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The Age of Johnson

Samuel Johnson was born at Lichfield in 1709. From his father he inherited his huge, unwieldy, unhealthy frame, and that vile melancholy of disposition which was to throw a gloom over so much of his life. The elder Johnson died on the verge of bankruptcy. He tried his luck in so many ways, including his marriage with a widow twenty years his senior. At last he tried his luck in London. He reached the metropolis in 1737, accompanied by David Garrick. He published the poem London in 1738 and formed a connection with Cove's Magazine, to which he contributed the parliamentary reports. During the next few years he produced Vanity of Human Wishes (1748) and a tragedy, Irene(1749) on the neoclassical mode. In March 1750, he started a periodical The Rambler which appeared on Tuesdays and Thursdays till March 1752. This was followed by two other series, The Adventurer and the Idler, Meanwhile he was occupied for eighty years (1747-55) by an immense task, A Dictionary of the English Language. Johnson in his dictionary not only defined but also illustrated his definitions by quotations taken from the whole range of English Literature. Though weak in etymology and philosophy, this work laid the foundation of English lexicography. The Dictionary made him independent his struggles and anxieties were over, when somewhat later he received a pension of 300 pounds a year. He now became the acknowledged dictator

the Great Cham'of literature, as Smollett called him. He founded the famous club in 1764. In the club he sat surrounded by men such as Goldsmith, Sir Joshua Reynolds the great painter, Burke, Gibbon, Sir William Jones the orient list, Garrick and Boswell. He had ample opportunity for the exercise of his unmatched conversational and controversial powers in the club. He published his didactic tale, Rasselas in 1759; an edition of Shakespeare in 1765; an account of his tour to the Hebrides with Boswell under the title of Journey to the Western Islands of Scotland in 1775, and his largest and also his greatest work, 'The Lives of the Most Eminent English Poets' with critical observations on their works in 1779-81. He died in 1784 and was buried in Westminster Abbey

As a moralist he is characterized by remarkable sanity and massive common sense. Broadly speaking, he is a pessimist. He declared 'Life is a progress from want

to want, not from enjoyments to enjoyment; we are stirred into activity by a feeling of its Vacuity';
we spend our energies

for the most part in the pursuit of chimerical pleasure; and when our desires are gratified, the usual result is satiety. He develops these views in many of his miscellaneous writings and most notably in two of his finest works, the *Vanity of Human Wishes* and *Rasselas*. The *Vanity of Human Wishes* is an impressive sermon on the text which is stated in the title. It is supported by a number of typical illustrations taken from history. The *Rasselas* is historically significant as a reply to the flimsy optimism of Shaftesbury and Pope. It also tells us that happiness sought by all is nowhere to be found. The tone of Johnson's philosophy is thus profoundly sad but there is nothing debilitating about it. Throughout his life he made a most heroic fight against the besetting melancholy. The steady courage of his own manhood pervades his work. The essence of his teaching is that we should face the facts of existence honestly. We should bear the evil uncomplainingly and make the most of the good. The conclusions of the *Vanity of Human Wishes* and *Rasselas* show that he was saved from utter hopelessness by his strong religious faith. As a prose writer Johnson did not follow the lead of the Augustan masters. He gives us a style which is highly latinised in vocabulary. His sentence structure is marked by elaborate balance and antithesis. His way of writing is pompous and heavy. But it is never obscure, and at its best has great strength nobility and dignity.

ROBERT BURNS (1759-96)

Robert Burns was endowed with a marvellously spontaneous power of genius and an almost unrivalled gift of song. The ultimate basis of his strength was his absolute sincerity to himself and his surroundings. Being a Scottish peasant, he wrote frankly as a peasant. He became the poetic interpreter of the thoughts and feelings, the racy humour, the homespun philosophy, the joys, sorrows, passions, superstitions, and even sometimes the lawlessness and debaucheries of the class from which he sprang. Of all these things he sang with an entire freedom from everything suggestive of mere literary mannerism and affectation. It is indeed quite a mistake to regard him as an unlettered plowman. He read widely and critically. Though it may be noted as a detail that his most ambitious poem – *The Cotter's Saturday Night* – is in the Spenserian stanza, standard English literature affected him but little. His poetic ancestry was in fact Scottish, and the chief literary influences being his own work, vernacular poetry as represented by the songs and ballads of the Scottish peasant folk. He helped to bring natural passion back into English verse. Another important point about his writings is their strong democratic quality. He was keenly responsive to the revolutionary spirit of his age. This spirit is felt when, in – *The Cotter's Saturday Night* – he contrasts the homely life and the simple piety of the peasant and his family with the wealth and vulgar ostentation, the luxury and the artificial refinements of the fashionable world. He prophesies of the coming time when all over the world men will be brothers. He also reminds that it is 'taiaris unhumanity to man _which brakes countless thousands mourn'. Thus, he constitutes himself the mouthpiece of the growing faith of his time in Liberty, Equality and Fraternity.

