ENGLISH LITERATURE IN THE EARLY EIGHTEENTH CENTURY

1700–1740

BY

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TO

VALENTINE DOBRÉE

I dedicate
the most sustained labour
of my life

PREFACE

THERE is no general agreement as to how, or to what end, a history of literature should be written. My object here has been to give a general view of the literary activity of the period, and to be descriptive in such a way as, I hope, by breaking down barriers, will make the reader free of the realm here treated of, so that he may know what to expect should he adventure into it. It is written, that is, for the inquiring student and the interested general reader, rather than for the expert, or the sleuth-hound of trends and influences. Thus many small fry are referred to, some even discussed at length, as indicating the general approach at the time, out of which the bigger figures emerge for more thorough treatment. These are the writers that matter to us now; but however high the great ones may tower, it is as well to remember that Grub Street is always there. If I have quoted more generously than some may consider necessary, that is for two reasons: the first, that dogmatic statements unsupported by evidence seem to me to imply a certain arrogance; the second, that in inviting a reader to make the acquaintance of an author, I feel he should be given a taste of what he will find.

To give a real sense of the activity of a period it would be necessary to take each five years in such detail as to be wearisome—even if it were not impossible in the space; but so far as these forty years are concerned, it is clarifying to divide them into two periods, separating them roughly half-way. As illustrated in the text, the great writers, Swift, Pope, Defoe, wrote largely in forms different from their earlier choices, and in another manner; moreover the ethos changed. We are not at all in the same world in 1725 as we were in 1705; new sensibilities are making themselves felt. This, however, is true more particularly of creative writing, apart in the main from drama, which I have kept as a whole, together with philosophy, and criticism, which exhibit a more even flow, and history, memoirs and travel which were not so much affected.

It is one of the objects of the Oxford History of English Literature to embody the latest results of scholarship, a counsel of perfection over a field including so many aspects, an ideal

rendered all the more difficult by this book having taken more than twenty years to write, partly because of the scandalous dark night of interruption, World War II; to have embodied the latest findings in the earliest written chapters would have been impossible: but I have, I hope, made note of all important discoveries and findings.

To make full acknowledgement of all the help received would be equally impossible. Conversations with my colleagues at Leeds University, and discussions with students, have often given me fruitful ideas, and even supplied me with phrases. But I must not omit to thank experts who have been kind enough to read through certain sections; namely Professor John Butt who scanned and criticized my Pope chapters, Mr. J. M. Cameron who helped me with the philosophers, Mr. Herbert Davis who looked over my Swift, Professor James Sutherland who kept me straight with respect to Defoe, upon whom I received some light from Mrs. Jane Jack who lent me a copy of her thesis. I have especially to express gratitude to my co-editor, Professor F. P. Wilson, who read the whole script, and offered many helpful suggestions as well as being indefatigable in correcting my errors. In compiling the bibliography I have received help and advice as regards Defoe, Pope, and Swift from the scholars mentioned above, and for Berkeley from Professor T. E. Jessop, while in the general portion I have depended greatly upon Mr. Peter Meade of the British Museum, who compiled the greater part of it.

My acknowledgements would be woefully incomplete if I did not include the name of Miss A. C. Stead of Leeds University, whose careful typing saved me immense labour in correcting the text, and for whose disentangling of my first drafts I have nothing but admiration. And, finally, I owe a debt to my wife for reading the book through attentively, and saving me from many obscurities of expression and clumsiness in the phrasing.

B. D.

London
May 1959

THE OXFORD HISTORY OF ENGLISH LITERATURE

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PART ONE

1700–1720

I

THE BACKGROUND

1. SOCIAL

THE picture of society which the historian of literature would wish to realize is different from one constructed for other historical purposes. What invites his study is not the elements which brought about say, the growth of life-insurance, nor those which made the Cabinet an important instrument of rule, but those which called forth certain forms of writing, which modified others, and, in short, set their stamp upon the literature of the time. From this standpoint certain questions seem to thrust themselves forward for answer. Was it, for instance, the popular taste for reading about voyages that made *Travels* a suitable mould for Swift to pour the metal of his satire into? Was it a delight in seeing the issues plain after a confused period of religious polemic that made the *Tale of a Tub* a bookseller's success? If it was a time when social and moral values were changing with marked rapidity, does this account for the unusual proportion of satirical work? And, again, can we find in a variation of social emphasis one of the reasons why the poetry of the eighteenth century differs so greatly from that of the seventeenth?

