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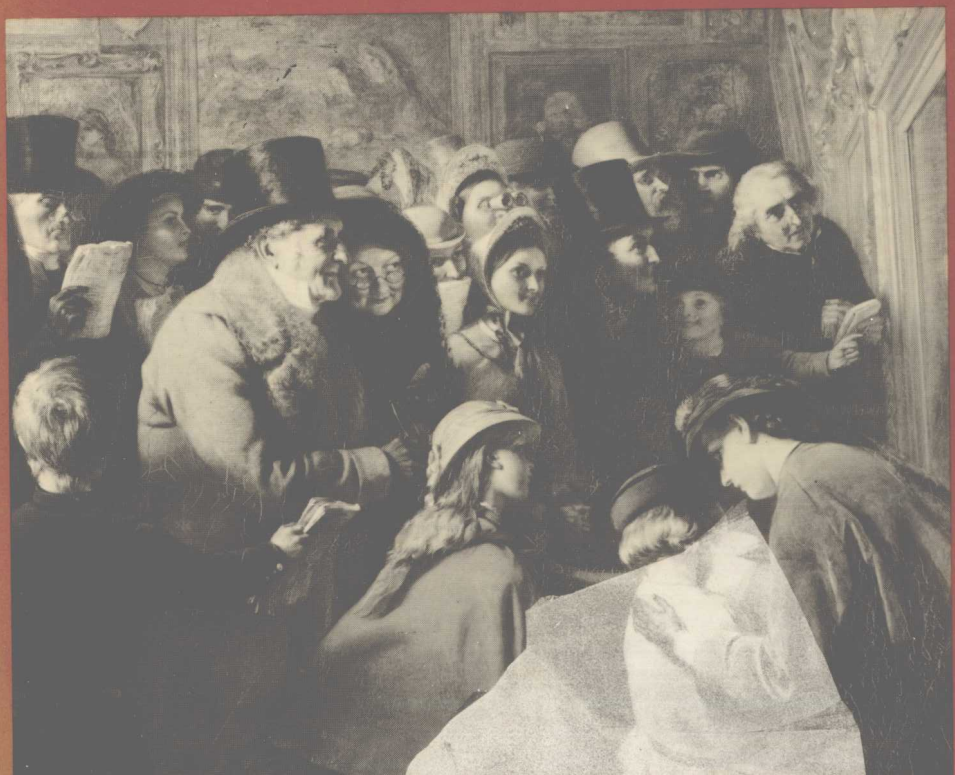
EXCLUDING THE NOVEL

PAUL TURNER



English Literature 1832–1890

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PAUL TURNER

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THE OXFORD HISTORY OF
ENGLISH LITERATURE

General Editors
JOHN BUXTON *and* NORMAN DAVIS

To Jane

Preface

It has often seemed unlikely, over the past fourteen years, that this book would ever get written. That it has done so is largely due to help from many people, whom I now wish to thank. In 1975 Professor Kathleen Tillotson let me see the comprehensive bibliography prepared before his untimely death by Geoffrey Tillotson, who was originally responsible for this volume. I have had unfailing support and encouragement from the General Editors, John Buxton and Norman Davis, and from Jon Stallworthy, John Bell, and Kim Scott Walwyn at the Clarendon Press. I was also encouraged by James Sutherland and Ian Jack, the more effectually as they were walking proofs that such a book could be finished, though I could hardly hope to equal their performances. My friend Park Honan was a cheering example of the same kind, and a mine of information on several of my authors. To get the books I needed, I shamelessly exploited the kindness of many College and Faculty librarians in Oxford, of Sheila Gordon-Rae at the Bodleian, and especially of Margaret Weedon, Eileen Davies, and Gwen Hampshire in the English Faculty Library. The English Faculty Board made it easier for me to haunt that library, by generously allowing me to keep my nearby teaching-room for three years after retirement. During the long process of research and writing, I owed much to the special knowledge of friends at Linacre College; to John Bamborough, who raised my sagging spirits at many a lunch-time there; to my wife Jane, for help of every kind; and to our rough collie, Georgy, who kept me fit, and acted as my Muse.

