THE EIGHTEEN NINETIES

A REVIEW OF ART AND IDEAS AT THE CLOSE OF THE NINETEENTH CENTURY

BY

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CHAPTER XIII

JOHN DAVIDSON

THE Eighteen Nineties had no more remarkable mind and no more distinctive poet than John Davidson. From the beginning he was both an expression of and a protest against the decadent movement, and in his personality as well as in his tragic end he represented the struggle and defeat of his day in the cause of a bigger sense of life and a greater power over personality and destiny. At the dawn of the period he had reached middle age, having been born at Barrhead, Renfrewshire, on 11th April 1857. But curiously enough, as in the case of so many of those who gained distinction in art during the period, John Davidson did not show any distinctive *fin de siècle* characteristics until he produced his novel, *Perfervid,* in 1890; and between that time and 1899 he remained an artist in the approved Whistlerian sense, content in the main to express life in the traditional artistic manner, without any overweening desire to preach a particular doctrine. With the close of the decade his mental attitude seems to have undergone a revolution, which translated him from an artist pure and simple into a philosophic missioner using literature as a means of propaganda.

He was the son of Alexander Davidson, a minister of the Evangelical Union, and Helen, daughter of Alexander Crockett of Elgin. His education began

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at the Highlanders' Academy, Greenock, and continued until he was thirteen years of age, when he was sent to work in the chemical laboratory of a sugar manufacturer at Greenock, and in the following year he became an assistant to the town analyst. In 1872 he returned to the Highlanders' Academy as a pupil teacher, and remained there for four years, afterwards spending a year at Edinburgh University. In 1877 he became a tutor at Alexander's Charity, Glasgow, and during the next six years he held similar scholastic posts at Perth and Paisley. During 1884-1885 he was a clerk in a Glasgow thread firm, but returned to the scholastic profession in the latter year, teaching in Morrison's Academy, Crieff, and in a private school at Greenock. During these years he devoted much time to literary work, the drama claiming a considerable amount of his attention, and in 1886 his first work, *Bruce: A Drama*, was published in Glasgow. In 1888 he published *Smith, a Tragic Farce*; in 1889 *An Historical Pastoral*, *A Romantic Farce* and *Scaramouch in Naxos*. All of these were issued in Scotland during his period of scholastic employment, but this he abandoned in the latter year, when he departed for London with the object of earning his living as a writer.

Then began a period of literary struggle mitigated somewhat by the rewards of artistic recognition. In the midst of much journalistic work, which included contributions to *The Glasgow Herald*, *The Speaker* and *The Yellow Book*, he produced poems and novels and short stories; he also translated François Coppée's play, *Pour la Couronne*, which was produced by Forbes Robertson at the Lyceum Theatre under the title of *For the Crown*, and Victor Hugo's *Ruy Blas*, produced at the Imperial Theatre as *A Queen's Romance*.

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It was his poetry which first won for him a place among his contemporaries. *In A Music Hall and Other Poems* was published in 1891, and during the decade he issued at short intervals eight further volumes of poetry, followed by two others in the new century. These volumes were *Fleet Street Eclogues* (1906), *Ballads and Songs* (1894), *Fleet Street Eclogues,* second series (1896), *New Ballads* (1897), *The Last Ballad* (1899), *Holiday and Other Poems* (1906), and *Fleet Street and Other Poems* (1909). In this body of work Davidson is represented at his highest as an artist, though he himself set more store by the remarkable series of "testaments" and philosophical plays and poems which engaged his genius during his last phase. In the period covered by his poetic activity he published various prose works, such as *Sentences and Paragraphs* (1893), an early volume revealing the scientific and philosophical interests of his mind, and above all his early association with the teaching of Friedrich Nietzsche; *A Random Itinerary* (1894), and several novels, including *Baptist Lake* (1894) and *The Wonderful Mission of Earl Lavender* (1895), published with Beardsley's frontispiece illustrating one of the incidents of the book.

