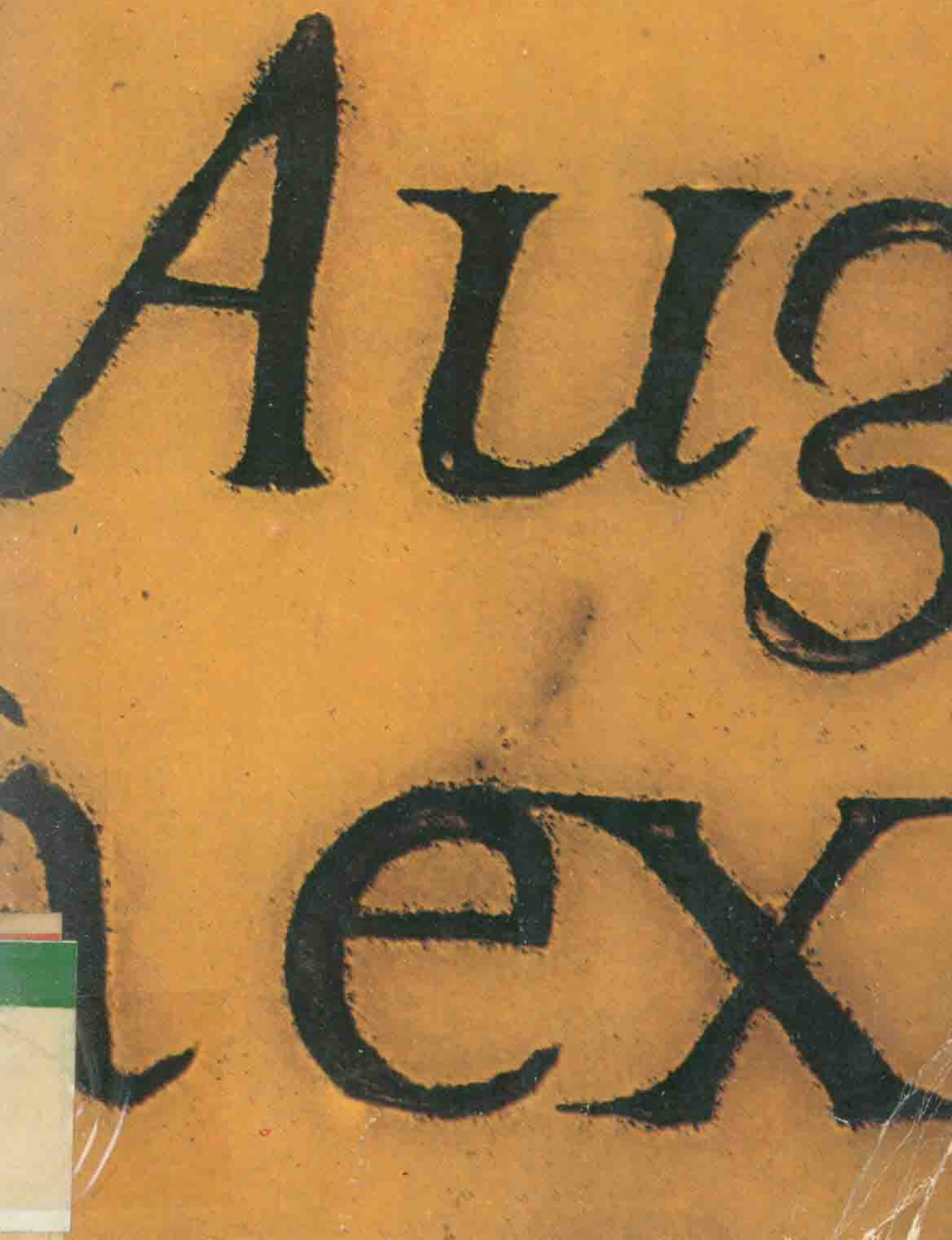
PELICAN GUIDES TO EUROPEAN LITERATURE

THE AGE OF ENLIGHTENMENT 1715-1789

EDITED BY RONALD GRIMSLEY



PELICAN BOOKS

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1715–1789

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Note

THIS volume concentrates almost exclusively on the literature of England, France, Germany and Italy. While the editor has determined the general plan, each contributor has been given responsibility for his own sections.

