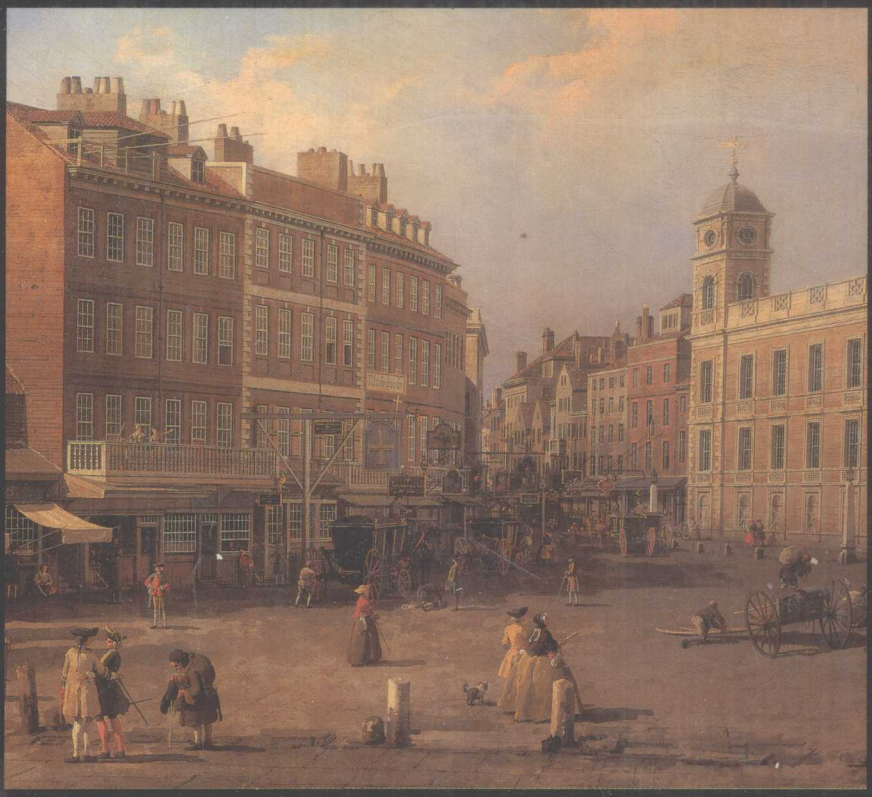
The Eighteenth Century

The Intellectual and Cultural Context of English Literature, 1700–1789

James Sambrook



Longman Literature in English Series

The Eighteenth Century

The Intellectual and Cultural Context of English Literature, 1700 – 1789

James Sambrook

Longman

London and New York

Longman Group UK Limited
Longman House, Burnt Mill, Harlow
Essex CM20 2JE, England
and Associated Companies throughout the world

Published in the United States of America
by Longman Inc., New York

First published 1986
Second impression 1988

BRITISH LIBRARY CATALOGUING PUBLICATION DATA
Sambrook, James
The eighteenth century—The Intellectual and cultural context of English literature, 1700–1789—(Longman literature in English series)
1. England—Intellectual life—18th century
I. Title
942.07 DA485

ISBN 0-582-49306-4 csd
ISBN 0-582-49305-6 ppr

LIBRARY OF CONGRESS CATALOGING IN PUBLICATION DATA
Sambrook James.
The eighteenth century—the intellectual and cultural context of English literature, 1700–1789.
(Longman literature in English series)
Bibliography: p.
Includes index.
1. English literature— 18th century—History and criticism. 2. Great Britain—Intellectual life—18th century. 3. Great Britain—Civilization—18th century.
I. Title II. Series.
PR441.S33 1986 820'.9'005 84–29705
ISBN 0-582-49306-4
ISBN 0-582-49305-6 (pbk)

Set in 9/10pt Bembo (Linotron 202)
Produced by Longman Singapore Publishers (Pte) Ltd.
Printed in Singapore

List of Plates

Between pages 66 and 67.

