大学英国文学史

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宋文林

A COLLEGE HISTORY OF ENGLISH LITERATURE

Volume II

A College History of English Literature

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(In Two Volumes)

by

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商 务 印 书 馆

1996年·北京

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陈　嘉　宋文林　著

商　务　印　书　馆　出　版
（北京王府井大街36号　邮政编码100710）
新华书店总店北京发行所发行
河北省香河县第二印刷厂印刷
ISBN 7-100-01595-2/G·230

1996年9月第1版　　开本 850×1168 1/32
1996年9月北京第1次印刷　　字数 368千
印数 4 000 册　　印张 12 1/4

定价：16.40元

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English Literature of the Mid-19th Century

Section I The Historical Background: Social and Intellectual

English literature of the middle decades of the 19th century, according to its historical development, may be sub-divided into two periods: 1) English literature of the 30's and 40's, or from 1832 the year of the Parliamentary Reform to the decline of Chartism after 1848; and 2) English literature from the 50's to the end of the 70's, a period of comparative stability that preceded the economic crisis and the sharpening political contradictions in the early 80's.

1. The 1830's and 1840's

The year 1832 is an important landmark in English history. The Parliamentary Reform in 1832—1833 placed the political power of the nation into the hands of the wealthy industrialists who quickly thereafter came to terms with the aristocracy and intensified the exploitation of the working people. So, after 1832, the major conflict in the political arena became more definitely that between labour and capital as never before in English history.

The years between 1832 and the early 50's were marked by one important chain of social events, the Chartist Movement. Chartism arose out of the increasing strength of the working class as well as their increasing miseries in life. The

new Poor Law of 1834 which brought along with it the workhouse system, the continuance of the Corn Laws which made bread too expensive for the poor, and the intensified exploitation of man, woman and child workers with their longer hours of work and lower wages, and the threats of unemployment and epidemics, all led to the demands of the workers for social justice and a better life.

In 1836 the London Working-Men's Association was formed, and in February 1837 it drew up a petition of six demands which later constituted the People's Charter. In 1838 took place the elections of the workers for the first Chartist Convention which met in London in February 1839. In July of that year the first Chartist petition with reported signatures of over a million was submitted to Parliament, but it was rejected and the Convention was dissolved. The government made many arrests and threw into prison most of the leaders of the movement. A rising of partly armed miners at Newport in Wales in 1839 also ended in defeat. In July 1840 the National Chartist Association was formed and by 1842 this central Chartist organization boasted of a membership of 40,000. A second petition, with a signature of 3 million, was sent in and it contained stronger wording and higher demands than in the first petition. But it was again rejected, and strikes broke out all over the country while the government sent troops and adopted other measures to force the strikers back to work. The third wave of Chartist activity came after 1846, and a third petition said to bear over 5 million signatures was delivered to Parliament on April 10, 1848, and was once more rejected. After that, the Chartist Movement declined, with a short-lived revival in 1853, and in 1858 the National Chartist Association finally broke up. But the repeated upsurge of Chartist agitation forced the ruling classes in England to make certain concessions, resulting in the repeal of the Corn Laws in

1846 and the passage of the Ten Hours Act in 1847.

In the 1830's and the "hungry forties," during the political and social upheavals of Chartism, the Manchester School of political economy, headed by Richard Cobden (1804—1865) and John Bright (1811—1889), tried to relieve the strained relations between the industrial capitalists and the working class by advocating the economic principles of free trade and "laissez-faire" and by calling for the repeal of the Corn Laws. The philosophical basis of the Manchester School of Free Trade was the Theory of Utilitarianism, first expounded by Jeremy Bentham (1748—1832) and later elaborated by John Stuart Mill (1806—1875). While preaching utility as the foundation of morals and pain and pleasure as "sovereign masters" that govern man's conduct, they defended the bourgeois moral code of personal profit or the principle of "rational egoism" by considering self-interest to be always the motive of human actions. These philosophical concepts served to combat the theory of the "natural rights" of man and were employed by the industrial and finance capitalists as an apology for their economic exploitation of the labouring masses. (The most outstanding satire on utilitarianism was made by Dickens in *Hard Times*)

