

exception of the last-mentioned, all these writers were successfully exercising their literary gifts.

The earlier period had been a time when novel ideas and methods were struggling for admission, and were opposed by authority and tradition. It was an era of bitter conflict; this is true not merely of literature and of the intellectual world in general, but in the practical sphere of society and politics. But at the opening of the second division of the century the chief obstacles had already been surmounted. Hence a sense of progress, of hopefulness, of room for 'diffusive thought to work and spread.' It was a time for optimism, for broad generalizations and sanguine projects; the germinal ideas of which we have spoken were energetically developed, and applied in every department. The prevailing tendency, already mentioned, to explain things as organic involved the idea of growth, of the influence of surroundings, and of the importance of following the successive stages of change. Hence the conception of development, of evolution, and of the historical method. These ideas received impressive illustration in such works as Lyell's *Principles of Geology* at the opening of the era, and Darwin's *Origin of species* towards its close; under their influence, not merely natural science, but every branch of thought was by degrees revolutionized.

### III.

In time, however, as the wider and more striking applications were exhausted, the ideas themselves began to lose their freshness and stimulus. They seemed less positive than had been expected. Often they appeared to lead to mere scepticism, to be little else than destructive. The sources of faith and action were sapped. So, in the closing third of the century, the great wave of inspiration of whose beginnings we spoke of the middle years of the century have spent itself. The hopefulness and energy of the middle years of the century have departed. There is an awakening from

many bright dreams. The age of universal peace looked forward to in the early fifties had not arrived. The great program of political reforms which had been earlier sketched, was with some completeness realized, yet the Golden Age was as remote as ever. And so in the world of literature, there are manifest indications of decadence or, at least, of exhaustion. To be sure the change is gradual; the dividing line is not as distinct as at 1833. Several of the great men of the preceding period continue to live and to write after 1866, but generally speaking their best and most significant work had been done. No genius of the same rank as the leaders of the preceding sixty-six years, appears. Genius of any order is rare, although good writers are not uncommon. Decline is specially evident in the sphere of imaginative literature. Dante Rossetti is the one poet of unmistakable power, but his work is reminiscent of Coleridge and Keats. Even valuing very liberally the novels of Hardy, George Meredith, and others, the fiction of later years is not equal to that of the middle of the century. It is notable that writers of critical and scholarly, rather than of creative, works become more prominent than in the earlier periods. Authors like M. Arnold (as writer of prose), Walter Bagehot, John Morley, Goldwin Smith, J. R. Seeley, Leslie Stephen are conspicuous figures in our later literature; as are also writers of exquisite but somewhat trivial verse, like Austin Dobson and Frederick Locker. Among younger and later writers, the common phenomena of literary exhaustion display themselves—supreme importance of technique, attention both in poetry and prose to style at the expense of thought, literary ambition and skill with but little or nothing to utter. Writers hit upon a happy vein, but it quickly gives out. With many clever men of letters, prose becomes affected; ostentatiously select diction and epigrammatic expression serve only to veil vacuity or triteness of thought. On the other hand it may be conceded that two writers of real genius