XXXVII

ON ARCHITECTURE

We have all of us been hearing for some time about the proposal to pull down the City churches. Some of us have a certain sympathy with the view that it would be much better to pull down the City. In the long reaches of history the irony of the contrast disappears. There must be a good many Greek or Egyptian temples still standing when the towns or villages that clustered about them have dissolved into dust. In looking at those temples we still have, if we are at all imaginative, a sort of mystical sympathy. We have a sense that, after all, the temple did not really exist to serve the city, but to serve the god. But it is a sort of sympathy we seem only able to feel in the case of a heathen god. Any number of neo-pagan poems have been written describing such gods as still hovering like ghosts over such temples. Any number of modern poets have written about ancient ruins still haunted by dog-headed Anubis or great green-eyed Pasht. They seldom expressed much sympathy for the human inhabitants of those vanished cities. But, in the case of the vanished cities, at least the inhabitants did inhabit. They worked, wedded, dined, and slept in their own town, and were often attached to it by a high religion of patriotism. So did the inhabitants of our City, in the days when people built churches there. Now that the City has become a vast warehouse, there is much less cause for a poetic lament over its destruction. The reader will be relieved to hear, however, that I have no immediate intention of setting fire to London, or of attempting to repeat the great conflagration which was recorded (entirely wrong) on the Monument. I merely say, in a general historical sense, that the mysterious description of a man as being Something in the City might have been extended in ancient times even to so humble a calling as being a Priest in the City. And I do say that, when we see humanity in retrospect and perspective, we generally find their religion more interesting than their commerce. Even the most commercial cities of antiquity, like Tyre and Carthage, were not so lively and entertaining when they were making out bills-of-lading or recording the fluctuation of the shekel as compared with the drachma, as when the more poetic side of their nature led them to throw babies into the furnace of Moloch.

But the comparison of commercial and religious centres is connected with another question that is perhaps more immediately modern than the worship of Moloch. We have not got quite so far as reviving that sort of Eastern mysticism as yet, though there is no saying what we may come to eventually, with a judicious combination of neo-pagan nature-worship and our efforts to restrict the population. But, anyhow, it is more and more plain that commerce is cosmopolitan, while religion is generally to some extent national, even if it is also international. Being an expression of the whole life of a people, it gives some expression to the local and traditional life; whereas mere commercialism of its nature becomes more and more a shuffling and interchange of different products. The London churches do preserve a certain historic character of London; they do remind us of a typical passage in the history of England. But the merely commercial life of England becomes less and less English; and the material machinery of London is looking more and more like New York. It seems likely that, as has so often happened, things native and domestic will have to retire into sanctuary. It will be a long time at least before the last monument of Wren vanishes with the fall of St. Paul's Cathedral, as the last monument of the Regent has vanished with the fall of Regent Street.

In that sense it is not so much a question of the preservation of London churches as of the preservation of London. London has a soul of its own; it therefore has a soul to be saved; but nobody seems to bother very much about saving it. And it seems possible that the quaint old Wren churches might still do something towards saving the soul of London, even if we have given up all hope of any churches saving the souls of Londoners. For those seventeenth-century buildings had a character and expressed a spirit, even if it be not what I myself should regard as the highest spirit. I am (as my enemies have discovered with diabolical, but slightly monotonous, glee), a mediævalist; and it is my instinct to seek the highest spirit in what was once the highest spire. For the old Gothic St. Paul's, that stood on Ludgate Hill before the Great Fire, was said to be the loftiest building in Christendom. It must have looked very magnificent, rising to such a height upon such a hill. Old St. Paul's might even have been spared by the American invader as being quite a respectable sky-scraper.

Nevertheless, I do not desire the present Renaissance dome of St. Paul's to be immediately replaced by a Woolworth tower. However it may stand in relation to Christendom, it stands in a very important position in relation to Europe. It does to that extent represent the spirit of Europe; and in this particular conflict I sympathise with the spirit of Europe as against the spirit of America. Something of the same part is played in a smaller way by the other Renaissance churches; in so far as they do testify to the idea that culture is a thing rather of quality than quantity. They do suggest that quaint things in quiet places may reveal the secret of our deep human past often better than buildings that take up much more room in the streets, and also much more room in the newspapers. They do stand, in some fashion, for the moment, for the fact that it is not the sky-scraper that is nearest to the sky. A man must have some little sense of craftsmanship and history to know how good is some of the seventeenth-century carving, even of the florid and lightly classical sort. He does not need anything but a neck to crane and eyes to goggle with in order to appreciate a sky-scraper. The taste for mere size is not merely more vulgar; it is also more backward and barbaric. It is all the difference between Rembrandt or Velasquez studying the subtleties of an ordinary face and the yokels in a village staring at the giant in a show. And, in so far as it is a war between barbarism and civilisation, I hope I am on the side of civilisation not for the first time.