Another attempt to conciliate the conflict between capital and labour was made by a group of men in religious circles known as Christian Socialists who preached self-restraint to dissuade workers from participating in Chartist and other violent activities while showing brotherly sympathy for the poor workers suffering from social injustice. One of the leaders of the group was Charles Kingsley, a clergyman and a novelist, who negated the people's role in history and exalted heroes as creators of history. Similarly, Carlyle in his *On Heroes and Hero-worship* held the same view. However, Carlyle was distrustful of the material progress of his day and yearned for the

medieval past (in his *Past and Present*), as also did Benjamin Disraeli, with his views of "feudal socialism" that favoured the rule of the aristocracy.

The two decades preceding the halfway mark in the 19th century included on the one hand the bulk of Chartist literature and on the other the first fruits of major Victorian novelists, poets, and prose writers.

The three major waves of the Chartist Movement, with the struggle within the Chartist ranks of the "moral force" and "physical force" groups, as well as the influence of Robert Owen's utopian socialism and O'Connor's petty bourgeois project of the Land Plan, found their expression chiefly in the Chartist writings that included different literary genres of poetry, oration, fiction, literary criticism, and political articles.

The years following the parliamentary reform of 1832—1833 also marked the early flowering of the so-called Victorian literature, particularly after the beginning of the long reign of Queen Victoria in 1837. Dickens' career as a great novelist of the period began in 1837 with his *Pickwick Papers*, to be followed in quick succession by half a dozen novels in a dozen years, culminating in *Dombey and Son* in 1848. Thackeray's greatest novel *Vanity Fair* appeared serially in 1847—1848, while Mrs. Gaskell's first novel of importance *Mary Barton* and the two noteworthy works by the two Brontë sisters Charlotte and Emily, *Jane Eyre* and *Wuthering Heights*, were published in 1847.

In the realm of poetry, the early works of Alfred Tennyson and Robert Browning, two outstanding Victorian poets, appeared also in these two decades, Tennyson emerging with his 2 volumes of poetry in 1842 that established his fame while Browning launched his first two attempts at dramatic monologue *Dramatic Lyrics* and *Dramatic Romance* as well as his several verse dramas in the 1840's.

In the field of prose, two chief figures Carlyle and Macaulay wrote most of their works in the 1830's and 1840's, including the former's *Sartor Resartus, The French Revolution, On Heroes and Hero-worship,* and *Past and Present* and the latter's *Essays* and his first volume of *History of England,* while a younger writer John Ruskin already made a start in the 1840's with his first volumes of *Modern Painters* and *Seven Lamps of Architecture*. Matthew Arnold who distinguished himself in both prose and verse, wrote much of his poetry in the 1840's though he did not start his important critical work till the 1860's.

2. The Quarter-Century after 1850

The 1850's and 1860's and early 1870's constituted a period of comparative social stability in England, while there were big expansions in industry and commerce and colonial exploitation abroad and a lull in the conflict between the proletariat and the upper classes at home. Then a great economic crisis shook the country in 1875 and again in 1880 and 1884, when English agriculture was ruined by American wheat and Australian wool and English industry met with slumps and setbacks. In 1864 the International Working-Men's Association, otherwise known as the First International, was founded under the direct leadership of Marx and Engels, but large-scale organized efforts of the working people did not come till the 1880's. In the meantime, the struggle between the Liberals and the Tories for political dominance was carried on with great vigour through the middle decades of the 19th century, and bourgeois party politics together with labour agitation led to the passege of the Second Reform Bill of 1867 and the Third Reform Bill of 1884.

From the 1850's to the 1870's, rapid scientific progress had its strong impact upon philosophy and religion of the day.