Contents

1. The Spirit of the Age

['REFORM, that you may preserve', Macaulay urged the House of Commons in 1831.] The alternative was to 'persist in a hopeless struggle against the spirit of the age'. John Stuart Mill thought so too. His articles on 'The Spirit of the Age', published the same year, described the age as one of 'transition', in which 'worldly power' must cease to be monopolized by 'the landed gentry, and the monied class'. Thirty years later another student of the *Zeitgeist*, Matthew Arnold announced: 'Democracy is trying *to affirm its own essence*; to live, to enjoy, to possess the world, as aristocracy has tried, and successfully tried, before it.' The affirmation was most explicit in a series of Reform Acts, which enfranchised first the industrial middle class (1832), then some working men in towns (1867), and finally agricultural labourers (1884); but democratic feeling was shown in many other ways, and drew strength from sources not purely political. One was the fear that, without some degree of reform, the horrors of the French Revolution would be re-enacted in England. Another was the social conscience cultivated by the Evangelicals, which became increasingly sensitive to working-class suffering. A third was the Utilitarian philosophy developed by James and John Mill from Bentham's principle: 'It is the greatest happiness of the greatest number that is the measure of right and wrong.'

Until the mid-century the greatest number were conspicuously unhappy. 'A feeling very generally exists', wrote Carlyle in 1839, 'that the condition and disposition of the Working Classes is a rather ominous matter at present; that something ought to be said, something ought to be done, in regard to it.' Their condition was the product of many factors. The most obvious one was a population explosion, accompanied by rapid industrialization and urbanization. Between 1801 and 1881 the population of England and Wales rose from nearly nine to nearly twenty-six millions. The mechanization of industry attracted labour to manufacturing towns, and by 1851 more than half the people were living in urban areas. Working and living conditions for factory hands grew worse and worse, as industrialists, encouraged by Ricardo's economic

theory to think market forces immutable and irresistible, competed to exploit new technology for instant profit, while overproduction caused periodic slumps, and mass unemployment. The increase in population, accelerated by immigration from Ireland, especially after the potato famine of 1845, produced the 'poverty and misery . . . among the lower classes of people' which Malthus had predicted. A typical passage in Henry Mayhew's social survey, *London Labour and the London Poor* (1851) was a report on those who earned their living by searching for objects of value in rat-infested sewers.

The 'condition of England', as this huge social problem was commonly called, was first brought to the consciousness of the middle class by government reports published in the thirties and forties. In one of them a section on the effects of disease among the working classes was drily headed: 'Misery not a check to the pressure of population on subsistence'. Malthusians, of course,, and Utilitarians realized that population-growth was a large part of the problem: J. S. Mill had been arrested at seventeen for distributing leaflets on birth control, after finding a strangled baby in St James's Park. If society as a whole was dimly aware of it too, the Victorian prejudice against sex was more rational than is generally thought. The prejudice was strongly supported by public opinion, and even given scientific authority by doctors like William Acton, who claimed in a medical textbook of 1857 that 'every sexual indulgence' in youth was an 'unmitigated evil'. As a 'check to population', however, prudery proved ineffective. Pornography flourished, the number of prostitutes in London alone was put at eighty thousand in 1862, and what Tennyson once called 'the torrent of babies' continued to flow.

The fear of revolution had been increased by Chartism (1837–48), a largely working-class movement which campaigned for political rights by massive demonstrations. Carlyle saw Chartism as an inarticulate plea for authoritarian government, but to most thoughtful minds the threat of mob violence seemed to confirm the need for further reform. It also encouraged the belief that, as J. S. Mill later expressed it, 'the higher classes . . . had more to fear from the poor when uneducated, than when educated.' For Tennyson one of the two great social questions of the day was 'the housing and education of the poor man before making him our master'. Thus education was initially conceived as a

charm to soothe the savage breasts of the poor, and eventually make them fit for democratic power; but it developed into one of the period's chief preoccupations. Though belief in *laissez-faire* and rivalries between religious organizations delayed until 1870 the establishment of any system of state education, the work of educating the poorer classes had been started long before then, by a variety of agencies, religious, philanthropic, and commercial. The percentage of literate males and females was recorded in 1841 as 67.3 and 51.1 respectively: the figures for 1891 were 93.6 and 92.7. This growth of literacy in a growing population created a vast new demand for reading-matter, at a time when technological improvements were making all forms of publication cheaper. The result was a huge expansion of the book trade, and the proliferation of newspapers and periodicals. It thus became much easier to earn a living by writing, and periodical journalism offered a convenient approach to full-time authorship. The period's literature was notably enriched by the increased variety of its authors' backgrounds, yet most authors shared a tendency to didacticism, as if conscious of a duty to educate readers who might be comparative newcomers to the written word.