GOLDSMITH (1728-74)

Oliver Goldsmith stands nearest to Johnson both in personal and historical interest. He was in most eccentric of an eccentric family. He was born in 1728 at Pallas, Ireland. His father was a clergyman. In early life, he gained an unenviable reputation for wilderness and stupidity. He managed to get his degree at Dublin. He spent some years in idleness before he went to Edinburgh to study medicine. In Edinburgh, his Bohemianism developed unchecked. He went to London under the pretext of pursuing medical studies. But actually he earned a little money by teaching and lost it all at the gaming tables. In 1755 he set to

make the Grand Tour of Europe with one clean shirt, a guinea in his pocket, and his favourite German flute as his equipment. How he managed to pay his way is still mystery. For information regarding this question, as well as for details of his experience, it is probable that we are safe in turning to his poem, *The Travelers*, and to the account of Goldsmith's continental wanderings in *The Vicar of Wakefield*. In 1756, he reached London penniless and friendless. After doing many odd jobs, he entered literature at thirty. His career was mainly that of a hackwriter. A large portion of his output belongs to the class of what are popularly known as pot-boilers. Even these have much of the charm of his personality and style. His more substantial work consists of two poems – *The Traveller*(1764) and *The Deserted Village*(1770) one novel *The Vicar of Wakefield*(1766) and two comedies – *The Good Natured Man*(1768) and *She Stoops to Conquer*(1773). To these should be added a number of essays, including a series entitled *The Citizen of the World* (1760- 62). His friendship with Johnson starts. The warm relations between the two men, so entirely different in mind and temper, throw an interesting light on both. Though Johnson bullied Goldsmith often, he would allow no one else to do so slow in conversation and with a perfect genius for blundering, Goldsmith was the laughing stock of the wits of London's literary world.

Goldsmith's work is very miscellaneous in character. His two admirable comedies are historically interesting because they mark a reaction against the dull and uninteresting moralisings of sentimental comedy and a return to real humour and life. A striking feature of Goldsmith's original writings is the strong personal element in all of them. Their peculiar charm is therefore fundamentally the charm of the man himself. He projected into what he wrote not only his temperament but also his experiences. A large portion of his imaginative work is really reminiscence. Thus it is easy to discover the originals of most of his best known characters in his relatives or himself. Dr. Primrose, for example is certainly his father, the good priest in *The Deserted Village*, his brother Hardy, Moses in *The Vicar of Wakefield*, young Honeywood in Goldsmith's one excursion into the field of fiction is the Vicar of Wakefield. Goldsmith had learned little of the art of novel from the precepts and practice of Fielding. Goldsmith's plot is ill-concocted, full of glaring improbabilities, and huddled up in the most ludicrous manner at the close. We are ready to make allowances for the technical defects of his work, because it is instinctive with his peculiar charm and tenderness and its materials are handled with that transfiguring power which touches the simplest detail with idyllic beauty. Its humour is perennially delightful. Much of its characterization is purely conventional. No praise would be excessive for the subtlety with which the good Dr. Primrose and his family are portrayed. Its spirit is that of quiet, mainly piety, without the slightest suggestion of the 'goody-goody'. The large sympathy which is conspicuous in many of its descriptions shows that in human feeling and real social insight alike. Goldsmith was ahead of most of the professional preachers and teachers of his time

GRAY (1716-71)