1 Lord Burlington, *Chiswick House.*

2 Nicholas Hawksmoor, *Mausoleum at Castle Howard.*

3 Sir John Vanbrugh, *Blenheim Palace.*

4 James Gibbs, *St Martin-in-the-Fields.*

5 Gallery at Strawberry Hill.

6 Louis François Roubiliac, *Monument to Lady Elizabeth Nightingale.*

7 Peter Scheemakers, *Monument to Shakespeare.*

8 Michael Rysbrack, *Monument to Newton.*

9 Richard Wilson, *Cader Idris: Llyn-y-cau.*

10 Thomas Gainsborough, *Woodcutter courting a Milkmaid.*

11 William Hogarth, *Gin Lane.*

Between pages 162 and 163.

12 Sir Joshua Reynolds, *Omai.*

13 Joseph Wright, *A Philosopher giving a Lecture on the Orrery.*

14 Johann Zoffany, *The Death of Cook.*

15 Plan of Alexander Pope's garden.

16 Pagoda and Mosque at Kew.

17 William Kent, *Venus' Vale at Rousham.*

18 King Alfred's Hall in Cirencester Park.

19 Lake and Pantheon at Stourhead.

20 Palladian Bridge at Wilton.

Acknowledgements

We are grateful to the following for permission to reproduce illustrations: BBC Hulton Picture Library (Plate 2); the trustees of the British Museum (Pls 1, 2, 11, 16, & 18); Derby Art Gallery (Pl. 13); *Country Life Magazine* Pls 5 & 20); C. Cottrell-Dormer esq., Rousham (photo: Courtauld Institute of Art) (Pl. 17); The National Maritime Museum, London (Pl. 14); Tate Gallery (Pl. 9); Warburg Institue (Pls 6, 7 & 8); the Marquess of Tavistock & trustees of the Bedford estates (Pl. 10); and Kenneth Woodbridge (Pl. 19).

Editors' Preface

The multi-volume Longman Literature in English Series provides students of literature with a critical introduction to the major genres in their historical and cultural context. Each volume gives a coherent account of a clearly defined area, and the series, when complete, will offer a practical and comprehensive guide to literature written in English from Anglo-Saxon times to the present. The aim of the series as a whole is to show that the most valuable and stimulating approach to literature is that based upon an awareness of the relations between literary forms and their historical context. Thus the areas covered by most of the separate volumes are defined by period and genre. Each volume offers new informed ways of reading literary works, and provides guidance to further reading in an extensive reference section.

As well as studies on all periods of English and American literature, the series includes books on criticism and literary theory, and on the intellectual and cultural context. A comprehensive series of this kind must of course include other literature written in English, and therefore a group of volumes deals with Irish and Scottish literature, and the literatures of India. Africa, the Caribbean, Australia, and Canada. The forty-seven volumes of the series cover the following areas: pre-Renaissance English Literature. English Poetry, English Drama, English Fiction, English Prose, Criticism and Literary Theory, Intellectual and Cultural Context, American Literature, Other Literatures in English.

David Carroll
Michael Wheeler

Longman Literature in English Series

General Editors: David Carroll and Michael Wheeler
University of Lancaster

Pre- Renaissance English Literature

* English Literature before Chaucer *Michael Swanton*
English Literature in the Age of Chaucer
* English Medieval Romance *W. R. J. Barron*

English Poetry

* English Poetry of the Sixteenth Century *Gary Waller*
* English Poetry of the Seventeenth Century *George Parfitt*
English Poetry of the Eighteenth Century, 1700–1789
* English Poetry of the Romantic Period, 1789–1830 *J. R. Watson*
* English Poetry of the Victorian Period, 1830–1890 *Bernard Richards*
English Poetry of the Early Modern Period, 1890–1940
English Poetry since 1940

English Drama

English Drama before Shakespeare
* English Drama: Shakespeare to the Restoration, 1590–1660
Alexander Leggatt
* English Drama: Restoration and the Eighteenth Century, 1660–1789
Richard W. Bevis
English Drama: Romantic and Victorian, 1789–1890
English Drama of the Early Modern Period, 1890–1940
English Drama since 1940

English Fiction

* English Fiction of the Eighteenth Century, 1700–1789 *Clive T. Probyn*
* English Fiction of the Romantic Period, 1789–1830 *Gary Kelly*
* English Fiction of the Victorian Period, 1830–1890 *Michael Wheeler*
* English Fiction of the Early Modern Period, 1890–1940 *Douglas Hewitt*
English Fiction since 1940