Introduction

SUSTAINED by a steadfast faith in absolute values and the universality of objective principles, the classical age had been one of comparative cultural stability. Even when a thinker like Descartes questioned the validity of traditional philosophy, he still retained confidence in the power of reason (as 'naturally equal in all men') and in the possibility of reaching complete intellectual certainty. In the same way few writers and artists doubted the existence of good taste and the technical means of attaining it. The subject-matter of art did not depend on immediate social and political reality, but on apparently indestructible values. If artists sought inspiration in the remote past, it was because the great genres of antiquity – the tragedy and the epic poem – were deemed to be the perfect expression of an imperishable ideal. Whenever concessions were made to everyday life – when, for example, an ode was prompted by an important event or the writer of comedies portrayed some aspect of contemporary society – it was always with a view to transcending it: the ode would launch out into reflections on life and death and the comedy would emphasize the moral aspects of human nature. Moreover, what gave art its ultimate value was not simply its 'eternal' content but the formal perfection in which it was embodied – a formal perfection controlled by 'reason' and 'nature', and obtainable only through the observation of clearly defined principles. These cultural values were also protected by powerful social and political influences. Not only was the age of Louis XIV one of absolutism, so that an all-powerful monarch and Church prevented any serious examination of political and religious beliefs, but art itself was dominated by the aristocratic taste of *l'honnête homme*. A stable, well-ordered society thus seemed to lend powerful support to a view of art that required the exclusion of subjective deviations from universally accepted principles.

The Enlightenment, on the other hand, was a time of cultural ferment, for the religious, philosophical and social ideas of the previous

century were subjected to a close and, for the most part, hostile scrutiny. This critical spirit had already begun to emerge in the last decades of the previous century, but it was henceforth to become one of the most characteristic features of the new age. Thinkers were no longer prepared to accept ideas on the mere authority of the past, but insisted on testing them in the light of their intellectual validity. Whereas religious authority presupposed the acceptance of revelation as mediated through the Church, the *esprit philosophique* relied solely on human reasoning. 'We are men before we are Christians', said the author of the article 'Reason' in the *Encyclopédie*. Although reason had certainly been admired in the classical period, for the whole of Cartesian philosophy was based on its universal power, the new 'philosophical spirit' would not admit any necessary link between philosophy and traditional metaphysics. The old rationalism was rejected because of its alleged failure to relate the activity of reason to the field of everyday experience; rationalism henceforth seemed to stand for an empty abstraction divorced from the concrete facts of real life. If the Enlightenment was proud to call itself 'the age of philosophy', it no longer understood 'philosophy' in the traditional metaphysical sense; apart from exercising his reason to criticize unproved assumptions about ultimate reality, the philosopher had the more positive task of exploring the 'system of the world' and the many different aspects of human existence. Science, art and society were deemed to function in accordance with the laws of cause and effect and did not need to look beyond the finite world for their explanatory principles. Yet because the philosopher was concerned with life on earth rather than with the revealed truths of eternity, he had to take into account the link between reason and the observation of accessible facts. As the article 'Philosopher' in the *Encyclopédie* puts it, 'the philosopher forms his principles on an infinite number of observations and to do this he has to take a maxim at its source and examine its origins'; he does not deal with empty abstractions but with the 'science of facts'. 'The *esprit philosophique*', insists the same article, 'is the spirit of observation and accuracy which relates everything to its true principles.'