Thomas Gray was a man of poor physique, a great scholar, and a recluse. He produced but little poetry. What he wrote is not only exquisite in quality and finish, but also curiously interesting as a kind of epitome of the changes which were coming over the literature of his time. Among his first poetic efforts was a poem on – *The Alliance of Education and Government*, belonging to the Augustan school. It was written in closed couplet. Gray never

succeeded in finishing it. His first publication was the

ode –On a Distant Prospect of Eton college|| written in 1742 and published anonymously by Dodsley in 1747. Next year, in the first three volume of Dodley’s collection, appeared his –Eton Ode,|| the –Ode to Spring,|| and the poem –On the death of a Favourite Cat||. These are conventional in thought and diction and contain little to suggest the new spirit. The –Elegy written in a country Churchyard|| was published by Dodley in 175, when it quickly went through fifteen editions and was often pirated. Many features make it historically very important. There is, first, the use of nature. Nature, though employed only as background, is still handled with fidelity and sympathy. Next, there is the churchyard scene, the twilight atmosphere, and the brooding melancholy of the poem. These connect the –Elegy|| with one side of the romantic movement the development of the distinctive romantic mood. The contrast drawn between the country and the town – the peasants simple life and ‘the madding crowd’s ignoble strife’ – is a third particular which will be noted. Finally, we see poetry under the influence of the spreading democratic spirit, in the tender feeling shown for the rude forefathers of the hamlet’ and the sense of the human value of the ‘Untill things that are written in ‘the short and simple annals of the poor’. Therefore, poetry reached out to elude humble aspects of life hitherto ignored. Thus, in spite of the poet’s continued use of Augustan trick of personification and capital letters, the ‘Elegy’ marks a stage in the evolution of Gray’s genius

Yet it was only a stage, for as he grew older he became increasingly romantic. The two great odes,|| The Progress of Poesy|| and –The Bard||, are filled with the new conception of the poet as an inspired singer rather than an accomplished artist. The short poems on northern and Celtic themes like –The Fatal Sisters|| and –The Descent of Odin’, take their place in the history of the revival of the romantic past. Gray’s development as a poet began with versified pamphlets in Pope’s manner, passed on through conventional lyrics to the –Elegy||, and ended with experiments which are fundamentally romantic in character. Though Gray was a man of very pure poetic feeling, he was singularly unprolific

THE AGE OF HARDY

Hardy’s Early training as an architect gave him an intimate knowledge of local churches, which he utilize to advantage in his writings. His personal experience was bound up with the people and customs, the monuments and institutions of Dorset and the contiguous counties of south-western England. He placed this area permanently on the literary map by the ancient name Wessex. As a writer Hardy was a living paradox. A natural poet, much of his poetry is in prose. He had the poet’s largeness, minuteness, and intensity of vision – a threefold faculty displayed throughout his novels. Yet among his hundreds of typical lyrical poems hardly a score are free from grating harshness and pinchbeck angularity. The explanation of the paradox is that Hardy’s genius was entirely sculptural. Give a granite block of stubborn prose, he could chisel as a master. He could carve not only tremendously impressive figure groups but also vast sculptured landscapes with all the varied detail of nature. But lyrics cannot be induced from granite chips. If it happened to Hardy twice or thrice, it was only by some miracle, and that was when he produced Tess of the D’Urbervilles, Weathers, and In time of the Breaking of Nations’. His emphasis upon the human tragedy it held in right proportion and perspective in most of his novels. Scarcely more than twice did Hardy’s skill in the novelist’s craft desert him. The last chapter of Tess of the D’Urbervilles outages the religious conscience of 1891. Today it offends the aesthetic conscience by its violation of our critical sense of order and imaginative sufficiency. There is a failure in artistry when an artist says more than exactly enough. Hardy had said enough in Tess before the beginning of the last

chapter. And it stands, then the novel is a masterpiece. But it is scarred by an unhappy final strike. Jude the

Obscure the best novel is more fatally injured by rhythmlessness. At no time are Sue and Jude permitted – ted to escape the shadowing hand of malignant destiny.