English Prose

English Prose of the Renaissance, 1550–1700
English Prose of the Eighteenth Century
English Prose of the Nineteenth Century

Criticism and Literary Theory

Criticism and Literary Theory from Sidney to Johnson
Criticism and Literary Theory from Wordsworth to Arnold
Criticism and Literary Theory from 1890 to the Present

The Intellectual and Cultural Context

The Sixteenth Century
* The Seventeenth Century, 1603–1700 *Graham Parry*
* The Eighteenth Century, 1700–1789 *James Sambrook*
The Romantic Period, 1789–1830
The Victorian Period, 1830–1890
The Twentieth Century: 1890 to the Present

American Literature

American Literature before 1865
American Poetry of the Twentieth Century
American Drama of the Twentieth Century
* American Fiction, 1865–1940 *Brian Lee*
American Fiction since 1940
Twentieth-century America

Other Literatures

Irish Literature since 1800
Scottish Literature since 1700

Australian Literature
Indian Literature in English
Southern African Literature in English
African Literature in English: East and West
Caribbean Literature in English
* Canadian Literature in English *W. J. Keith*

* *Already published*

Author's Preface

The chronological limits of this volume have been determined by the overall plan of the series to which it belongs. One terminal date has proved easy to observe, and so I rarely find it necessary to continue discussion of any topic beyond 1789: the other date, 1700, has necessarily been disregarded to the extent of allowing for a discussion of Newton and Locke because a study of eighteenth-century intellectual life which omitted these two men would be like *Hamlet* without either the Prince or the ghost of his father.

The arrangement of material in my first five chapters under broad topical headings (Science, Religious Ideas, Philosophy, Politics and History, and Aesthetics) may appear to have some logic, as indicating five distinct realms of ideas or objects of study (external nature, God, the mind, society, and art), but the reader will soon discover that these divisions are to a very considerable degree arbitrary. That the most important writers, for instance, Newton, Locke, Shaftesbury, Addison, Hume, Priestley, Burke, and Adam Smith, each appear in more than one chapter is evidence not so much of the survival of many-sided 'Renaissance men' into the eighteenth century as of the close interrelations of all forms of intellectual enquiry in that period. There was no boundary between ethics, economics, and history, or between ethics and aesthetics, or between science and religion; there was not even a terminology to define those particular boundaries if they could have been drawn: the word 'aesthetics' was not used at all, and 'science' and 'economics' were not used in their modern sense during our period. Although what we call science (then still called natural philosophy) was beginning to become more specialized towards the end of the century, a philosopher was still able to look upon all those fields of knowledge as his proper province, and, as the pages of the *Spectator* and the *Gentleman's Magazine* show all too clearly, an educated man could still take an interest in them all. To a student of the eighteenth century it seems at times almost as if every path of thought communicates with every other: astronomy provides aids to navigation and proofs of the existence of God, current political and economic thought influences the interpretation of ancient Roman history, the empirical and mathematical methods of science are applied to aesthetics and moral philosophy; such instances, large and small, could be multiplied almost indefinitely. It follows that much of my material could be transposed from one of the following chapters to another without damage to the general plan.

Chapters 1 to 5, taken as a whole, are intended to give some sense of the

intellectual climate in which eighteenth-century imaginative literature grew and flourished. Chapter 6, 'Visual Arts', is concerned with parallel imaginative works in the four arts, architecture, sculpture, painting, and gardening, which, according to Sir Joshua Reynolds, 'address themselves primarily and principally to the imagination'. Chapter 7, 'Models', is intended to give some notion of the wide eclecticism of eighteenth-century culture: the 'intellectual climate' to which I have referred produced effects as varied as the English weather, because the winds of cultural influence in this period blew from remote areas in the north, east, and west, as well as from their old prevailing quarter, the Mediterranean south. Chapter 8 is a 'Conclusion' in which perhaps nothing is concluded, for I make no attempt to impose a factitious unity upon the intellectual life of the eighteenth century: I merely indicate some of the connections between the material of the earlier chapters, giving most attention to the idea of the imagination because this is likely to be of most interest to students of literature; finally, I question some of the labels that have been attached to the eighteenth century by critics and historians. The plates are not intended to constitute a epitome of eighteenth-century art, but to illustrate phases and varieties of taste; they are as pertinent to Chapter 7 as to Chapter 6.