The Enlightenment considered itself fortunate to have inherited from geniuses who could provide them with new insights into human existence and the nature of the physical world. The names of John

Locke (1632–1704) and Isaac Newton (1643–1727) dominate the early decades of the century. Reacting against the metaphysical pretensions of Descartes, Locke had demonstrated the advantage of studying ideas in relation to their origins and of seeing how they emerge from the mind's response to the data of sense-experience; intellectual truth no longer depended on the universal principles of abstract reason, but on mental reactions to the external world. This genetic method was to be extended to other intellectual disciplines such as natural history and psychology. Newton had also revealed the amazing fertility of a scientific method which abandoned the elaboration of vague and unsupported hypotheses for a close and systematic examination of the physical world by means of mathematics, observation and experiment. Henceforth, the universe could be explored in the light of its own inherent properties. Although both Locke and Newton themselves were sincere Christians and stressed the importance of God's existence (Newton believed that God could intervene directly to modify the working of physical laws), other thinkers, impressed by the order and rationality of the physical universe, were prepared to disregard the question of its divine origin, and to concentrate their attention upon nature rather than upon the supernatural.

'Nature' was one of the most widely used terms of the period, although it was invested with different and occasionally contradictory meanings. Very often it was linked with the critical function of reason already mentioned: nature warned men not to go beyond the realm of observation and experiment in order to probe the ultimate mystery of things. On the other hand, it opened up a vast territory for intellectual endeavour, since nature included all finite reality – 'the system of the world and the collection of all created things', as d'Alembert put it in the *Encyclopédie*. As such, nature seemed to offer an important unifying principle which included a vast range of phenomena – both physical and human – and yet served as a guide and inspiration for their further exploration. Moreover, thanks to Newton, nature was believed to contain a harmony and order which lent support to man's efforts to penetrate its secrets. Admittedly, this notion was intended to provide a warning as well as encouragement, for the examination of nature had to be confined to the observable aspects of the physical world and man's existence; but the territory accessible to investigation was very extensive and when approached in the right way – in the

modest confidence that the powers of the human mind were great enough to understand at least limited aspects of the natural order – it could provide the basis of a fruitful scientific method. Indeed, science was henceforth to replace metaphysics as a means of extending man's understanding of his own existence and his relationship with the universe.

The considerable scientific advances of the previous age seemed to justify this confidence in nature and provided the eighteenth century with strong reasons for believing in the possibility of yet greater progress. Sustained by the spectacular achievements of Newton, the physico-mathematical sciences continued to move forward: mathematicians such as Euler, d'Alembert, the Bernouillis and especially Joseph Lagrange, with his *Mécanique analytique* (1799–1805) were outstanding, while Laplace's *Système du monde* was an ambitious attempt to give Newtonian principles a cosmic dimension. In spite of the work of Priestley and Cavendish, chemistry had to wait for Lavoisier (1743–94) before it could enter a really creative period, E. G. Stahl's notorious theory of 'phlogiston' as the explanation of fire having been a serious obstacle to fruitful experiment. On the other hand, such names as Linnaeus, Buffon and Von Haller testify to important work in botany, zoology and physiology, while biology and the sciences of life came to the fore in the second half of the century as the traditional theory of 'preformation' gradually gave way to the idea of epigenesis. Perhaps more important for the literature of ideas than the developments of specific sciences was the extension of the scientific outlook and method to particular aspects of human life. Montesquieu has been hailed with some justification as a forerunner of sociology, while the empiricism of Locke encouraged interest in psychology, as is evident from the work of philosophers like Condillac and Hume; history and language also became the objects of more systematic study as they freed themselves from theological presuppositions; and there was a growing confidence in the possibility of applying the scientific principle of causal explanation to many areas of human experience.

