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Literature and Politics In 1833

One of the most vivid descriptions we have of the 1830s was written in 1829. It is by Carlyle in his essay "Signs of the Times," where he intones in his best Presbyterian manner that "a time of unmixed evil is upon us" (439).

Carlyle refers specifically to the repeal of the Test Acts in 1828; many commentators saw in the possibility that Catholics could now hold public office the coming of the Millennium. Carlyle rather slyly links this prospect with another that actually concerns him more—the coming of Benthamism:

the Millenarians have come forth on the right hand, and the Millites on the left. The Fifth-monarchy men prophesy from the Bible, and the Utilitarians from Bentham. The one announces that the last of the seals is to be opened, positively, in the year 1860; and the other assures us that 'the greatest-happiness principle' is to make heaven of earth, in a still shorter time. (441)

Reading "Signs of the Times," one feels that the same sort of fear which swept London at the time of the Great Plague has come back again in 1829. George IV died, and cholera raged. Death and fear about the future of British society spread together in the air—and in the newspapers.

"Signs of the Times" represents the first occasion that Carlyle is moved strongly enough by contemporary life to step out from his dour German-Scotch glowering over old books, and this fact alone shows the intensity of the feeling of crisis. That the hero of Waterloo, the Duke of Wellington, could put himself at the head of the movement for Catholic emancipation was a source of astonishment to most people.

This repeal of the Test Acts, known as the bill for Catholic Emancipation, passed in 1828, and agitation for a distinct bill to reform the parliamentary representation system began in 1830. By 1831, the excitement and fear were at their height. Greville, whose diaries are an

important contemporary account, felt the tension strongly enough to make daily entries and to remark:

Nothing talked of, thought of, dreamt of, but Reform. Every creature one meets asks, What is said now? How will it go? What is the last news? What do *you* think: and so it is from morning till night, in the streets, in the clubs, and in private houses. (7 Mar 1831:64)

The Napoleonic wars had already stimulated an unprecedented appetite for reading newspapers; the atmosphere of domestic siege in 1830 revived this. Only the cheapest and most ephemeral publications sold at all,

for no man can expect to read a large work leisurely through, when the very ground under his feet seems to have a touch of the earthquake . . . till the great question of reform is settled, we need look for no commanding works in either literature or art. (*Athenaeum* 4 no. 212, 19 Nov. 1831:755)

Throughout 1832, many papers published bulletins of Literature's sad state. There was no popular poetry of any distinction, and prose consisted only of pamphlets on cholera and on reform.

Even a national hero like the Duke of Wellington felt uneasy enough to put up iron shutters on the windows of his London residence; the *Quarterly Review* wrote that the usual patrons of literature were too busy worrying about riots in the streets to subscribe to poetry:

No man feels any assurance of the permanence of his income or resources; no man sufficiently free of anxiety with respect to his future lot to partake of the elegant enjoyments of society with his wonted zest. . . . Politics are just now so engrossing a subject, that few men can bear to think of any other; and nearly their only reading is the newspaper. (46 no. 92, Jan 1832: 560, 561)

What served to prolong this fear among even the moderates was that the Reform Bill was blocked by the Lords in 1831, and this created an impasse between William IV and his ministers, as well as between the Commons and the Lords. The process of the Bill's passage took over two years and two general elections. Even though it came to seem inevitable, the tension was to last until final approval in the early days of June 1832.

The passing of the Bill, and the death of Sir Walter Scott a few months later, marked the end of an era. The Whigs suddenly found themselves at the head of a Government after nearly a generation of being in Opposition. The first Parliament assembled from the Reformed electorate opened in January 1833 and was said to have been "the longest Session with the largest number of hours of labour in

the House of Commons than there had yet been in any Parliament.” (Kitson Clark 137; *Hansard* 20:907). The fact that much of this Parliament’s business seemed to be of an ungodly sort—for the Bishops had ostracized themselves by not cooperating with passage of the Reform Bill, and there were long debates concerning the power and income of the Established Church—and the fact that this coincided with a national outbreak of cholera gave the early 1830s an apocalyptic flavour: “The times were very evil and very exciting” (Kitson Clark 152).