The books of his last phase are a designed attempt to co-ordinate and restate his ideas upon life and art. They begin with the first three of his four "testaments": *The Testament of a Vivisector* (1901), *The Testament of a Man Forbid* (1901), and *The Testament of an Empire Builder* (1902). He brooded long and deeply over the views expressed in these works, which reveal a revolutionism transcending all familiar attacks upon institutions, secular or religious, for the poet lashes with high and passionate seriousness the

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tyrannies not of man, but those also of nature and of fate. Next in order of these philosophical works came *The Theatrocrat: A Tragic Play of Church and State* (1905). Later he devised a dramatic trilogy, further to embody his philosophical gospel, under the title "God and Mammon"; but only two of the projected plays were written: *The Triumph of Mammon* (1907), and *Mammon and his Message* (1908). Finally, he concluded his message to humanity fittingly enough with *The Testament of John Davidson* (1908). His attitude towards these works is made clear in his prefaces and other notes, and in the dedication to the last volume he describes the books as "The Prologue to a Literature that is to be," a literature, he adds, "already begun in my Testaments and Tragedies."

Depression rather than disappointment dogged the life of John Davidson. It is true that he did not reach fortune by his works, but even he could hardly have expected such a reward. He did, however, and with justice in the light of so much industry, expect to earn a living by his pen, but this expectation had but meagre fulfilment. As in the case of many other artists he had to pot-boil. This hurt him both in performance and result, for regular income did not spring out of the traffic. "Nine-tenths of my time," he wrote, on his fiftieth birthday, "and that which is more precious, have been wasted in the endeavour to earn a livelihood. In a world of my own making I should have been writing only what should have been written." These words were written in 1907, and the year before he had been awarded a Civil List pension of one hundred pounds, but this came too late, however, to arouse hope in a temperament which long years of struggle with adversity had steeped in a settled gloom.

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In 1908 the poet left London with his family for Penzance, and on 23rd March 1909 he left his home never to return. Nearly six months afterwards his body was discovered by some fishermen in Mount's Bay, and, in accordance with his known wishes, was buried at sea. Such a death is not a surprising end to one who adopted or possessed Davidson's attitude towards life. He resented the unknown and loathed all forms of weakness. He could not accept life as he found it, and his philosophy reflects his objection to circumstance and fate, actuality and condition, in a passionate claim for control over destiny and power, and over life itself. There was no reality for him without omnipotence; he repudiated life on any other terms. That was at the root of his depression, as it was the basis of his philosophy.

The assumption that he took his own life is consistent with what is known of his temperament and his ideas. In *The Testament of John Davidson*, published the year before his death, he anticipates this fate:

> "None should outlive his power. . . . Who kills
> Himself subdues the conqueror of kings:
> Exempt from death is he who takes his life:
> My time has come."

And further on in the same poem he gives suicide a philosophic basis which has, perhaps, more frankness than novelty:

> "By my own will alone
> The ethereal substance, which I am, attained,
> And now by my own sovereign will, forgoes,
> Self-consciousness; and thus are men supreme:
> No other living thing can choose to die.
> This franchise and this high prerogative

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I show the world :—Men are the Universe
Aware at last, and must not live in fear,
Slaves of the seasons, padded, bolstered up,
Clystered and drenched and dieted and drugged ;
Or hateful victims of senility,
Toothless and like an infant checked and schooled ;
Or in the dungeon of a sick room drained
By some tabescent horror in their prime ;
But when the tide of life begins to turn,
Before the treason of the ebbing wave
Divulges refuse and the barren shore,
Upon the very period of the flood,
Stand out to sea and bend our weathered sail,
Against the sunset, valiantly resolved
To win the heaven of eternal night."

The poetry of John Davidson reveals on most pages a keen sense of life in its various manifestations struggling for power of one kind or another. His imagination is essentially dramatic, but his sense of conflict is often philosophic, his artistic sense always showing a tendency to give way to the imp of reflection which, through his imagination, was ever seeking to turn drama into philosophy and philosophy into science. Yet he was not immune from a certain whimsicality, particularly in his early prose works, in the fantastic novels, *Perfervid*, *Earl Lavender*, and *Baptist Lake*, and still more certainly, with a surer touch of genius, in his pantomime *Scaramouch in Naxos*. In the "Prologue" to this play, spoken by Silenus, Davidson goes far towards summing up his own peculiar attitude. The speaker alludes to a fondness for pantomimes, and proceeds to say: "I don't know whether I like this one so well as those which I witnessed when I was a boy. It is too pretentious, I think; too anxious to be more than a Pantomime—this play in which I am about to perform. True *Pantomime*