Although scientific progress involved, for the most part, an intellectual prudence which acknowledged the need to respect the lessons of observation and experiment, it did not check all rash speculation, even among scientists; nor did it prevent thinkers from accepting the need to establish universal principles. Newton, for example, made

metaphysical assumptions concerning the absolute nature of time and space. The very fact that nature was a unifying concept helped to strengthen belief in its objectivity and permanence. Moreover, the old school of Natural Law philosophers continued to exercise a strong influence upon eighteenth-century thought, even upon thinkers who, like Rousseau, criticized their basic tenets; the very idea of 'the state of nature' presupposed that man was provided with a fixed essence which made his true being capable of resisting historical change and social influence. The 'noble savage' himself was endowed with qualities which were said to be more natural and universal than the artificial characteristics of his European counterpart. The rejection of the old metaphysical and religious absolutes did not necessarily mean the complete rejection of the rationalist spirit on which they were based.

The faith of the Enlightenment in the power of natural order is often demonstrated in unexpected ways. The political economy of the Physiocrats, for example, rested on the assumption that a benevolent God had created a natural order involving an ultimate harmony of interests, so that self-seeking and social good were not incompatible; the Physiocrats also believed that agriculture should be given precedence over industry and commerce because it lay closer to the principle of natural order. In England Adam Smith showed the same confidence in nature; in *The Wealth of Nations* (1766), he maintained that the unrestricted exercise of economic self-interest would lead, by a natural process, to the prosperity and happiness of the whole community. A pessimist such as Mandeville did not hesitate to affirm that 'private vices' could become 'public benefits' and that nature could help society to function harmoniously in spite of the presence of conflicting elements. Thinkers as far removed from the Physiocrats as were utopian socialists such as Morelly, with his *Code de la Nature* (1755) and *La Basiliade* (1751), or Mably who wanted to replace private property by some form of agrarian communism, still based their ideas on the principle of 'nature'.

Although this confidence in nature provides one of the main themes of the Enlightenment, the concept itself underwent considerable modification in the course of the century. The rigidly mechanistic outlook associated with Descartes and Newton gradually yielded to a conception that interpreted the universe in more dynamic terms. Philosophically, the ground had been prepared for this change by Leibniz

and Spinoza who had already stressed the idea of energy and striving rather than the Cartesian notion of 'extension'; a revival of interest in the works of ancient thinkers such as Epicurus and Lucretius also served to encourage this transformation of intellectual attitudes. Later eighteenth-century thinkers began to replace the image of the clock by that of the animal or organism. The notion of evolution made a hesitant appearance in the work of Buffon, Maupertuis and Diderot, although it tended to be remote from the minds of most thinkers of the time. When biology began to replace physics as the developing science, the universe was seen as a centre of energy rather than of order: it was the constant creation and destruction of its various elements – and not the orderly working of its complex mechanism – which began to command attention. Imagination – as well as reason – now began to play a large part in the interpretation of the world. In this respect it is interesting to compare the old-fashioned mechanistic materialism of d'Holbach's *Système de la Nature* (1770) with the animistic view of the world contained in Robinet's *De la Nature* (1761). The gap between man and animal rigidly maintained by the Cartesians and reaffirmed by Montesquieu and Voltaire, who still accepted a hierarchical view of the world (in spite of important concessions to the influence of man's physical being upon his philosophy of life) was gradually being closed by thinkers such as Robinet and Diderot. The soul of the world, it was believed, spread throughout the whole of creation and included all forms of existence, both animate and inanimate. In Germany Goethe came to see nature no longer in mechanistic terms, but as an infinitely rich and spontaneous source of creative energy; the origins of conflict did not lie in man himself (as Kant had believed in his separation of morality and nature) but in a world that frustrated the feelings and aspirations of the heart; given the right conditions, man could find a harmonious fulfilment of his being. Herder also set the life of the individual within the wider context of the history of mankind as a whole; he affirmed that as soon as men saw their lives in this way, they could achieve harmony and peace. Confidence in nature thus continued to dominate the age, but it no longer provided the basis of a rigidly hierarchical universe.