How literature fares during a political apocalypse can be seen in Carlyle’s letters of the time. Unfortunately for him, Carlyle chose the month of August 1831 to travel from the otherworldly calm of rural Scotland to a London seemingly in the grip of a second Plague. He had intended to arrange for the publication of *Sartor Resartus*. By December 1831, he saw that he had no chance of getting his book published until the Reform Bill was passed:

There is not the faintest outlook for Teufelsdreck, more especially till the Reform Bill get out of the way: indeed Literature, like all earthly things seems to have got into a state in which it *cannot* continue; either it must improve, or altogether disappear from the world. (to Alexander Carlyle, 21 Dec 1831; 6.71)

In January 1832, he wrote, “there is nothing in London at present but stagnation and apprehension . . . British Literature is a mud-ocean” (to John Carlyle, 10 Jan 1832; 6.87). Carlyle found the publishing trade “crippled” (to Margaret Carlyle, 22 Jan 1832; 6.97), and by May 1833, he had resolved upon publishing his book in “hydra-hea[ded] fashion”—that is, in magazines. He mourned to John Stuart Mill, in October 1832, that

I had hoped that by and by I might get out of Periodicals altogether, and write Books: but the light I got in London last winter showed that *this* was as good as over. My Editors of Periodicals are my Booksellers. (16 Oct 1832; 6.241)

The strangeness and awkwardness of the times are also registered by Mary Shelley’s writing to the publisher John Murray to ask if her father might be allowed to write a volume for Murray’s *Family Library*, a popular series of non-fiction, and the closest Godwin could come to adapting himself to the times. Mrs. Shelley wrote:

You are but too well aware of the evil days on which literature is fallen. . . . Nearly all our literati have found but one resource in this—which is in the ample scope afforded by periodicals. A kind of literary pride has prevented my father from mingling in these . . . (4 May 1832; 2.404).

The Radical press, on the other hand, took the diffusion of literature through periodicals as a matter for congratulation. One newspaper, one of the many established in 1832, begins with an article commenting on the revolution taking place in printing as well as in political representation. The change in printing technology may have coincided with a dearth of great works, but “for their absence, we have amends made to us by the never-failing floods of our periodical literature. From this is projected a literary and political Armageddon, in which democracy shall triumph. . . . All our *literati* are betaking themselves to the Magazines and the Newspapers; no literature sells but the periodical. Leigh Hunt, John Wilson, Campbell, Moore, and other poets, all scribble for the diurnals, weeklies, or monthlies.”¹

There were, in fact, some serious efforts within a year of the Reform Bill’s passage to consider the state of literature. The *Athenaeum* published a “Biographical and Critical History of the Last Fifty Years” in five articles appearing from October to December 1833. But the most interesting survey is a book, *England and the English*, by Edward Lytton Bulwer (1803-73), author and editor, and for a time (1831-41), Radical M.P. *England and the English* is Bulwer’s anatomy of English character and institutions as they appear just after the Reform Bill. It is often little more than a series of editorials, rather inclined to wishful proselytization but still full of interest. Bulwer was a fashionable Radical, which means that his clothes were Beau Brummellish and his politics Benthamite.

In a chapter that has the running head, “Poverty of Our Present Literature,” Bulwer sets out to describe contemporary English writing. Asked to name the great writers of the past twenty years, he cites Byron, Wordsworth, Scott, Moore, Shelley, and Campbell. These are the representatives of what he calls “imaginative” literature, poetry and fiction. However, it is also apparent that Literature, in 1833, comprehends serious works of non-fictional prose just as much as it does poetry. The categories under which Bulwer canvasses for literary talent include criticism, history, and moral philosophy. As examples of notable writers in these areas, he cites Isaac D’Israeli, Hazlitt, Leigh Hunt, Lamb, and Southey. But he notes that while there are a number of great literary men, there still seem to be very few great literary works. His comment on this paradox echoes that of Carlyle: the great literary works are to be sought, “not in detached and avowed and standard publication, but in periodical miscellanies” (261). The great writers of the age must therefore include also the names of Sydney Smith, John Wilson, Francis Jeffrey, and Thomas Babington Macaulay. The salient fact of Bulwer’s literary age as he sees it is its ephemerality: its case to posterity will be made only by compilation and re-publication.

