We are all evolutionists nowadays,’ in ‘progressive’ circles, that is; and we do not usually import German thought until it has become a bit stale in the country of its origin

Max Nordau, and other pessimists, dreamed of a world going steadily to the dogs—yet *steadily*. Their theory was a theory of uninterrupted progress—*backwards*, in truth, but *uninterruptedly* backwards.

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Wherefore, there must be no miracles; for miracles are interruptions: or, if they could be admitted at all, they must never be regarded as jumps. Sudden intrusions into the fixed order were impossible: their very indecency made them so.

Yet all the time our public schools and universities still based their most characteristic culture on two ages, both remote: the Periclean and the Augustan. The amazing exploits of Alexander the Great were calmly taken for granted, possibly because he performed them so long ago, partly because he was paralleled by Napoleon. Yet Napoleon was a teasing problem, whose fascination resulted in the production of a whole literature. Shakespeare also teased, and relief was found in Bacon. Both Shakespeare and Napoleon were too like miracles to be comfortably absorbed. Beethoven was also discovered, and also John Sebastian Bach, and Wagner took a long time to come into his kingdom. All were felt to be bewildering.

The Middle Ages, and specially the thirteenth century, next re-emerged, helped by Walter Scott and the Oxford Movement (when it got behind the boundaries of the Carolines). All along there has been the sacrosanct age of the so-called 'Reformation'—in some quarters still the Second Pentecost (or so some visitor from another planet might be led to imagine). The Tractarians stopped at that next . . . until progress drove some of them backwards.

Then someone observed that about every five hundred years there has occurred a period of flowering in human history. The ages of Pericles and of Augustus furnished ready and familiar examples; and the thirteenth century was found—with some amazement—to fit in also. It was further observed that these ages of fruition were followed by flat and unprofitable ages. The science of botany, rather a recent science to attain maturity, might have suggested as much.

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The point that was not quite grasped was that this flowering was often *sudden*. A period of flowering often is : a few sunny and special days will suddenly transform a garden ; everything seems to rush into bloom at once, like the state of things in the Periclean age. Think of its galaxy of first-rate immortals : Pericles himself and Demosthenes ; Plato and Aristotle ; Phidias ; Aeschylus, Sophocles and Euripides ; Aristophanes—all living in the same epoch in that little city of Athens, and all of them immortal in their works ! How explain any of them separately : above all, how explain them all together ? However carefully and elaborately you may work out their antecedents and their *praeparatio evangelica* (so to say), they still have the appearance of being miles above it all—of being, in fact, an uprush and an inroad.

How explain Phidias, Michaelangelo, Raphael, Monteverde, Gluck, Mozart, Schubert, Beethoven, Chopin, Liszt, Wagner ? Undoubtedly they used to the full the resources of the art they had learned by hard discipline of the school. But they added so much ; they transformed so completely what they had inherited ; they endowed their art with new forms. Shakespeare, Goethe, Dante are unbelievable and inexplicable. They simply cannot be accounted for by any theory of pure development. Yet there they are : they are phenomena and must be dealt with. Now it is these men who have been the creators of eternal works. They have, in their several lines, produced something which not only can never be surpassed, but can never be superseded, something which has given a form and a pattern for all time.

This is so in the case of the arts. It is even more so in the instance of philosophy. Subsequent philosophers have tried to get beyond and behind Plato and Aristotle ; but they have not succeeded. The discoveries of these two remarkable men remain dis-

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coveries for all time. That is to say: they are *prophets*. Yet it is hard to fit them into any idea of continuous and unbroken progress. We ought, according to this idea, to have produced much better prophets. But we have not.

And if this is the case in the instance of the arts and of philosophy, it is still more the case in the instance of religion. There is an uniqueness about the founders of the great ethnic religions, where a founder can be dated from. The Buddha cannot be crammed into any pint pot: nor, for the matter of that, can Mahomet. The uniqueness of Jesus Christ is recognised on all sides, even by those who will not add 'Our Lord'—those, that is, who deny Him deity. You may trace out *praeparationes evangelicae* as much as you like in any of these instances. But the thing prepared for, the work of the founder, is by no means to be accounted for by any such pedigree.

Further, how account for the great mystics: for St. Francis of Assisi, for St. Teresa of Spain, St. John of the Cross, Mother Julian, Father Baker—to say nothing of St. Paul and St. John the Beloved? Great love, strict asceticism: these things paved the way. But others have had great love, have subjected themselves to equal discipline: yet they have not (it seems) been able to advance so far. The thought that God has favourites is not an easy thought: it seems to militate against His justice. Yet how escape from it? There are certainly men of ten talents, men of five, and men of only one. 'The Spirit bloweth where it listeth,' and also 'how it listeth.' God, after all, is free Here, too, is a thought difficult in a mechanised and democratic age!

Yet it becomes easier when one remembers that all gifts of God are bestowed for the benefit of all; just as His own excellence is put at the disposal of all, in their several degrees of receptivity. This has been recog-

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nised by the saints, those who have lived nearest to God. How diverse they are : from the high intellectuality of St. Gertrude to the simple humility of the Little Flower. Yet all have contributed to the common stock ; that has been their great work. It was just this realisation that enabled St. Thomas Aquinas to be so 'universal' in his philosophy. It was never 'my thought,' or 'my system' with him : it was always 'the thought,' or 'the system'—if it could be attained—the common possession of all the brethren of Christ, worked out by him, mostly on his knees, as a conscious instrument of Christ. This, also, is not an easy thought in an age of acute individualism and consequent competition. But it is a truly Christian thought.

There is no inherent reason, then, why God should not work upon the world by specially endowed agents. Certainly He is admitted to have done so in the case of the Chosen People—one little race chosen out of all the races of the world. And, of course, He did so uniquely and pre-eminently in the case of our Blessed Lord, and continues to do so, until the consummation of the ages, by the instrumentality of His Sovereign Vicar upon earth ; just as 'in times past' He had 'spoken by the prophets.'

It certainly appears to me that the history of the world is the history of geniuses : of an intellectual, practical, artistic, spiritual Aristocracy, often bursting suddenly, abruptly, even explosively into the humdrum, ordinary, democratic, *bourgeois* order of plodding things.

If this be so, then miracles are the most normal things in life : they are God's way of working in the important things of life. And one effect of them is to keep on reminding us of God's constant and direct dealing with the world He has created. For, of course, all geniuses are miracles.

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