Many of his characters are created with the fullness, vigour, and assurance of a Shakespeare or Dickens. His power to suggest immensity of place was unique. Whether it is the vastness of Egdon Heath in *The Return of the Native*, the luscious ripeness of Blackmoor Vale in *Judas*, or the tree-girt solitude of *The Woodlanders*. Hardy's places are as memorable as his people. On Egdon the men and women are pigmies – the Heath is itself the daemon, moulding and conditioning the lives of those who dwell upon it and who are part of its own life. In the use of tragedy Hardy bears comparison with the great figures in world literature. He falls short of their stature chiefly because he inclined to pursue his afflicted characters past the limits at which both art and nature are customarily satisfied to halt. In the use of pathos, however, he is unsurpassed. For example, the description of Tess's christening of her child by candlelight in bedroom, Marty South's lament over Giles at the close of *Woodlanders*, and the tragedy of the dog whose well-meaning zeal drives Gabriel Oak's flock to destruction in *Far from the Madding Crowd*. Hardy's novels and poems are the work of a man painfully dissatisfied with the age in which he lived. He was homesick for the past. The past of England, when there was strong root of English manhood and womanhood. To Hardy, this root had been overlaid by a thin soil of finicking niceness miscalled education and culture. He distrusted modern civilization because he suspected that its effect was frequently to decivilize and weaken those to whom Nature and old custom had given stout hearts, clear heads, and an enduring spirit. Ancient and modern are constantly at war in his boob. None is happy where one has felt the alienating touch of school-bred refinement. Hardy thought gratefully of the simple paganism lingering on in Wessex beneath the Christian veneer. Wessex was still the old England its woods, its heaths, its barrows, its barns and byres – all these stood in memory of a noble antiquity making mute protest against invading aggressive modernity. What Wessex meant to Hardy, and its significance as a symbol in relation to his whole work, is indicated at the opening of *The Return of the Native*.

Hardy's most extensive work. It is one of the greatest creations in literature. For this vast epic-drama two traditional forms were adapted and combined. From their union Hardy produced a new and original form. The epic is foreign to the modern team. What would have been extended passages of narrative verse in a traditional epic are here abbreviated into stage directions – to fill the spaces between the scenes of the spoken drama. *The Dynasts* is a masterly example of Hardy's genius in the organization and control of literary material. It was an astonishing feat to secure balance, order, proportion and perspective in handling hundreds of characters, a time-period of fifteen years, and a scene range covering practically the whole of Europe. All the historical personages as well as the common people who bore the chief part of the suffering caused by the clash of dynasts are introduced in Hardy's pity for all suffering creatures was terribly acute. He himself agonized in the agony of others. He was never able to cultivate that protective skin of semi-apologetic calmness by which the majority insulate against a torturing participation in the world's sum of misery.

WILLIAM BUTLER YEATS

William Butler Yeats was an Irish poet. He published a number of works such as *Fair and Folk Tales*,

The Wanderings of Oisín, *The Celtic Twilight*, *The Secret Rose*, *The Wind among the Reeds* and *The Shadowing Waters*. They show this attachment to the myths and the legends the romantic

Ireland of the past. He was interested in the doctrines of Eastern Mysticism and he became a Buddhist _almost. He was

also influenced by the French symbolists and their English die pat Pater and Blake. His poetry reveals the metaphysical elements in Blake and the symbolism of the English poet Pater. The romantic pensiveness, a gentle melancholy, the homely nature imager, of dreams the simple ballads and the old stories, constituted the spirit of Yeat's verse. The roman-fcaod heroic poetry lost its appeal to him at a particular stage .In responsibilities there appeared poems that were crucial in his development. September 1913', the last but one poem in the Tokirne _A cat'. Slowly Yeats shed the embroidered coat of verse. He was influenced by Hopkins ad Eliot the originators of the modernist school Yeats'verse became more difficult compact and in the later poems. He disliked the introduction of contemporary affairs into poetry as a young man. As an older poet it was impossible for him to remain as a poet detached from the events of the 1916 Easter Rebellion and after .Once he was tortured by the inability of his body to keep pace with his mind desires. Sailing to Byzantium and The Tower 'touch upon this The lake of Isle of the masterpiece of the younger Yeats and Byzantium is that later anti-romantic Yeats. It is characteristic of the period in which he lived and which received him as a herald of the new gospel of poetry. Yeats became the undisputed leader of the Irish Literary Revival. Yeats helped English poetry beak with the once popular Victorian ideals and became modern in outlook. Yeats intellectualism, Directivity, aestheticism, faith in the mystical and the occult, interest in Celtic myth and folk-bit, knowledge of the oriental philosophy, the inborn romanticism, love for symbols and just for experimentation made his poetry complex in style and temper. Yeats placed art above morality .He declared the values of art to be eternal unlike the moral values which instincts and emotions had a vital part to play and in the final stage he adopted a bare colloquial style and the simple stanza form of the ballad and the folk song. His poems illustrate his different stages of development. In 1923 he was awarded the Nobel Prize for literature .His poems and plays are a richly varied expression and far reaching exploration of a sensitive and creative mind. Yeats may be called one of the best modern poets.