As illiteracy was gradually reduced, concern shifted to the quality and content of education. At first the main object had been to teach religion or 'useful knowledge'. The latter continued to be emphasized by Herbert Spencer and others who thought science the subject 'most worth knowing'; but broader ideas of education were diffused, first by Newman and then by Matthew Arnold, who as an Inspector of Schools complained in 1860 that the pupil had, 'except his Bible, no literature, no *humanizing* instruction at all'. In 1871 'English literature' was added to the elementary school syllabus, and in 1880 Huxley, while rejecting Arnold's version of 'culture', admitted that an 'exclusively scientific training [would] bring about a mental twist as surely as an exclusively literary training.'

The interest in education was just one of the ways in which the reforming spirit spread from Parliamentary representation to every sphere of social life. In trade and industry, for instance, the rights of capital were gradually reduced by a series of Factory Acts, and by the growth of trade-union power, from Robert Owen's Grand National Consolidated Trades Union (1834) to the first Trades Union Congress in 1868, and the successful dock-

strike of 1889. The idea of socialism, which Owen had also pioneered in England, was slow to gain wide acceptance; but J. S. Mill discussed it quite sympathetically in his *Principles of Political Economy* (1848), the year of the *Communist Manifesto*, and by the end of the period Morris was preaching Marxism.

A type of social reform more congenial to the spirit of the age was one that drew strong words in 1870 from Queen Victoria:

> The Queen is most anxious to enlist every one who can speak or write to join in checking this mad, wicked folly of 'Women's Rights', with all its attendant horrors, on which the poor feeble sex is bent, forgetting every sense of womanly feeling and propriety. Lady — ought to get a good *whipping*. It is a subject which makes the Queen so furious that she cannot contain herself. God created men and women different—then let them remain each in their own position.

The cause of feminism had not been helped by the association of its first English exponent, Mary Wollstonecraft, with the French Revolution; but the Owenite William Thompson had argued the case more cogently in 1825, and poems like *The Princess* (1847) and *Aurora Leigh* (1857) gave feminism greater emotional appeal. The Queen's fury was a tribute to the effectiveness of Mill's *On the Subjection of Women* (1869), and to his recent efforts in Parliament to make the 1867 Reform Act the logical climax of the series, by amending the word 'man' to read 'person'.

Mill typified his period not only in wanting to be a 'reformer of the world' but also in defending personal freedom, since reforming zeal bulked no larger in the *Zeitgeist* than individualism. This, though partly inherited from the Romantics, was probably intensified by a new sense of overcrowding, especially in large towns. Ethologists say that every animal needs a specific amount of living-space, and there was perhaps something analogous in Mill's claim that

> there is a sphere of action in which society, as distinguished from the individual, has, if any, only an indirect interest; comprehending all that portion of a person's life and conduct which affects only himself . . . This, then, is the appropriate region of human liberty.

Apart from the physical overcrowding, the mere feeling that there were growing numbers of people about must have challenged some

individuals to assert their own uniqueness, on Mill's uncompromising principle:

> If all mankind minus one were of one opinion, and only one person were of the contrary opinion, mankind would be no more justified in silencing that one person, than he, if he had the power, would be justified in silencing mankind.

Carlyle's taste for speaking in a 'minority of one' exemplified the same attitude; and the obstinacy of the solitary dissident doubtless grew, as the period's interest in travel and history made the human majority seem greater, and science extended in both space and time the apparent dimensions of the universe.

In poetry individualism was protean. The philosophy of *In Memoriam* was based on individual feeling: 'And like a man in wrath the heart | Stood up and answered "I have felt."' It thus illustrated Mill's distinction between eighteenth- and nineteenth-century thinking: 'For the apotheosis of Reason we have substituted that of Instinct; and we call everything instinct which we find in ourselves and for which we cannot trace any rational foundation.' Browning's dramatic monologues centred on the discrepancies between the individual's 'conceit of truth' and other people's view of it. Clough's *Dipsychus* was about something that Matthew Arnold thought typically 'modern': 'the dialogue of the mind with itself'; and his own *Empedocles* was about an endogenous psychological state: ''Tis not the times, 'tis not the sophists vex him; | There is some root of suffering in himself.' The egocentricity of the Spasmodics went to absurd lengths, but was defended by one reviewer on the assumption that 'a true allegory of the state of one's own mind . . . is perhaps the highest thing that one can attempt in the way of fictitious art'; and this theory closely resembled the practice of the Pre-Raphaelites. Hopkins developed a whole new language and prosody to express his own sense of individuality: 'Nothing else in nature comes near this unspeakable stress of pitch, distinctiveness, and selving, this selfbeing of my own.'