It is fatally easy for us, looking back in perspective, to simplify too much, to see the year 1700 as ending a phase. Did not Dryden in his at once nostalgic and courageous swan-song of that year declare:

> 'Tis well an Old Age is out
> And time to begin a New;

and Congreve stop writing comedies as though he felt that what

he had to say belonged to a previous era? Certainly the scope and intention of literature after 1700 strike us as decidedly different from what had latterly defined it. However arbitrary the date may be, something important in life and significant to literature seems to have happened; so that in passing from one century to the other we have the sense of emerging into a world altogether more comprehensible, one which it takes us less effort to inhabit—or so we perhaps delude ourselves. The old voices go on for a time; Halifax, Temple, Clarendon are published and read side by side with the works of new writers; but these at the turn of the century abandon the old forms, which, unsuited to carry what they have to say, would inevitably clog their utterance. The drama dwindles; at first poetry, a thin trickle of clear water in a marsh of exhausted turgidity, tentatively seeks new forms, or tries variants of older ones; the historians begin to develop method; a new popular philosophy—the Enlightenment we have come to call it—grows into the general consciousness; the busy world looks forward to Baconian and mercantilist conquests, while the scholars gather strength in looking back; a new class becomes dominant, not in taste—that was a sad variant reserved for a hundred years later—but in morality. The picture, naturally, is confused. Some authors, such as Defoe, seem clearly to mark a new age; others, such as Swift, are as evidently linked with the old.

General statements are necessarily in part false; the most we can hope for is to provide a frame which does not distort too much: yet perhaps for our purpose we may say that the age 'began' with the Revolution of 1688 which was felt finally to have swept away most of the remaining vestiges of medievalism. Or put it that a process of profound change which had been going on for over a century now increased its pace, to crystallize out in 1720, or thereabouts, when a new phase becomes apparent. All origins we know can be traced further and further back, all premonitions ante-dated; but to be niggling about refined points of scholarship, to hedge and hover over minute particulars when considering the period before us would be to miss the whole significance of what was happening on a large scale. What we have to take account of, even if we cannot 'explain' it, is the change which indubitably came over literature between the Revolution (some might prefer to put the date back a few years) and about 1740. Writings were no longer

addressed in the main either to courtly or highly educated cliques such as could relish Restoration drama, or even to those who responded to the ratiocinative poems of Dryden. And we can note that literature is no longer proffered by men who speak with the voice of authority, but by men whose tone is persuasive; the reader is not being addressed from above, he is being spoken to as an equal.

Since literature itself is part of our sense of what life was like at a given moment, it is hazardous to try to determine their relation; but there are some periods where literature seems very immediately to reflect the political and social scene. This occurs apparently when there emerges a measurably large public which has not been trained to enjoy the books earlier generations delighted in, and which, if not exactly hungry for 'Literature', is ready for some sort of reading, eager indeed to taste anything which seems specially addressed to it. Our period is just such a one, for at that time a new class was coming into being, the class of merchant 'citizens', which, if still the milch-cow of the aristocratic ruling classes, was beginning to feel its power over the latter, and therefore its equality in mental vigour. Its claim was lucidly stated in 1722 by Mr. Sealand in Steele's *The Conscious Lovers*:

> I know the Town and the World [he declared]—and give me leave to say, that we Merchants are a Species of Gentry, that have grown into the World this last Century, and are as honourable, and almost as useful, as you landed Folks, that have always thought yourselves so much above us. . . .

This was echoed by Defoe in *Roxana* (1724), and later by Gay, not only in *Polly* but in *The Distress'd Wife* (1734):

> *Barter.* Is the name then [of merchant] a term of Reproach?—Where is the Profession that is so honourable?—What is it that supports every Individual of our Country? 'Tis Commerce—On what depends the Glory, the Credit, the Power of the Nation?—On Commerce.—To what does the Crown itself owe its Splendor and Dignity?—To Commerce.

and Joseph Butler, in a sermon preached in 1740, reminded 'the enlarged middle rank of people' of their responsibilities.

This business class, largely dissenting, which hitherto had had the time to read no more than contentious literature on political or religious topics, was now producing leisured sons,

and, still more to the point, leisured daughters, who wanted to read something which bore directly upon the life they knew and lived. The womenfolk who did not merely aspire to ape 'quality' would willingly accept diversions (especially if they had a strong moral tone) other than those of cheapening gloves in the Exchange, paying rounds of gossiping visits, or compromising themselves at basset, in short, plunging into the usual refuges from boredom which are the recourse of the uneducated rich.

Mr. Sealand is symptomatic of one aspect of a general process which was going on, and was completed, say, in the thirties, namely the convergence from above and below of distinct reading classes, which came together to form one large homogeneous group. Naturally there is always reading for the very few—recondite philosophy, for instance—in our period Berkeley and Hutcheson, or, say, Granville fatigued and aloof, and at the other end there will always be the Ned Wards[1] bustling, vociferous, demotic, or the infantile reading represented at this time by almanacs and prognostications, ballads or street songs, and the literature summed up in Swift's gay gibe as the '*Sixpenny Worths of Wit*, Westminster *Drolleries*, *Delightful Tales*, *Complete Jesters* and the like, by which the writers of and for Grub-Street have in these ages so nobly triumphed over time'. These last we shall ignore. But what we have to note as an indication of what broadly was happening is that instead of one group of people reading, perhaps, the Cambridge Platonists, and another the virulent controversies of Penn, Faldo, and Muggleton, 'everybody' will be reading Butler's *Analogy*. Instead of a few relishing Cowley, perhaps, and the others, if they read poetry at all, such things as *Covent Garden Drolleries*, in 1750 'everybody' will enjoy Dodsley's *Miscellanies* and Gray's *Elegy*. No doubt, the main factor in there being a variation in literary matter was political and religious change; but at any rate something was bound to replace the mass of religious polemics, devotional treatises, and political pamphlets, which, now that the moulds disrupted by the metaphysical as well as economic civil strife were settling down into new shapes, could no longer nourish