But even where the larger thing is all right in its place, it is here out of place. Even when it is good as a sky-scraper, it is not suited to the sky. The first rule of all good scene-painting is to remember the back-scene. It is an error to paint even Aladdin's Palace without knowing whether its domes and minarets are to be outlined against the back-scene of the Blasted Heath or of the Nile with the barge of Cleopatra. The more inappropriate is the background, the more it will fall forward into the foreground. And our scenery, in several senses, has rather a way of falling down on the actors. Our scenery is of the sort that keeps the scene-shifter very busy shifting. Our back-scene is always a transformation scene. To some it may seem a rather dismal sort of dissolving view. To others (including myself) its cold clouds and gradations of grey seem to be the very vision of real romance. But, anyhow, English weather is emphatically weather; as is implied when we talk of having to weather it. There is no such thing as the English climate. Now the best

American architecture is very fine architecture, as, for example, the Pennsylvania Railway Station in New York. But the best American architecture is classical architecture, of the same kind as the best Greek and Roman architecture. At least, it is partly of the same kind, and partly for the same reason. It was built for a climate; it was built to stand up clear and clean-cut against a sky that looks as solid and steady as the stone; a pure pattern of white upon blue. It is suitable to the hard light and the cloudless spaces about the towers of Manhattan; and there, like anything else that is in its place, it is a splendid thing to see. But even the invaders who have brought over American buildings have not yet imported any large blue fragments of American sky.

XXXVIII

ON SHAKESPEARE

I HAVE recently read with very great interest a book on what is not perhaps entirely a new subject. I refer to the subject of Shakespeare; not without reference to the subject of Shakespeare's Sonnets, of the Dark Lady and the poet's relation to Southampton and Essex and Bacon and various eminent men of his time. The book is by the Comtesse de Chambrun and is published by Appleton; and it seems to me both fascinating and convincing. I hasten to say that the lady is very learned and I am very ignorant. I do not profess to know much about Shakespeare, outside such superfluous trifling as the reading of his literary works. Madame de Chambrun's book is called *Shakespeare, Actor-Poet;* and I must humbly confess that I have known him only in his humbler capacity as a poet, and have never devoted myself to the more exhausting occupation of studying all the green-room gossip about him as an actor. But it is very right that more scholarly people should study the biographical problem; and even a poor literary critic may be allowed to judge their studies as literature. And this study seems to me to be one very valuable to literature; and not, like so many of the Baconian penny-dreadfuls, a mere insult to literature. Indeed some Baconian books are quite as much of an insult to Bacon as to Shakespeare. I have no authority to decide the controversies of fact raised here, about the relation of Southampton to the Sonnets or the discovery of the Dark Lady in the family of Davenant. I can only say that to a plain man the arguments seem at least to be of a plain sort. Thus, I have never had any reason to quarrel with Mr. Frank Harris or Mr. Bernard Shaw about the claims of Miss Mary Fitton, or to break a lance for or against that questionable queen of beauty. I have lances enough to break with them about more important things. But to my simplicity it does seem rather notable that next to nothing is known about the Dark Lady except that she was dark; and that precious little seems to be known about Mary Fitton except that she was fair. Or again, I profess myself utterly incompetent to consider the question of what "T. T." meant by "W. H."; and I do not think the difficulty will interfere very much with my joy in saying to myself, "But thine immortal beauty shall not fade", or, "Give not a windy night a rainy morrow". But if it be true, as it is here stated, that some of these sonnets were already written when William Herbert, Lord Pembroke, was only eleven years old, he certainly must have been a precocious child if what Shakespeare says about him is at all appropriate. There may be ingenious answers to these things that I do not know. But to guileless ignorance like my own the point seems rather a practical one. As a matter of fact, I have generally found in these cases that the ingenious explanations were a little too ingenious. But, as I have said, I have no intention of dogmatising on these problems. Madame de Chambrun's theory is that the young man for whom Shakespeare had such a hero-worship was his own patron and protector, the Earl of Southampton; for whom indeed she has some little hero-worship herself. But she gives very good and convincing grounds for regarding him as something of a hero. I am pretty sure she is quite right in saying that the rebellion of Essex and Southampton was essentially just and public-spirited. She says that if it had succeeded they would have been handed down to all history as patriots and reformers. I am also quite sure she is right in saying that it was rather a rebellion against Cecil than against Elizabeth that alone would make it creditable. It is curious to note that, in this account, Bacon and Shakespeare, so far from being conspirators and collaborators, were two antagonistic figures in two opposite factions; one on each side of a serious civil war. Bacon was the bitter accuser of Essex; indeed, Bacon had probably become a sort of hack and servant of Cecil. Shakespeare was of course a friend and follower of Southampton, who was a friend and follower of Essex. According to this account, Shakespeare was presenting plays like "Richard II" as deliberate political demonstrations, designed to warn weak sovereigns of the need of greater wisdom, at the very time when Bacon was drawing up the heads of his detailed and virulent denunciation of the rebel. However this may be, it is practically certain that there was the chasm between the two great men, whom some have blended into one great man (we might say into one great monster). This theory would make an even stranger monster of the Baconian version of Bacon. Not only was he capable of leading two separate public lives, but even of figuring in two opposite political parties. He must have been plotting against himself all night and condemning himself to be hanged on the following day.