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is a good-natured nightmare. Our sense of humour is titillated and strummed, and kicked and oiled, and fustigated and stroked, and exalted and bedevilled, and, on the whole, severely handled by this self-same harmless incubus; and our intellects are scoffed at. The audience, in fact, is, intellectually, a pantaloon, on whom the Harlequin-pantomime has no mercy. It is frivolity whipping its schoolmaster, common-sense; the drama on its apex; art, unsexed, and without a conscience; the reflection of the world in a green, knotted glass. Now, I talked to the author and showed him that there was a certain absence from his work of this kind of thing; but he put his thumbs in his arm-pits, and replied with some disdain, 'Which of the various dramatic forms of the time may one conceive as likeliest to shoot up in the fabulous manner of the beanstalk, bearing on its branches things of earth and heaven undreamt of in philosophy? The sensational dramas? Perhaps from them some new development of tragic art; but Pantomime seems to be of best hope. It contains in crude forms, humour, poetry, and romance. It is childhood of a new poetical comedy.' Then I saw where he was, and said, 'God be with you,' and washed my hands of him." Here we have Davidson, as early as 1888, concerned about something new in art, something elastic enough to contain a big expression of modernity, of that modernity which in the Eighteen Nineties, and in John Davidson more than in any other British writer of the time, was more than half reminiscent of the classical Greek sense of eternal conflict.

But with Davidson and the moderns, led philosophically by Nietzsche, Davidson's earliest master, the eternal conflict was not regarded with Greek resignation. It was looked upon as a thing which might be

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directed by the will of man. The modern idea was to make conflict a means of growth towards power: the stone upon which man might sharpen the metal of his will until he could literally storm high heaven by his own might. Such an idea, often vague and chaotic enough, inspired the hour, making philosophers of artists and artists of philosophers, and seekers after a new elixir of life of all who were sufficiently alive to be modern. This idea, more than any other, informed the moods of the moment with restless curiosity and revolt. It filled the optimist with the conviction that he lived in a glorious period of transition which might at any moment end in Utopia, and the pessimist with the equally romantic notion that the times were so much out of joint that nothing short of their evacuation for the past or the future would avail. As Davidson sang:

> "The Present is a dungeon dark
> Of social problems. Break the gaol!
> Get out into the splendid Past
> Or bid the splendid Future hail."

This resentment of the present was always Davidson's weakness despite an intellectual courage in which he had few equals in his time.

He could face with heroic fortitude the necessity of revaluing ideas, just as he could face the necessity of revaluing his own life by suicide. But he could not face the slings and arrows of outrageous fortune. He never realised that a man and his age were identical, or that tragedy was an essential of life to be courted even by the powerful. ("Deep tragedy," said Napoleon, "is the school of great men.") Instead of that he murmured against that which thwarted and checked him, regretting the absence of might to mould the world for his own convenience. That was his contribution to the

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decadence. The bigness of him, unknown to himself, was the fact that he did fight for the integrity of his own personality and ideas, and he did accomplish their conservation, even to rounding off his own life-work with a final "testament." But when one has said all one is forced to admit that the irregularities and incongruities of his genius were nothing less than the expression and mark of his time.

It is as a poet that Davidson must ultimately stand or fall, although the philosophy he expressed in his later volumes will doubtless attract far more attention than that which greeted its inception. At first glance his poetry suggests a limited outlook, and even a limited technique; but on closer acquaintance this view cannot be maintained. John Davidson is as varied as he is excellent, and as charming in moments of light-heartedness as he is noble in his tragic moods. Time probably will favour his ballads, but it will by no means neglect the magic poetry of his eclogues, nor the grandeur of certain passages in his poetic dramas. And it is not easy to believe that the delicate lyricism of some of his shorter poems will ever pass out of the favour of those who love great verse. Such a poem is "In Romney Marsh," finely balanced in phrase and image, and rising to a magnificent climax of metaphorical description in the two last verses:

"Night sank: like flakes of silver fire
The stars in one great shower came down;
Shrill blew the wind; and shrill the wire
Rang out from Hythe to Romney town.

The darkly shining salt sea drops
Streamed as the waves clashed on the shore;
The beach, with all its organ stops
Pealing again, prolonged the roar."