The new concepts of time and space based upon discoveries in geology and astronomy made it difficult to believe in the traditional Christian pictures of paradise, purgatory, and hell. Then Darwin's *Origin of Species* (1859) and *The Descent of Man* (1871) introduced the new theory of evolution and discredited the biblical story of God's creation of the world and the first man and woman. All these serious threats to orthodox Christianity on the one hand brought about powerful reaction to dogmatic, traditional belief in the Anglican Church as shown by Newman and his Oxford Movement before he embraced Catholicism, while on the other hand there arose unorthodox beliefs in some divinity or other, such as the secular spirituality of Carlyle, the dissenting form of Christianity adopted by Matthew Arnold, and the "religion of the heart" or positivism which preached Christian forgiveness and had its influence upon George Eliot. On the other extreme there was Herbert Spencer (1820—1903) advocating the struggle for existence and "the survival of the fittest" which was a distorted application of Darwin's theory of evolution to the development of human society and which, known as social Darwinism, served as an apology for capitalism by justifying oppression and exploitation.

Although Marx and Engels issued their *Communist Manifesto* in 1848 and Marx lived in England to write his important work *Capital* while Engels published *The Conditions of the Working Class in England* in 1845, and although in 1864 the International Working-Men's Association was already organized under the direct leadership of Marx and Engels, yet the influence of Marxism was not widely felt in England till the 1880's when a number of socialist organizations began to spring up on English soil, and Marxist influence upon English literature in the mid-19th century was restricted chiefly to Chartist writers.

From the 1850's down to the mid-1870's, Tennyson and Browning held their sway in the realm of poetry, as their important works were mostly written in those decades (Tennyson's *In Memorian, Maud,* and *Idylls of the King* and Browning's *Men and Women, Dramatis Personae,* and *The Ring and the Book*). Matthew Arnold was a poet in the 1840's— 1860's and an essayist in the 1860's—1880's. Following the founding of the PreRaphaelite Brotherhood the PreRaphaelite poets turned to the Middle Ages for inspiration, with the painter-poet Dante Gabriel Rossetti as the leading spirit. Allied somewhat with PreRaphaelitism at the outset of his career, Swinburne was a rebellious pagan who shocked the Victorian society with his early sacrilegious "poems and ballads", and continued to write as a great lyricist and a consummate master of metre and rhymes.* Among the minor poets should be mentioned Arthur Hugh Clough, who was the "Thyrsis" of Arnold's elegy, and Christina Rossetti, sister of Dante Gabriel Rossetti and a religious lyricist. Also worthy of note was Edward Fitzgerald with his translation of the Persian poet Omar Khayyám's *Rubáiyát* that openly cried for epicureanism. It was published in 1859 but did not gain its popularity and influence till some ten years later.

In the world of prose fiction, while Dickens and Thackeray kept on turning out their novels in the 1850's, the new arrivals on the prose-fiction scene in the 1850's — 1870's were chiefly George Eliot and George Meredith. As major masters of prose in this period, Ruskin was a prominent art critic who in later years was a progressive social critic and Newman was the leader of the Oxford Movement who turned a Catholic. And while Matthew Arnold distinguished himself as

*Another PreRaphaelite poet William Morris who turned from an advocator of Medievalism in his youthful days to a singer of socialismin his later years will be dealt with in the next chapter.

a poet as well as a literary critic, John Stuart Mill wrote superb essays of philosophical significance and Thomas Henry Huxley propagandized for scientific knowledge.

Section II Chartist Literature

1. A General Survey of Chartist Literature: Different Literary Genres and Stages of Development

(1) Different Literary Genres

The bulk of Chartist literature appeared in the different Chartist publications during the Chartist Movement, mostly written by Chartists in order to promote their political struggle. There were no less than 25 Chartist periodicals in the twenty years of Chartist activities (1839—1858), some of them lasting only a few months, while a few others, including what was once the central official organ of the Movement, *The Northern Star,* persisted for up to ten years. Many of these Chartist writings were by anonymous authors a few of whom were voluminous writers. Although some of the works, written in great haste to serve political needs, were somewhat crude, there is a considerable amount of shorter pieces that possess artistic merits, especially in the field of poetry.