The defining feature for Bulwer of periodical literature, going back to Addison, Steele, and Defoe, is the close intercourse it keeps up with politics; this was naturally of interest to someone who was both an M.P. and a novelist. The question as to why periodicals should foster what he calls a "natural sympathy" between literature and politics is not analyzed by Bulwer—only assumed. At the same time, one also notices that in speaking of literature Bulwer uses the term *intellect* frequently and talks of literature as the "Intellectual Spirit of the Time." Neither of the terms *literature* or *intellect* is used by Bulwer in as narrow a sense as they would be now. Literature for him has a critical capacity as well as an imaginative one, and intellectual concerns are not confined to the academy or to a certain level of learning. In such a world, literary and political matters do not exclude one another.

In the post-war period of national self-examination, the genre of the novel had started to come to the fore. Alison Adburgham points out that "when the Napoleonic Wars ended, there were in London no novelists of any note" (2). The literary life of Britain was scattered instead across the provinces: Scott in Scotland, Edgeworth and others in Ireland, Jane Austen in rural England. What London produced during this interregnum was periodical literature and the fashionable novel. These forms of gossip became the particular hallmark of London literary life in the 1820s and early 1830s—not surprisingly, for both are concerned with the description of manners and of politics. The *romans à clef* simply provided fictional names where the newspapers used asterisks; both novels and newspapers satisfied the London appetite for scandal and innuendo. Adburgham observes, "The world of politics was indistinguishable from the world of fashion. As both Bulwer and Disraeli knew full well, the entrance to Parliament lay through the drawing rooms" (218). The magazines and the silver-fork novels (a genre dominated by the aristocratic women authors who presided over the drawing rooms) were the record of this. Drama languished, and as many commentators repeated, "At present the English, instead of finding politics on the stage, find their stage in politics" (Bulwer, 305).

The combination of Reform in politics and innovation in the technology of the printing press made the contemporary scene itself compelling reading. The novel could be defended as a truthful account of public affairs. The *Edinburgh Review*, in an article of July 1833, stated:

It is no longer necessary to defend the novel against those sweeping denunciations by which it was once assailed . . . and many a novel,

devoid of every other merit, may not be without its value as a faithful portrait of the manners of the day. (57, no. 116, Jul 1833: 404).

The *Edinburgh Review* emphasized the value of novels as a record which is not merely historical: "On the contrary, they are, perhaps, beyond all works, save the periodical essay, or the party pamphlet, written peculiarly for the present day" (405).

From reading Bulwer and the *Edinburgh Review*, we see that, in fact, novels were not considered part of traditional literature, of poetry, drama, and scholarship. They were, above all, political entities—in their subject matter, their audience, and in their publishing ephemerality. The *Edinburgh Review's* comparison of novels to periodicals and pamphlets is a revealing one. The public of the 1820s and 1830s wanted only to read about themselves. There was no time for arcane research during the upheavals of the early 1830s; what was wanted was news—in particular, news of London and of Parliament. As the era of the Napoleonic wars receded, and Britain began to look round itself, this looking-round meant a gradual intensification of the focus on government and the metropolis. Provincial agitation only placed increased pressure on Parliament. Scott, Austen, and Edgeworth gave way to silver-fork scandal. At the same time, the new technology of steam presses and railways meant also that the London newspapers could more easily dominate the reading matter in the provinces. The period between 1821 and the early 1830s was one which increased the focus on London life, and it came to a climax with the Reform Bill. The collapse of the Edinburgh publishing scene in the financial crisis of 1826, coincidentally just when fashionable noveldom was approaching its zenith, is perhaps symptomatic of the yielding of the provinces to the metropolis. In March 1830, *Fraser's Magazine* noted that the activities of such writers as John Wilson and Susan Ferrier had faded from prominence, Scott had taken to writing history, Galt was busier as an entrepreneur than as a novelist, and Lockhart had moved to London. There was no one to carry on the tradition of realism as the British novel had defined it; the chain from Fielding and Smollett seemed broken. Like Bulwer, *Fraser's* saw only a vacuum (1, no. 2, Mar 1830: 236).