It is a pleasure to acknowledge the vigilant assistance of Norma Martin and John Swannell (not for the first time), and of Jill Bennett, Sheila James, and Tony Palmer.

James Sambrook

Contents

List of Plates vii
Acknowledgements viii
Editors' Preface ix
Longman Literature in English Series x
Author's Preface xii

1 **Science 1**

2 **Religious Ideas 25**

3 **Philosophy 46**

4 **Politics and History 69**

5 **Aesthetics 101**

6 **Visual Arts 134**

Architecture 135
Sculpture 142
Painting 146
Landscape gardening 154

7 **Models 168**

Roman 169
Grecian 175
Gothic 181
Oriental 187
Savage 191

8 **Conclusion 198**

Exploration, empiricism and evolution 198
Perception and imagination 202
'Age of Reason' and other clichés 206

Chronology 212

General Bibliographies 238

(i) General Background 238
(ii) Science 239
(iii) Religious Ideas 242
(iv) Philosophy 243
(v) Politics 246
(vi) Aesthetics 249
(vii) Visual Arts 251
(viii) Models 257

Individual Authors 259

Notes on biography, major works and suggested further reading 259

Index 280

Chapter 1
Science

The last edition of Johnson's *Dictionary* published in our period defines the word 'science' as 'knowledge', 'certainty grounded on demonstration', 'art attained by precepts, or built on principles', 'any art or species of knowledge', and 'one of the seven liberal arts'. Though the old liberal arts included arithmetic, geometry, and astronomy, and though the second of Johnson's definitions points towards later semantic developments, it was not until long after the great lexicographer's death that 'science' became synonymous with what he would have referred to as 'natural philosophy'. Nevertheless, the process by which science (in the modern sense) came to be regarded as the truest form of knowledge and its system became the model for other systems of knowledge was well under way in the eighteenth century. It was then that most educated men incorporated the most accessible discoveries of the previous century, the age of Galileo, Kepler, and Newton, into their ordinary view of the physical world.

The realization that the earth was a lesser planet of one relatively unimportant star among millions proved to be less chastening than one might expect; its most widespread effect was to encourage confidence in the sublime capacity of the human mind and in the power of scientific method. If men were excited by the vastness and order of the universe they were no less excited by the fact that human intelligence could formulate the laws which governed the motions, relations, and physical properties of that universe. Science gave new freedom and new hope, as if mental and stellar horizons were expanding together: the sudden and huge growth of ordered and apparently certain knowledge seemed greatly to enlarge the possibilities of intellectual, moral, and practical improvements. Increasing knowledge of the heavenly system provided demonstrations of the power and wisdom of God, and supplied practical aids to navigation; increasing knowledge of the physical and chemical properties of matter provided further demonstrations of the power and wisdom of God, and brought about improvements in manufacturing industry: the Steam Age dawned. At the same time, increasing knowledge of the physical world made the hypothesis of a God unnecessary for some men. Encouraged by the successes of experimental science in general, and supported by increasing knowledge of optics and physiology, philosophers for a while came to believe that they, too, might be able to discover natural laws which would make their conclusions and predictions as reliable as those of the scientists.

Though philosophy was not transformed into the hoped-for science of mind, the investigations of eighteenth-century philosophers into perception, sensibility, and imagination were of incalculable value to poets, novelists, and critics.

For poets, philosophers, and theologians, as well as for other scientists, the great intellectual hero of the eighteenth century was Sir Isaac Newton (1642–1727), 'the Miracle of the present Age' as Addison called him (*Spectator*, no. 543). Of course the modern scientific revolution was under way before Newton was born; scientific enquiry was organized in the Royal Society before he was heard of; his great synthesis was based in considerable part upon the researches of Boyle, Barrow, Hooke, Flamsteed, and Wallis, as well as upon those of Continental natural philosophers such as Descartes, Galileo, Kepler, and Huyghens; but for eighteenth-century Englishmen scientific advance was to a remarkable extent identified with the single name of Newton. The triumph of mind represented by his work had an awe-inspiring, elemental, universal quality which seemed comparable with Nature itself. As Pope's famous couplet makes clear, Newton personified enlightenment:

> Nature and Nature's Laws lay hid in Night;
> God said Let Newton be! and all was Light.