Pater's first principle of criticism was equally self-orientated: 'What is this song or picture . . . to *me*?' His theory of style demanded a precise correspondence between wording and 'the true nature of one's own impression': 'what might seem mere details of form' had the function of 'bringing to the surface,

sincerely and in their integrity, certain strong personal intuitions'. A similar view was implied by translations from the Classics. Where Pope had been content to make Homer sound like Pope, Clough and many other translators felt obliged to imitate Homer's hexameters, as if these were an integral part of the poet's personality. Francis Newman's *Iliad* was only an extreme example of a general anxiety to reproduce the 'surface' of an original. Working 'on the principles rather of a daguerrotypist than of a fashionable portrait-painter', he tried to show 'what the true Homer really was', with all his 'oddities and peculiarities'. But this concern with personality was naturally strongest when the personality in question was the writer's own, as in the autobiographies of Ruskin or Harriet Martineau. It expressed itself less formally in the delightful letters of Jane Welsh Carlyle, and more aggressively in her husband's eccentric prose. To his style, as to Browning's, the words of Hopkins may be applied with special force: '*myself* it speaks and spells; | Crying *What I do is me: for that I came.*'

In life, individualism was seen at its best in the spirit of self-help celebrated by Samuel Smiles and the large number of eminent people who were self-made and self-educated. Faraday began his career as an errand-boy. Livingstone was a factory-hand at the age of ten, but taught himself enough Latin in the evenings to read Virgil and Horace, and then studied botany, zoology, and geology. During working hours, which began at 6 a.m., he put his book on the spinning-jenny, so as to catch a sentence every time his work took him past it. Another sign of the age's faith in the individual was the cult of the great man. 'The History of the World', wrote Carlyle, 'is but the Biography of great men', and the attitudes recommended in *Heroes and Hero-Worship* were duly directed both to him and to several other sages. Hence the wooden bridge that Tennyson had to have built, to escape his worshippers at Farringford, and the tea-party given by the Newnham Browning Society, at which the poet was said to have sat, 'bland and ruddy, and slightly buttery from the muffins, with [a] crown of pink roses laid upon his white locks, and looking like a lamb decked for sacrifice.'

If such eminent Victorians were the victims of individualism, its beneficiaries were children. Arguing in 1850 that each person's individuality should be allowed to develop 'without limit, save for the like individualities of others', Herbert Spencer specifically

included children, and condemned parental 'coercion'. At the start of the century, Samuel Butler recalled, it had been 'universally admitted that to spare the rod was to spoil the child', and a father's duty was thought to consist in

> checking the first signs of self-will while his children were too young to offer serious resistance. If their wills were 'well broken' in childhood, to use an expression then much in vogue, they would acquire habits of obedience which they would not venture to break through till they were over twenty-one years old.

By 1869, however, Lecky could write:

> there is a method of education which was never more prevalent than in the present day, which exhausts its efforts in making virtue attractive, in associating it with all the charms of imagination and of prosperity, and in thus insensibly drawing the desires in the wished-for direction.

The gradual change in attitudes to children, though partly due to writers like Wordsworth and Rousseau, was also connected with a growing interest in psychology (the backwardness of which had been deplored by Mill in 1843 as a 'blot on the face of science'), and with the growth of humane feeling for all types of underdog, from slaves, factory-workers, and convicts to actual dogs, horses, and other animals. The psychological and humanitarian components of the new approach to upbringing were both shown, in the year of Lecky's comment, by Florence Montgomery's popular novel, *Misunderstood*; and the period's increasing concern to understand and sympathize with the child's point of view is clear from the unprecedented volume and variety of its children's books.

The spirit of reform and the spirit of individualism soon began to seem incompatible. As Democracy affirmed its essence, injustice to the 'greatest number' threatened to turn into the 'tyranny of the majority'.