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Even in his last volume of verse, when ideas rather than imaginative inventions crowded his mind, he proved in many a poem the invincibility of his lyrical gift. The title-poem itself, "Holiday," equals any of his earlier lyrics, and compares well with even the best of his ballads. And he has wrought a solemn grandeur into the short crisp lines of the impassioned and deeply felt poem called "The Last Song":

> "Death is but a trance:
> Life, but now begun!
> Welcome change and chance:
> Though my days are done,
> Let the planets dance
> Lightly round the sun!
> Morn and evening clasp
> Earth with loving hands—
> In a ruddy grasp
> All the pleasant lands!
>
> Now I hear the deep
> Bourdon of the bee,
> Like a sound asleep
> Wandering o'er the lea;
> While the song-birds keep
> Urging nature's plea.
> Hark! The violets pray
> Swooning in the sun!
> Hush! the roses say
> Love and death are one!"

It does not need a very wide acquaintance with Davidson's poetry to realise how he was affected by the natural life of his native countryside and the country places of his residence. He saw the phenomena of field and hedgerow and woodland with clear eye and appreciative exactitude. But he did not immolate his personality at the shrine of Nature after the manner of

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Wordsworth or Shelley. His appreciation was in the main sensuous and æsthetic, serving to supply the poet with some of the fanciful materials of his art, for use in the more buoyant moments of his muse.

Throughout the whole of his poems passages abound in which Nature has thus been made to render the sort of tribute Keats demanded of her, as for instance in the following passage from one of the earlier eclogues :—

> " At early dawn through London you must go
> Until you come where long black hedgerows grow,
> With pink buds pearled, with here and there a tree,
>   And gates and stiles ; and watch good country folk ;
>   And scent the spicy smoke
> Of withered weeds that burn where gardens be ;
> And in a ditch perhaps a primrose see.
> The rooks shall stalk the plough, larks mount the skies,
>   Blackbirds and speckled thrushes sing aloud,
>   Hid in the warm white cloud
> Mantling the thorn, and far away shall rise
> The milky low of cows and farmyard cries.
> From windy heavens the climbing sun shall shine,
>   And February greet you like a maid
>   In russet-cloak arrayed ;
> And you shall take her for your mistress fine,
> And pluck a crocus for her valentine."

This keen sense of country sights and sounds reaches its highest in " A Runnable Stag," a lyric which stands alone among English poems for its musical realism and its vividly suggested but unstated sentiment :

> " When the pods went pop on the broom, green broom,
>   And apples began to be golden-skinned,
> We harboured a stag in the Priory comb,
>   And we feathered his trail up-wind, up-wind,
>   We feathered his trail up-wind—

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A stag of warrant, a stag, a stag,
A runnable stag, a kingly crop,
Brow, bay and tray and three on top,
A stag, a runnable stag."

The subject brings to mind the callous stag-hunting chapter in Richard Jefferies' book, *Red Deer*, but different are the sentiments underlying poem and essay—in the former human feeling colours realism with pity at the stag harried to death in the sea, when

"Three hundred gentlemen, able to ride,
Three hundred horses as gallant and free,
Beheld him escape on the evening tide,
Far out till he sank in the Severn Sea,
Till he sank in the depths of the sea—
The stag, the buoyant stag, the stag
That slept at last in a jewelled bed
Under the sheltering oceans spread,
The stag, the runnable stag."

Davidson without comment reveals the pity of it all, but Richard Jefferies is capable of describing a similar incident in the passionless terms of photography.

Sympathy with pain, oftener of the spirit than of the flesh, links John Davidson with the Humanist movement of his time and ours, but it does not imprison him in a specific category. Labels cannot be attached to him. He was not associated with any coterie or organisation. He was as strange to the Rhymers' Club as he was to the Fabian Society or the Humanitarian League, and although circumstances brought him into the Bodley Head group of writers, giving some of his books decorations by Beardsley, and his portrait, by Will Rothenstein, to *The Yellow Book*, the facts must