Critics have indeed had little to say on this interregnum between Byron and Tennyson. Perhaps it was not until 1847—ten years after Victoria came to the throne, and the annus mirabilis of *Dombey and Son*, *Vanity Fair*, *Wuthering Heights*, and *Jane Eyre*—that the British reading public was ready for the return to realism that *Fraser's* pined for in 1830. In retrospect, we may recall that Tennyson had already been published (and demolished) by the early 1830s, that 1833 was the

year of Arthur Hallam's death, the year that Browning published his first poem, and Dickens, his first *Sketch*.

There are a number of literary accounts of this interregnum, of which the most famous is probably Thackeray's *Pendennis*, noteworthy here because of the connections that it makes between literature and politics. Thackeray and Dickens are only the most famous examples of those who served their apprenticeships in the 1830s, and Thackeray's career as a writer is perhaps the more typical one. In the 1830s, he flirted with Pierce Eganish low-life adventures and was a sort of apprentice journalist to the brilliant but debauched Dr. Maginn. Thackeray was to be a good fifteen years more at this improvident journalism before *Vanity Fair*, his moralistic satire of the Regency period, made him a Victorian literary lion.

His hero, Arthur Pendennis, does not set out to become an author. He comes down to London from Oxford ostensibly to take up legal studies, though really to taste the bachelor low life. With the aid of a few bad verses and some reviewing work, he is soon making four hundred pounds a year as a literary hack. He even publishes a fashionable silver-fork novel, *Walter Lorraine*, and it is successful. But his success owes little or nothing to his decent talent and everything to his pedigree. Pendennis is perceived, in a word, as a *gentleman*, a man of independent income and leisure, and the climax of the novel occurs, not with the publication of *Walter Lorraine*—but with the coming of Pendennis into his inheritance. At this point, he immediately gives up his writing career. His wealth and leisure as a landowner are devoted—ironically, in this novel known for its depiction of the writing life—to the cultivation not of letters, but of politics. Pendennis becomes an M.P. as soon as he can, and also gets married to a respectable young woman who is thus spared the indignity of living in Grub Street. The moral seems to be that writing for newspapers is a form of wild oats, something forgivable only in bachelors; with maturity and property comes a steadier interest—that of politics.

This is the moral, too, of another novel of the 1830s literary life, a sort of working-class *Pendennis*—*Godfrey Malvern; or The Life of an Author* (1842) by Thomas Miller (1807-74), a poet and author of some forty-five works. Miller was remarkable as a basketmaker who came to London to set up a business; having enclosed some of his verses in baskets sent to the Countess of Blessington, he was noticed by the most fashionable part of literary society.

The hero of his novel, Godfrey Malvern, is a poor country schoolmaster who writes some verses, achieves a local fame, and goes to London. He is fortunate enough to be given some reviewing hackwork and to have verses accepted by an annual, one of the coffee-table books

of picture and verse that like silver-fork novels were in their hey-day in the 1820s and 1830s. His verses are noticed by Lady Smileall (Miller was evidently not uncritically grateful to the Countess of Blessington), who invites him to one of her soirées. There his figure and face are striking enough for him to make a hit as an "intellectual" (he is tall); he thus falls into a facile kind of literary celebrity that Victorian novelists are always warning their readers to avoid as if it were a daily temptation. Malvern's rural schoolmastering background is completely forgotten, and he becomes the lover of a dark-eyed young Brompton woman, as a sort of natural reward for his versemaking and poetic good looks.