(Pope's compliment was particularly apt in view of Newton's discovery that all the colours are contained in white light, a discovery that delighted several generations of poets.)[1]

The blaze of new scientific knowledge which glorified Newton's name was generated by a union of empirical observation with mathematical method. The title of his great book is *Philosophiae Naturalis Principia Mathematica*, the mathematical principles of natural philosophy (i.e. science); in its Preface, dated 8 May 1686, Newton writes: 'I have in this treatise cultivated mathematics as far as it relates to philosophy.' His method is to deduce mathematical formulae from the observed motions of bodies in the heavens and on earth, and then from these formulae to deduce other motions which could be checked against further observations: 'for the whole burden of philosophy seems to consist in this – from the phenomena of motions to investigate the forces of nature, and then from these forces to demonstrate the other phenomena'.[2] Thus Newton applied his principles of motion to account for many hitherto unexplained natural phenomena, such as perturbations in the moon's orbit, the rise and fall of tides, and the behaviour of light. He was able to show by his calculations, for instance, that comets were not mysterious, haphazard, or new-created phenomena, but subject to the same law of gravitation as the planets; thus enabling Edmund Halley to plot, in 1682, the orbit of the comet that bears his name, and to prophesy its return in 1758.

In one aspect Newton's achievement was the consolidation of that seventeenth-century intellectual revolution, begun by Bacon, which almost banished metaphysics and mystery from the natural sciences; in another it was prophetic of continuing revolutions as inevitable as the return of a

comet. Instead of deducing knowledge of particular phenomena from general a priori assumptions about whole systems, scientists and, increasingly after Newton, other thinkers followed the practice of ascending gradually from observation and experiment, by way of analysis, towards general theories. The process of analysis was unending: general principles, even Newton's principle of gravitation, could never be other than provisional. Indeed, Newton himself was aware of certain irregularities in the movements of celestial bodies which could not be accounted for by his laws of motion, and believed that the cumulative effect of such irregularities would be to destroy the equilibrium of the solar system if God did not intervene at long intervals to set the system to rights. Later generations of astronomers and mathematicians, down to Pierre Simon Laplace (1749–1827), were able to offer naturalistic explanations of these irregularities, and so confirm the accuracy of Newtonian principles in their non-metaphysical aspect, with the result that no large-scale revision was called for until the Einstein era.

Though Newton's principles were rapidly accepted in Britain, they were resisted in some quarters on the Continent, particularly in France, where the system of Descartes set out in *Principia Philosophiae* (1644) was accepted by most philosophers until almost the middle of the eighteenth century. The concept of gravitation, a force acting at a distance across apparently empty space, seemed absurd to mechanical philosophers who believed that bodies could move only when pushed. In the opinion of Descartes, for instance, the planets were moved by the pressure of ether in a solar vortex. Newton was able to demonstrate conclusively that such a hypothesis could not account for the motions actually observed, whereas his own principle of gravitation could.

He was cautious in ascribing a mechanism to universal gravitation. In the *General Scholium* which he added to the second edition of his *Principia* in 1713 he wrote:

> I have not been able to discover the cause of those properties of gravity from phenomena, and I [feign] no hypotheses; for whatever is not deduced from the phenomena is to be called an hypothesis; and hypotheses, whether metaphysical or physical, whether of occult qualities or mechanical, have no place in experimental philosophy. . . . And to us it is enough that gravity does really exist, and acts according to laws which we have explained, and abundantly serves to account for all the motions of the celestial bodies, and of our sea.

Nevertheless, in the concluding paragraph of the *General Scholium* he speculated that pressure in the ether, 'a most subtle spirit', accounted both for gravitation and for the structure and some physical properties of matter:

> We might add something concerning a most subtle spirit which pervades and lies hid in all gross bodies; by the force and action of which spirit the particles of bodies attract one another at near

> distances, and cohere, if contiguous; and electric bodies operate to greater distances . . .; and light is emitted, reflected, inflected, and heats bodies; and all sensation is excited, and the members of animal bodies move at the command of the will.[3]

Independent of such speculation, gravitation worked. The investigations of astronomers, physicists, and mathematicians in England and Europe throughout the eighteenth century all bore witness that the principle of gravitation, that every body attracts every other body with a force proportional to its mass and inversely proportional to the square of the distance between them, is as comprehensive as it is simple. Newton himself declares that Nature 'will be very conformable to her self and very simple'[4]; so a single formula can account at once for the fall of a pebble and the movements of the stars. The principle of gravitation, a particularly cogent expression of unity in variety, seized the imagination of men as fully as it satisfied their understanding.