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be set down to Mr John Lane's sense of what was new and strong in literature rather than to any feeling of kinship on Davidson's part. Kinsman of modernity in the big sense, he was not, then, in the brotherhood of any clique or special group of modernists, and although his works were as modern in the smaller topical aspect as they are part of a larger and more notable awakening of thought and imagination, they never achieved even a small measure of the popularity usually accorded topical writings. Davidson's work, even in what may be considered its most popular form, in his great ballads, was esteemed by a few rather than accepted by many. It is conceivable that in due time "The Ballad of a Nun," "The Ballad of an Artist's Wife" and "The Ballad of Hell" will enter into the familiar poetry of the people, as they have taken their places in the realm of good poetry recognised by the cultured. But that time is not yet; a higher average of culture must come about before such verses could supplant "Christmas Day in the Workhouse," or even Rudyard Kipling's ballad of "The Mary Glocester" and "Gunga Din."

Davidson himself eventually rejected in some measure his own lyric verse. He came to look upon rhyme as a symptom of decadence, although he knew that "decadence in any art is always the manure and root of a higher manifestation of that art." He sought therefore to discover in the art of poetry, as he sought also in life, a newer and more apt means of expression. This he found in English blank verse. And he associated his discovery with the final profundity of his passionately asserted vision of life as matter seeking ever finer and more effective manifestations. "Matter says its will in poetry; above all, in English blank verse, and

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often, as in the case of Milton, entirely against the conscious intention of the poet." In this verse form, "the subtlest, most powerful, and most various organ of utterance articulate faculty has produced," he saw the latest emanation of what he calls the "concrete mystery Matter," created, "like folk, or flowers, or cholera, or war, or lightning, or light," by an evolutionary process involving all activities and states of consciousness, until it produced that powerful human race which "poured into England instinctively as into the womb of the future, and having fought there together for centuries . . . wrestling together for the mastery, and producing in the struggle the blended breed of men we know: so tried and welded, so tempered and damascened, this English race having thrown off the fetters of a worn-out creed, having obtained the kingdom of the sea and begun to lay hands as by right on the new world, burst out into blank verse without premeditation, and earth thrilled to its centre with delight that Matter had found a voice at last." Poetry for him was thus no scholarly accomplishment, no mere decoration or bauble, but the very instrument of thought and imagination, emotion and passion, the finely tempered weapon of a nationalism which he linked up with Nature and endowed with her fierceness, mastery and power.

His sense of the high mission of poetry found ample expression in the prefaces and appendices of his later books, and in his "testaments." But in earlier days he heard himself speaking of the meaning and object of his own poetry in "A Ballad of Heaven," where the musician announces the completion of the masterpiece which "signed the sentence of the sun" and crowned "the great eternal age":

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"The slow adagio begins;
The winding-sheets are ravelled out
That swathe the minds of men, the sins
That wrap their rotting souls about.

The dead are heralded along;
With silver trumps and golden drums,
And flutes and oboes, keen and strong,
My brave andante singing comes.

Then like a python's sumptuous dress
The frame of things is cast away,
And out of Time's obscure distress,
The thundering scherzo crashes Day."

Davidson's self-imposed mission was to thunder news of a new dawn. He repudiated the past (" The insane past of mankind is the incubus," he said), and, whilst insisting upon the importance of the present, he heralded the new day to come with an ardour equalled only by the Futurists of Milan, who followed him, and are his only intellectual kin. Had John Davidson lived to-day he must have hailed Marinetti, brother. " Undo the past ! " he cried, in *The Testament of a Man Forbid* :

"Undo the past !
The rainbow reaches Asgard now no more;
Olympus stands untenanted; the dead
Have their serene abode in earth itself,
Our womb, our nurture and our sepulchre.
Expel the sweet imaginings, profound
Humanities and golden legends, forms
Heroic, beauties, tripping shades, embalmed
Through hallowed ages in the fragrant hearts
And generous blood of men; the climbing thoughts
Whose roots ethereal grope among the stars,
Whose passion-flowers perfume eternity,
Weed out and tear, scatter and tread them down;
Dismantle and dilapidate high heaven."

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Being a poet, and Davidson never made any other claim, he would use poetry to help undo the past. "The statement of the present and the creation of the future," he said, "are the very body and soul of poetry." Of his later intentions he declared, "I begin definitely in my Testaments and Tragedies to destroy this unfit world and make it over again in my own image." He was never weary of asserting the novelty of his aim and method, and although he admitted that there was no language for what he had to say, he was convinced that what he had said was new both in form and idea. "It is a new poetry I bring, a new poetry for the first time in a thousand years." He called this new poetry "an abiding-place for man as matter-of-fact," and his own purpose in writing it, "to say that which is, to speak for the universe." And the ultimate aim of such work was, again in his own words, "to change the mood of the world."