However, Malvern, unlike Pendennis, is already married. Back in the country and in the first third of the novel, he has wooed and won the squire's daughter. In London, Malvern attends his literary assemblies as a bachelor (as was the custom); and when his wife becomes pregnant, she is shunted back to the country. The dark-eyed young lady, for all her tempestuous intellect, falls for the tall Malvern as readily as the innocent squire's daughter, and in her turn becomes a fallen woman. All is made right at the end, however: the mistress conveniently dies in childbirth, and Malvern goes back to his country wife. Finally, and most importantly, like Pendennis, he turns out to be really a member of the squirearchy, and not of Bohemia, after all: he is discovered to be the rightful heir to his father-in-law's estate. The false mistress, Literature, is powerless to keep the hero from his rightful consort, Property—and the pursuit of politics. The last statement of the novel is a spirited proclamation—not of true love or spiritual catharsis—but of what Malvern plans to say in the House of Commons about free trade. The narrator writes:

There are two objects to which he is bending all his energies to accomplish; and neither party nor place will ever change a resolution like his, founded upon, what he believes to be, Right and Justice. These are:—an alteration in the Corn and Poor Laws. (2.397)

Even the fate of St. John Rivers in *Jane Eyre* seems less grimly pedantic than this devotion to the Anti-Corn Law League.

Like Malvern, Pendennis is also earnest on the topic of Party and also refuses to become what is called a party man. When pressed, he will describe himself nebulously as a "Liberal Conservative":

I shall go pretty much with Government, and in advance of them upon some social questions which I have been getting up during the vacation;—don't grin, you old Cynic [he says to his friend Warrington], I *have* been getting up the Blue Books, and intend to come out rather strong on the Sanitary and Colonisation questions. (2.413)

What is curious in all of this is that both Malvern and Pendennis have previously made a great point when they take up literary reviewing *not* to become too involved in politics. It is part of their idealism and also, it is suggested, part of their naïveté. In speaking of naïveté, neither Miller nor Thackeray suggest that political bias ought to be part of literary work: they merely assume that it is. However, Thackeray, like many other observers in the 1830s, did think that the question of party line—if not of politics itself—was dying out in the literary world, and there is a general consensus that no period was so remarkable for an absence of party spirit as the 1830s. Reformism was instead the prevailing sentiment among all factions. The practice of coalition government that had become habitual during the Napoleonic wars continued when Radicalism came to obscure party divisions. The Tories had the support of not one newspaper when they left office in 1830, and no one would confess to being a Tory, for everyone wanted to be known as a Reformer—Disraeli is a perfect reflection of this state of public opinion.

By the same token, the legislation passed when the Whigs came into power was as much a product of the newly labelled “Conservative” party being rebuilt out of the ashes of the Tories, as it was of the Whigs, who really had very little idea of what to do after so many years of waiting out in the corridors. Strong party organization was a feature of the later nineteenth-century, not the 1830s, and it may have been for that reason that politics were notably more accessible at that time than at any other. The social legislation of the 1840s was a consequence of the previous decade’s coalition spirit, of the temporary triumph of public opinion over party.²

The statements of Malvern and of Pendennis seem a faithful reflection of the prevailing sentiment after Reform had had its day. Pendennis’s brand of popular liberalism does not pass without jibes from the bohemian companion of his literary days, Warrington, who mocks the condescension of the enlightened squire who has read Harriet Martineau:

We give lectures at the Clavering Institute, and shake hands with the intelligent mechanics. We think the franchise ought to be very considerably enlarged; at the same time we are free to accept office some day, when the House has listened to a few crack speeches from us, and the Administration perceives our merit. (*Pendennis* 2.413)

To this, Pendennis can answer only that more convincing reformism would imply not only greater faith in the People, but inevitably also greater vanity in himself. He cannot separate politics from egotism.