This persistent tendency to dwell on the unity of nature, whether conceived in mechanistic or dynamic terms, had to reckon with the rapidly expanding knowledge of man's situation in the world. Where-

as writers of the classical age had tended to ignore contemporary achievements (since artistic perfection had already been realized in antiquity), the eighteenth century saw a spectacular growth of interest in other cultures and civilizations. Men's outlook was broadened and modified by the thought that the world contained a remarkable variety of hitherto unknown customs and ways of life. The tremendous popularity of books written by travellers from the Far and Near East made people increasingly aware of the relativism of their own moral ideas. Jesuit missionaries in China disseminated information about Oriental religion; travellers like Cook and Bougainville gave accounts of their voyages around the world; Chardin and Tavernier fascinated readers with their descriptions of Persian life; the Baron de la Hontan, with his *Dialogues curieux* and other works, described the outlook of the American savages. As writers became more familiar with other cultures, they were able to take a detached and often critical look at their own; a favourite satirical pastime was to expose the naïve and one-sided viewpoint of those who thought that the customs of their country had timeless validity. Typical of these satirical attacks upon contemporary complacency were Swift's *Gulliver's Travels*, Defoe's *Robinson Crusoe* and Montesquieu's *Lettres persanes*.

Apart from drawing upon these exotic sources of new knowledge, Europe itself was recognizing its own differences of outlook. The prestige of French classicism was being rapidly undermined by the growing enthusiasm for English culture. Major writers like Voltaire and Montesquieu visited England and helped to spread knowledge of its philosophical, religious and political life: with the publication of his *Lettres philosophiques* in 1734, Voltaire was one of the first writers to give the French public a panoramic view of English culture, while Montesquieu, in *De l'esprit des lois* of 1748, wrote at length about the English political constitution. Apart from the tremendous prestige of Locke and Newton in philosophy and science, other aspects of English life aroused great sympathy and interest. Voltaire was struck by the liberalism of the English religious outlook and contrasted it with the intransigence of Roman Catholicism in France; constitutional English monarchy also appeared to have advantages over French political absolutism; a more reasonable attitude towards trade and commerce and the constant stress upon the principle of social utility made England a liberal country which could offer many salutary lessons to less

enlightened régimes. English literature also began to enjoy a hitherto unprecedented vogue. In *Le Pour et contre* (1733–40) the journalist and novelist the abbé Prévost undertook to give French readers up-to-date information about English authors; and later on he translated several of Richardson's novels. Translations of other novelists such as Fielding, Goldsmith and Sterne, soon followed. Before the end of the century the name of Shakespeare was also to become familiar to French readers, even though translations were usually adapted to their taste; at the same time the domestic tragedy of Otway, Lillo and Moore became known in France and the 'pre-Romantic' poetry of Thomson, Young and Ossian began to exert an important influence upon French sensibility. In the second half of the century, German influence, though much more limited than the English, began to make itself felt with the translation of Haller's *Die Alpen* in 1750, of the German-Swiss Gessner's *Idylls* in 1762 and with fifteen translations of Goethe's *Werther* between 1776 and 1797.

With the weakening of national barriers, the eighteenth century tended to appear as an age of cultural cosmopolitanism. There was an active interchange of writers and thinkers between France and England and most educated people were European rather than nationalist in their intellectual outlook; in spite of important social and political differences, they were conscious of sharing the same ideas and, thanks to common mental attitudes, men could cross physical frontiers without difficulty.

This broadening of cultural horizons is revealed not simply by the way in which writers looked beyond their national boundaries, but also by their growing consciousness of links with the past. Judged by modern standards, the historical studies of the time may often appear to be inadequate, but they certainly constitute a considerable advance on the theological conception of the previous century. Whereas Bossuet's *Universal History* related human events to the direct working of divine Providence, a more scientific and philosophical attitude towards history emerges with the publication of such works as Gibbon's *Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire* (1776–88), Voltaire's *Siècle de Louis XIV* (1751), Vico's *Scienze nuova* (1725) and Herder's *Ideen zur Philosophie der Geschischte der Menschheit* (1784–91). Apart from his extended essay on the rise and fall of the Roman Republic and Empire, Montesquieu revolutionized the study of law with his *De l'esprit des*