[1] Edward Ward, 1667–1731, of 'low extraction', managed to visit the West Indies, 'ape and monkey climes' as a young man, and on his return became a publican in successive parts of London. He scribbled incessantly, and was not always well advised, being pilloried for certain passages in *Hudibras Redivivus*.

the minds and imaginations of the intelligent middle class. And since it was this class which was to dominate the literary scene for over a century, it is worth our while to glance at it.

This particular middle class now rising (there is always a rising middle class) was that which flourished in unusually large numbers, thanks to mercantile expansion, and of which Mr. Sealand represented the most successful element. Leslie Stephen described it as

> a class of comparatively educated and polished persons, large enough to form a public, and not so large as to degenerate into a mob, distinct from the old feudal nobility, and regarding the life of the nobles with a certain contempt as rustic and brutal, more refined again than that class of hangers-on to the Court, of merchants and shop-keepers stamped with the peculiarities of their business, which generated the drama of the Restoration, and, on another side, beginning to despise the pedants of colleges and cathedrals as useless and antiquated encumbrances. . . . After the long struggle at the end of the preceding century, the society called 'the Town' definitely emerges, and is inclined to identify itself with the nation. . . .

In short London itself was emerging, with a close-packed population of about half a million, seventeen times larger than its nearest rival Bristol. It was swelling rapidly as England became ever more urban, for since the Dutch wars and the seizure of the carrying trade by England, the seaports, especially London, had grown in importance. Far more than the place of residence it was later to become, it was a centre of business and politics, its ideas largely set by the City and Whitehall, its intellectual life active only during the legal terms: it is in this buzzing hive that we must seek the new class of readers, and we may for a moment look at its structure.

The great trading companies were being consolidated, new ones were being launched, imports and exports alike were increasing at an inspiring rate, all indicating that directing and business staffs must already have been big, clerical employees numerous, while the considerable number of government clerks of all grades added ever more and more to the reading public. Mingling with these were to be found the smaller citizenry, the tradesmen large and little, the kind of people Moll Flanders moved among, the middlemen, clerks, and those employed in what Defoe described as 'a new trade, which we call by a new name, stock-jobbing', not to mention the footmen

(one of whom was called Joseph Andrews) and the servants of the new class; in short, the smaller fry of the spreading mercantile interest and the ever more concentrated capitalism. Whether there was a general rise in literacy it is hard to say: Leslie[1] of *The Rehearsal* complained with acerbity: '. . . the greatest Part of the *People* do not Read Books, Most of them cannot *Read* at all. But they will Gather together about one that can *Read*, and Listen to an *Observator* or *Review* (as I have seen them in the streets)'. But it is probable that the excellent new Dissenting elementary schools, largely attended by children of Churchmen—exempt from the Schism Act and not to be confused with the Academies—did much to raise the standard. So did the Charity Schools against which Mandeville inveighed, since by teaching letters to the lowly, they gave desires for better things to people who should be hewers of wood and drawers of water. There were, of course, the old groups of readers—the Inns of Court young men, the people generically known as the gentry, and the old puritan and dissenting elements that were freeing themselves into wider realms of thought than works of devotion; there were, moreover, large numbers of Huguenots who would help to raise the standard of general literature.

The mass of argumentative people surging through a London which gives so strong an impression of energetic life would probably be devourers of all the flimsier literature hawked about the streets, whitening the stalls of the booksellers, and lying about on the tables of the coffee-houses or taverns they habitually called in at for their pipe, their glass, and their gossip. They were probably agog for anything new or fresh; but what drew them most was discussion or comment, cry and counter-cry, upon the subjects of bitter and vociferous faction, religious, political, commercial, shot with vituperation and libel, which characterized this unquiet time till about 1720. The reign of Queen Anne, far from being the age of exquisite grace and Augustan quiet it was so long presented as being, was actually a virulent one. Harsh and cruel beneath an irregularly polished surface, it was torn by strife over religious issues interwoven with the equally ferocious political squabbles

[1] Charles Leslie, 1650–1722, proceeded from Enniskillen to Trinity College, Dublin. He was ordained in 1680; but, a non-juring divine, he left Ireland in 1689. He finally adhered to the Pretender, lived some time in Italy, and returned to Ireland to die.