If I say that this fancy would turn Bacon and Shakespeare into Jekyll and Hyde, the partisans of the two parties will probably dispute rather eagerly about which was which. But I for one have very little doubt on that point. And I am glad to find that Madame de Chambrun thinks very much the same and knows very much more. If ever there was a base business in human history, it was the method of government which Burleigh and his son conducted in England in the name of Elizabeth; and, I am sorry to say, to some extent with the assistance of Bacon. The people whom Robert Cecil destroyed were all more honest than himself (not that that was saying much) and some of them were sufficiently honourable and spirited to dwarf his little hunchbacked figure even by their dignity in the hour of death. Whether it were Essex or Mary Stuart or even poor Guy Fawkes, they might have stood on the scaffold only in order to make him look small. And I am heartily glad to hear, if it be true, that this nest of nasty plutocrats, with Cecil in the midst of it, counted among its enemies the greatest of Englishmen. It gives me great pleasure to think that it was of those Tudor politicians that he was thinking, when he talked of strength by limping away disabled, and art made tongue-tied by authority and captive good attending captain ill. The last line must have described a good many scenes on the scaffold in the sixteenth century. It may be difficult to imagine Shakespeare greater than Shakespeare. But it is possible that if his friends had triumphed and his cause and faith revived, he might in some unthinkable transfiguration have been greater than himself.

I know much less of the other problem involved, which is entirely one of private life and not of public policy. I mean the question of that mysterious and sinister woman towards whom the sonneteer revives the ancient rage of inconsistencies; the *odi et amo* of Catullus. But even I, as a mere casual reader of things in general, had certainly heard of the joke or scandal which is said to have suggested Sir William Davenant was a natural son of William Shakespeare. Whether this was so or not, Shakespeare certainly knew the Davenants, who kept an inn where he visited and where (as the writer of this book explains) Southampton himself appeared on the scene at a later stage. Her theory is that Mrs. Davenant was what we should now call a vamp; that she had at one time vamped the poet and went on later to vamp the peer. But the poet, though his feelings were mixed, could already see through the lady, and was furious at the duping of his friend; and out of this triple tangle of passions came the great tragic sequence of the Sonnets. Upon this I cannot pronounce, beyond repeating that it is set out in this book with great cogency, comprehension, and grip; and without a trace of that indefinable disproportion and lack of balance, which makes many learned and ingenious works on such subjects smell faintly of the madhouse. The writer keeps control of the subject; we feel that, though her conclusions are definite, she would not be seriously upset if they were definitely disproved. She appeals to facts and fairness throughout; and nobody can do more. The documentation and system of references seems to be very thorough; and, in a matter which I am better able to judge, there is nowhere that sense of strain in the argument, or of something altogether far-fetched in the explanation, which continually jars us in most reconstructions of this kind, especially in the dangerous era of Elizabeth. Perhaps after all, that era really was the great spiritual battle; and Shakespeare and Bacon really were the spirits that met in conflict. But anyhow, it is a queer paradox that Shakespeare was an obscure and almost unhistorical figure; according to some nameless or worthless, according to others impersonal and self-effacing; but anyhow somewhat elusive and secret; and from him came a cataract of clear song and natural eloquence; while Bacon was a public man of wide renown and national scientific philosophy; and out of him have come riddles and oracles and fantastic cryptograms and a lifelong hobby for lunatics.