Nor was he less precise, nor less frank, in stating the new mood he would establish in the place of the old. In the *fin de siècle* search for reality few possessed his diligence, fewer his intellectual courage. The terrible and powerful poem, "A Woman and Her Son," recalls something of his own unrelenting criticism of life; his own determination at all costs to face facts and re-value ideas:

"These are times
When all must to the crucible—no thought,
Practice, or use, or custom sacro-sanct
But shall be violable now."

Early association with the ideas of Nietzsche had directed Davidson's innate pessimism into channels of creative inquisitiveness and speculation. He learnt more from Nietzsche than did any other poet of his

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time, but he never became a disciple. He learnt of that philosophical courage which Nietzsche called "hardness," and used it Nietzsche-wise in his continual questioning and re-valuing of accepted ideas. He was imbued also with the German philosopher's reverence for power. But he did not accept the Superman doctrine. This he repudiated equally with the Darwinian idea of sexual selection; both stood condemned by him because of their anthropomorphism—what in fact Nietzsche condemned in other directions as being "human-all-too human." Against the idea of evolution by sexual selection, with the ultimate aim of man and superman, he set the idea of chemical selection, with the ultimate object of complete self-consciousness. Beyond self-consciousness he saw nothing; that in his view was the highest possible achievement of life. The essence of his teaching is based in the idea of Matter as the final manifestation of ether seeking, first, consciousness, which it has long since attained, and next, self-consciousness, which it has attained more recently in man. This last form of consciousness, according to Davidson, is capable of the highest ecstasy and all knowledge. He denies the inconceivability of eternity, the existence at any time of chaos, and the presence at any time of spirit. All is Matter, even the ether and the lightning are forms of Matter. And on this basis he works out a conception of sin as courage, heaven and hell as "memories of processes of evolution struggling into consciousness," and God as ether, from which man came and to which he will return.

In announcing this theory of the universe he does not ask for scientific judgment or acceptance. He bases his claim for recognition on the fact that he is a poet and on imaginative grounds. "The world," he wrote, "is in

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danger of a new fanaticism, of a scientific instead of a religious tyranny. This is my protest. In the course of many ages the mind of man may be able to grasp the world scientifically: in the meantime we can know it only poetically; science is still a valley of dead bones till imagination breathes upon it." It was his desire as a poet to fill the conceptions of science, the world of atoms and electrons, of gases and electricity, of ether and matter, with the light of imagination, as a substitute for the dead rationalism of middle nineteenth-century culture. " Art knows very well that the world comes to an end when it is purged of Imagination. Rationalism was only a stage in the process. For the old conception of a created Universe, with the fall of man, an atonement, and a heaven and hell, the form and substance of the imagination of Christendom, Rationalism had no substitute. Science was not ready, but how can poetry wait? Science is synonymous with patience; poetry is impatience incarnate. If you take away the symbol of the Universe in which, since the Christian era began, poetry and all great art lived and had their being, I, for one, decline to continue the eviscerated Life-in-Death of Rationalism. I devour, digest, and assimilate the Universe; make for myself in my Testaments and Tragedies a new form and substance of Imagination; and by poetic power certify the semi-certitudes of science."

In the Eighteen Nineties John Davidson strove always for the utterance of such feelings and ideas as absorbed his mind during his last years; but in the earlier period he was less conscious of definite aim, and his best work took the form of poetry and the place of great poetry. His ballads and eclogues, a few of his lyrics and passages in his poetic tragedies are already

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graven on the scroll of immortal verse. His " testaments " belonged to another realm as they belong also to another period. They lack the old fine flavour of the poetry of his less purposeful days, and they hardly fulfil his own promise of a new poetry. They are in the main arrested poetry. The strife of the poet for a new expression, a new poetic value, is too evident, and you lay these later works down baffled and unconvinced, but reverent before the courage and honesty of a mind valiantly beating itself to destruction against the locked and barred door of an unknown and perhaps non-existent reality.

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