The numerous activities in the Chartist Movement called for different literary genres in prose and verse. Above all, there were shorter poems of all kinds: rousing songs, hymns, marches, satiric verses, sonnets on freedom, elegiac poems on martyred fellow Chartists, doctrinal verses on social injustice, and exhortative poems calling for mass action, but occasionally were also published pieces on the revolutionary past or a verse play, or even a long poem. In prose there were political articles and speeches, open letters, essays on literary criticism, critical essays on great authors in history, as well as stories and novelettes. But only a number of shorter poems, some

speeches and articles, one or two episodes from novelettes, and some few short pieces of literary critictism deserve to be handed down to posterity both for their artistic achievement and for their progressive significance.

(2) Stages of Development

The historical development of Chartist literature may be divided into three successive stages: a) the early period, including the works written between 1838-9 and 1842, corresponding roughly to the rise of the Chartist Movement up to its second major upsurge; b) the period of maturity, from 1842 to 1848, signifying the high tide of the Movement up to its first signs of decline; c) the period of decline from 1848 to 1858, with brief flares of poetic achievement brought about by such left-wing leaders as Ernest Jones, W.J. Linton, and Gerald Massey.

(a) The early period of Chartist literature contained mostly poetry, which was not easily distinguishable from similar verse by some writers a little ahead of them like Thomas Hood or Ebenezer Elliott or Elizabeth Barrett Browning and dealt with similar themes of the miseries of the poor working people and of prevalent social injustice and of the consequent demand for freedom and for change. There were, of course, a few fiery songs of Chartist sentiments and some pungent, satirical verses laying bare the ruthless tyranny and political hypocrisy of the ruling class. But many of the Chartist poems had the weakness of abstract expression of ideas and lacked vivid imagery. Besides, much poetry of this period contained a profusion of religious feelings and the use of allegorical figures. In these earlier Chartist poems, was visible the influence of progressive romantic poetic tradition of Byron and Shelley while the contradictions between the "moral force" and the "physical force" groups in the Chartist Movement could also be traced therein, for even in certain poems showing the power of the workers'

united action was suggested the attainment of their Charter by following up the legal rather than the violent path.

In the realm of prose, a few fiery speeches and some excellent literary criticism also appeared in the Chartist literature of this early stage. In some of the speeches by George Julian Harney, a left-wing leader, there were present not only fiery enthusiasm and eloquence but also logical analysis, the two aspects going together to form truly great orations. In the field of literary criticism, besides critical appraisals of great poets of the past like Milton, Burns, Byron, and Shelley, there appeared at least four articles on "The Politics of Poets" in which for the first time in literary history proletarian writers declared with no equivocation the importance of "the union of poetry with politics", and pointed out that all truly great poets of the past were also fighters for liberty and against tyranny.

(b) After 1842, following the rejection of the second Chartist petition and the subsequent persecution of the Chartist leaders and strikers, many of the radical elements of the bourgeoisie as well as fellow travellers among the petty bourgeoisie who had hitherto joined hands with the Chartists began to waver or forsake their cause, and from then on the Movement became more purely a proletarian movement. The visible effect of this upon Chartist literature in the years 1842–8 was the shattering of certain bourgeois-humanist illusions manifiested in the disappearance of abstract cries for freedom or of the appeal to God to relieve the miseries of the labouring masses, while the miseries described now were followed by the call to overthrow the existing social order. The maturity of the Chartist poets in these years may be seen in their struggle with the theories of Malthus and of the Manchester School and with the views of the moral force group within Chartism. However, the idea of fighting for the Charter with the physical force of an armed rising if necessary was still rare in the poetry at