Newton's second great success, the development of a calculus method, was of great value to the evolution of mathematics and therefore to science in general; it was applauded by Englishmen in the eighteenth century, if only because of the nationalistic passions aroused by the shameful priority dispute between Newton and Leibniz[5]; but it did not influence the wider intellectual life of eighteenth-century Britain nearly as obviously as did his theory of celestial mechanics, or his third great achievement, the theories concerning light which were eventually published in *Opticks* (1704).

The figure of 'Newton with his prism' caught the imagination of Englishmen some generations before Wordsworth. In a paper read to the Royal Society early in 1672 Newton described the first of a series of famous experiments in his makeshift camera obscura:

> having darkened my chamber, and made a small hole in my window-slits, to let in a convenient quantity of the Sun's light, I placed my Prisme at his entrance, that it might be thereby refracted to the opposite wall. It was at first a very pleasing divertisement, to view the vivid and intense colours produced thereby; but after a while applying my self to consider them more circumspectly, I became surprised to see them in an *oblong* form; which, according to the received laws of Refraction I expected should have been circular.[6]

This oblong form was the effect of light of different colours being refracted through different angles, for, as Newton's further experiments demonstrated, white light was a mixture of many colours. Men accepted so revolutionary a notion rather slowly, but when they did it seemed that a new world of Nature was revealed. James Thomson conveys the excitement of this discovery in *A Poem sacred to the Memory of Sir Isaac Newton* (1727), when he praises the great scientist for untwisting 'all the shining Robe of Day', and exclaims:

> Did ever Poet image aught so fair,
> Dreaming in whispering Groves, by the hoarse Brook!
> Or Prophet, to whose Rapture Heaven descends!

Newton does not claim to know more about the mechanism of colour than he does of gravitation. Both are known by their effects:

> if at any time I speak of Light and Rays as coloured or endued with Colours, I would be understood to speak not philosophically and properly, but grossly, and accordingly to such Conceptions as vulgar People in seeing all these Experiments would be apt to frame. For the Rays to speak properly are not coloured. In them there is nothing else than a certain Power and Disposition to stir up a Sensation of this or that Colour. For as Sound in a Bell or musical String, or other sounding Body, is nothing but a trembling Motion, and in the Air nothing but that Motion propagated from the Object, and in the Sensorium 'tis a Sense of that Motion under the Form of Sound; so Colours in the Object are nothing but a Disposition to reflect this or that sort of Rays more copiously than the rest; in the Rays they are nothing but their Dispositions to propagate this or that Motion into the Sensorium, and in the Sensorium they are Sensations of those Motions under the Forms of Colours.[7]

The sensorium is that part of the brain where nerves terminate. Just as Newton's celestial mechanics rests upon the presuppositions that time and space are absolute and that matter is particulate, his science of optics rests upon certain assumptions concerning the physiology of perception, assumptions made explicit in Locke's distinction between primary and secondary qualities (see p. 48 below) and which the joint authority of Newton and Locke was to make highly influential throughout the eighteenth century. Such assumptions are made clearer in the speculative queries added by Newton to successive editions of the *Opticks* between 1704 and 1718 – those queries which, after the *General Scholium* of the *Principia*, proved to be the writings of his most accessible to the understanding of non-scientists.

The queries as expanded and revised in 1718 constituted Newton's last notable publication. Though they were put forward ostensibly as a programme of possible future research by other natural philosophers, they were accepted, not unreasonably, by most of his readers as statements of his considered convictions about the ultimate nature of things. In their final form they reintroduce and elaborate Newton's concept of the ether as it appeared in the *General Scholium* to the *Principia*. This expanded, tenuous fluid medium which extends throughout the entire universe, and which in a more subtle and rarefied state pervades the pores of bodies, accounts for gravity and for magnetism and (static) electricity: 'If any one would ask how a Medium can be so rare, let him tell me how . . . the Effluvia of a Magnet can be so rare and subtile, as to pass through a Plate of Glass without any