> Protection, therefore, against the tyranny of the magistrate is not enough: there needs protection also against the tyranny of the prevailing opinion and feeling; against the tendency of society to impose, by other means than civil penalties, its own ideas and practices as rules of conduct on those who dissent from them; to fetter the development, and, if possible, prevent the formation, of any individuality not in harmony with its ways,

and compel all characters to fashion themselves upon the model of its own.

So warned Mill in 1859, and the next year Spencer published an article, of which he would write in *The Man versus the State* (1884):

> the thesis maintained was that, unless due precautions were taken, increase of freedom in form would be followed by decrease of freedom in fact ... The drift of legislation since that time has been of the kind anticipated. Dictatorial measures, rapidly multiplied, have tended continually to narrow the liberties of individuals

Despite such apparent contradictions between intentions and results, there was a general feeling that progress was being made; and Darwin's theory of evolution, as first propounded in the year of Mill's warning, seemed almost to suggest that progress was inevitable: 'as natural selection works solely by and for the good of each being, all corporeal and mental endowments will tend to progress towards perfection.' Five years later a Benthamite politician thought perfection had already been reached:

> I look round me and ask what is the state of England? Is not property safe? Is not every man able to say what he likes? Can you not walk from one end of England to the other in perfect security? I ask you whether, the world over or in past history, there is anything like it? Nothing. I pray that our unrivalled happiness may last.

Matthew Arnold was just one of many authors who ridiculed such complacency; but in spite of 'Wragg, poor thing!' the period had good reason to congratulate itself. It had survived, without a revolution, social tensions never experienced before. It had improvised, within a few decades, the framework of a modern industrial democracy. It was inventing or rapidly developing much that might now be classed among the bare essentials of any civilized life, such as drainage, water-supplies, gas-lighting, a railway-network, a police force, local authorities responsible for public health, and cheap postal services. Towards civilization in a less material sense it contributed a great variety of humane legislation, and a general improvement of public opinion, even if at the cost of making it rather puritanical and hypocritical. It is easy to laugh at Victorian moralizing, and the Victorians laughed at it too. 'We know no spectacle so ridiculous', wrote Macaulay, 'as the British public in one of its periodical fits of morality.' But he still insisted

that a 'great moral change' had taken place. Having listed some atrocities tolerated in 1685, he continued:

> But on all this misery society looked with profound indifference. Nowhere could be found that sensitive and restless compassion which has, in our time, extended a powerful protection to the factory child, to the Hindoo widow, to the negro slave . . . which winces at every lash laid on the back of a drunken soldier, which will not suffer the thief in the hulks to be ill fed or overworked, and which has repeatedly endeavoured to save the life even of the murderer . . . But the more we study the annals of the past the more shall we rejoice that we live in a merciful age, in an age in which cruelty is abhorred, and in which pain, even when deserved, is inflicted reluctantly and from a sense of duty.

Now that 'Victorian' has become a popular term of abuse, the word 'merciful' may seem as inapt as the name of Pecksniff's younger daughter, and the last phrase may remind one of Butler's Theobald Pontifex; but in relation to the past, Macaulay's boast was justified.

The sense of progress was celebrated by Tennyson in 1830 with a line composed after travelling on the first train from Liverpool to Manchester: 'Let the great world spin for ever down the ringing grooves of change.' He was wrong to assume, not having seen the train's wheels, that they ran in grooves, but the railway was then exactly the right image to express the contemporary feeling of advancing at high speed. 'Better fifty years of Europe than a cycle of Cathay', Tennyson added, and his poem 'On the Jubilee of Queen Victoria' (1887) summarized, more prosaically, what those fifty years had brought to England:

> Fifty years of ever-broadening Commerce!
> Fifty years of ever-brightening Science!
> Fifty years of ever-widening Empire!

The triumph of English commerce, which had helped to avert revolution in the 1840s, was proclaimed to the world by the Great Exhibition of 1851. The growth of the British Empire needed no such advertisement, but was given both religious and academic status by J. R. Seeley in 1883, when he attributed it to 'the God who is revealed in history', and made it the basis of a new historical approach. Science, however, was the period's chief source of pride, and its prime example of progress. 'Philosophy', wrote one of its historians, G. H. Lewes, in 1857,