Mention of egotism brings us to Dickens. The most egocentric account of the 1830s is *David Copperfield*, which, although it is an account of Dickens's own apprenticeship during that decade, contains few political landmarks. David's ambition begins with the decision to become a lawyer and then a parliamentary reporter. The manuscript reads: "I have heard that many men distinguished at the bar and in other pursuits had begun life by reporting the debates in Parliament" (450). Like Pendennis, he eventually abandons his half-hearted pursuit of the law. But Dickens's reasons for taking up writing are less clear; there are no clever Irishmen or Captain Shandons to lead him up the garden-path of literary hackwork. Just as his parliamentary reporting episode contains no politicians, so his literary career contains no other writers. Quite simply, it seems that David one day sends something to a magazine, and by the next, is an established author. What takes Miller or Thackeray a whole volume to relate in *Malvern* or *Pendennis* interests Dickens for only a paragraph in *David Copperfield*.

David Copperfield's account is misleading. The evidence provided by the letters of Dickens himself refutes the idea that any author's apprenticeship is easy. The difference between *David Copperfield* and *Pendennis* lies in what these two novels deem as power, or egotism: Thackeray sees the political arena as the only one in which Pendennis has a real chance of changing society; Dickens gives that privilege to authorship. Dickens and his career make explicit what Sir Walter Scott in his gentlemanly anonymity refused to recognize: that the author could have more power than the lawyer as a legislator of society.

The corollary to this is that institutional power becomes less and less attractive to the author who wishes to see his own vocation as a respectable profession. This is not true of Thackeray, but it is of Dickens. And it was the disciples of both, the young men who followed them, who found prestige in the idea of the avant-garde and the alienated artist. Thackeray was the first to use the word Bohemia in English in this sense, in *The Adventures of Philip* (1862), his retelling of *Pendennis*; he used it when he had regained his own place as a gentleman, to describe the disreputable literary life he had led during the 1830s:

What is now called Bohemia had no name in Philip's young days, though many of us knew the country very well, a land over which hangs an endless fog, occasioned by much tobacco; a land of chambers, billiard-rooms, supper-rooms, oysters, a land of song; a land where soda-water flows freely in the morning; a land of tin-dish covers from taverns, and frothing porter; a land of lotos-eating (with lots of cayenne pepper), of pulls on the river, of delicious reading of novels, magazines, and saunterings in many studios . . . (1.179-80).

What is curious and paradoxical is that once Thackeray had become serious about his vocation as a writer, his Bohemia disappeared; once he began to write books instead of articles for periodicals, he became caught up in the canon of Literature. On the other hand, there is no reason to believe that Thackeray wished to end his days like the greatest of the Bohemians, Maginn, in alcoholism and debt. Before 1840, it was a far commoner fate for writers to end their days in the Fleet Prison; it was only in retrospect that the Victorian literary lion of *Vanity Fair* fame could begin to see the interregnum of the 1830s as a Bohemian idyll which he had pursued amid the din of a political apocalypse. The split between the worlds of Bohemia and of Parliament only grew as the century went on and party politics reasserted itself. The split between literature and politics begins when the author no longer sees his writing as merely one form of sowing wild oats, and the years devoted to it as time to be put in before he is called to his gentlemanly birthright. Thackeray, looking back on the 1830s, called it Bohemia; Dickens, who never had any hope of becoming a gentleman, knew it as the beginning of his political career as an author. It is Dickens who is quintessentially the writer of the 1830s, someone whose optimism and vigour express what came out of that decade when society believed, for a time, that it could legislate happiness.

NOTES

1. *Bell's New Weekly Messenger* 1, no 1, 1 Jan 1832: 1; 1, no. 32, 5 Aug 1832: 104.
2. See Hayden, "Introduction," *British Literary Magazines*, ed. Sullivan, II, xxi-xxiii; and Gash, 9.

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