

Chapter IV -- Dry Rot in Literature.

When the arteries of a tree are closed, it dry-rots; when literature departs from its sane forms, it dry-rots. The revolt from sanity has taken three forms: naturalism, pessimism, and agnosticism.

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Christ in His Human Nature laid down the fundamental principles of literature:

1. "I am the way, the truth and the life."
2. "He that is not with me is against me; he that gathereth not with me, scattereth."

There is no such thing as an unmoral man, an unmoral book, an unmoral principle. Literature reflects life. Religion "dragged in by the heels" is not the criterion: the assumption of the final end of man -- heaven or hell, -- is. Unless man's eternal destiny exists in the mind of the author and stands out between the lines of his pages, his book is not unmoral -- it is immoral. The Word of God takes the matter out of argument: "He that is not with Me is against Me; he that gathereth not with Me, scattereth."

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Christ's principles held for a time, but men revolted from them. The revolt first took the form of Naturalism, a neopaganism. The principle of the naturalist is that in nature man is sufficient to himself.

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Swinburne, a wonderful man, who has drawn more music out of the English language than any other writer, was the first advocate of this principle in literature. His influence was great: it gave impetus to such men as Walt Whitman, Zola, etc. It did not begin to fail until Zola began to dramatize small-pox, anemia, drink, etc. In a way Swinburne was an honest man, but however much you may rhapsodize about nature, the effect is spoiled when you come out to leave it.

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The men who could not stomach Zola took to the school of Pessimism. They considered this the worst possible world creatable. Schopenhauer was the founder of this school, but his influence was not great. It was too sordid to live. The modified pessimism which took its place admitted all that pessimism claimed, but said that we should meet things in the most cheerful manner possible, with candor, elegance and courage. (Elegance and courage have since gone by the boards -- only candor remains.)

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George Eliot and Matthew Arnold were of this school. They said that the misery of life is deplorable, but that the dignity of man holds out some ground for hope. They did not descend to beastliness, like Zola -- they still had elegance: nor to despair, like Swinburne -- they still had courage. George Eliot was a great novelist, but her principles turned her into a psychologist; Matthew Arnold was born to be a poet, but this movement made him as cold as an icicle.

(Agnosticism will be treated in the next installment.)