The Coming of the Modern Age

Queen Victoria's reign ended in 1901, but the Victorian Age ended about twenty years earlier. That peculiar spirit called "Victorianism" – a mixture of optimism, doubt and guilt – began to disappear with men like Swinburne the rebel, Fitzgerald the pessimist, Butler the satirist and others. The literature produced from about 1880 to 1914 is characterized either by an attempt to find substitutes for a religion which seems dead, or by a kind of spiritual emptiness – a sense of the hopelessness of trying to believe in anything.

There were some possible substitutes for religion. One was art, and Walter Pater is its prophet. 'Art for art's sake' was the theme of books like *Marius the Epicurean.* It was one's duty, said Pater, in the most exquisite prose, to cultivate pleasure, to drink deep from the fountains of natural and created beauty. In other words, he advocated 'hedonism' as a way of life. 'Hedonism' was also the thesis of some of Oscar Wilde's witty essays and of his novel *The Picture of Dorian Gray*. **Wilde** (1856-1900) seems, in his book, however, to be concerned with showing the dangers of asking for too much from life. The beautiful Dorian Gray wishes that he should remain eternally young and handsome, while his picture, painted in the finest flush of his beauty, should grow old in his stead. This wish is granted: Dorian remains ever-young, but his portrait shows signs of ever-increasing age and, moreover, the scars of the crimes attendant on asking for too much (a murder, the ruining of many women, unnameable debauchery). Dorian, repentant, tries to destroy his portrait, symbolically quelling his sins, but, magically, it is he himself who dies, monstrous with age and ugliness, and his portrait that reverts to its former perfection of youthful beauty. The sense of guilt –as much medieval as Victorian – intrudes into Wilde's bright godless world unexpectedly, and this book prepares us for his later works written under the shame and shadow of his prison-sentence.

Another substitute for religion was imperialism. **Rudyard Kipling** (1865-1936) was the great singer of Empire. Born in India, Kipling knew the British Empire from the inside, not merely, like so many stay-at-home newspaper-readers, as a series of red splashes on the map of the world. This concern with Empire expresses itself in many forms –the sympathy with the soldiers who fought the frontier wars, kept peace in the empire, did glorious work for a mere pittance and the reward of civilian contempt; the stress on the white man's responsibility to his brothers who, despite difference of color and creed, acknowledged the same Queen; the value of an Empire as the creator of a new, rich civilization.

The other side of the coin is shown in the poems of writers like John Davidson, Ernest Dowson and A. E. Housman, who expressed a consistent mood of pessimism. In Housman's poems we have exquisite classical verse – regular forms, great compression – devoted to the futility of life, the certainty of death, the certainty of nothing after death. There is a certain Stoicism.

Pessimism reigned in the novel. **Thomas Hardy** (1840-1928) produced a whole series of books dedicated to the life of his native Dorset, full of the sense of man's bond with nature and with the past – a past revealed in the age-old trees, heaths, fields, and in the prehistoric remains of the Celts, the ruined camps of the Romans. In

his novel man never seems to be free. The weight of time and place presses heavily on him, and, above everything, there are mysterious forces which control his life. Man is a puppet whose strings are worked by fates which are either hostile or indifferent to him. There is no message of hope in *Tess of the D'Urbervilles.* When Tess is finally hanged we hear "…And so the President of the Immortals had finished his sport with Tess."

A return to optimism is shown in the verse and prose of **Robert Louis Stevenson** (1850-1894), but it is a rather superficial one. He is at his best in adventure stories and boys' books like *Treasure Island,* a juvenile masterpiece. *Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde* deals with the duality of good and evil within the same man. The poems, especially those for children, are charming, and the essays which have little to say, say that little very well. His short stories are good, and we may note here that the short story was becoming an accepted form – writers had to learn how to express themselves succinctly, using great compression in plot, characterization, and dialogue – heralding the approach of an age less leisurely than the Victorian, with no time for three-volume novels, and demanding its stories in quick mouthfuls.

A new faith, more compelling than Pater's hedonism or Kipling's Imperialism, was still needed, and Bernard Shaw and **H.G. Wells** (1866-1946) found one in what may be called Liberalism – the belief that man's future lies on earth, not in heaven, and that, with scientific and social progress, an earthy paradise may eventually be built. Wells is one of the great figures of modern literature. He owed a lot to Dickens in such novels as (*Kipps* and *The History of Mr. Polly*. He borrowed Dickens's prose-style, his humour, and his love of eccentrics, and dealt affectionately with working people, but he found themes of his own in the scientific novels. *The Time Machine, The First Man in the Moon, The War of the Worlds, The Invisible Man* all seem concerned not merely with telling a strange and entertaining story but with showing that, to science, everything is theoretically possible. The glorification of scientific discovery leads Wells to think that time and space can easily be conquered, and so we can travel to the moon, or Martians can attack us; we can travel forward to the future, and back again to the present. The old Newtonian world, with its fixed dimensions, begins to melt and dissolve in the imaginative stories of Wells: flesh can be made as transparent as glass, human size can be increased indefinitely, a man can sleep for a couple of centuries and wake up in the strange Wellsian future; a man can work miracles; a newspaper from the future can be delivered with mistake; a man can lose weight without bulk and drift like a balloon.

Wells sometimes described himself as a "Utopiographer". He was always planning worlds in which science had achieved its last victories over religion and superstition, in which reason reigned, in which everybody was healthy, clean, happy, and enlightened. The Wellsian future has been, for many years, one of the furnishings of our minds – skyscrapers, the heaven full of aircraft, men and women dressed something like ancient Greeks, rational conversation over a rational meal of vitaminpills. To build Utopia, Wells wanted, like Shaw, to destroy all the vestiges of the past which cultured the modern world, class distinction, relics of feudalism, directionless education, unenlightened and self-seeking politicians, and economic inequality. In other words, both Shaw and Wells wanted a kind of socialism.

Rejecting the doctrine of sin, they believed that man's mistakes and crimes came from stupidity, or from an unfavourable environment, and they set the devices to work to put everything right. Wells, book after book, tackles the major social problems.

John Galsworthy (1867-1933) is best known for his *Forsyte Saga*, a series of six novels which trace the story of a typically English upper-class family from Victorian days to the nineteen-twenties – presenting their reactions to great events which, in effect, spell the doom of all day stand for, including World War I, the growth of Socialism, the General Strike of 1926. Galsworthy was critical of the old standards such as the philistinism and decadence.

Arnold Bennet (1867-1931) is a realist and therefore can be condemned for a lack of imagination in style. He owed much to Balzac and Zola. Among his works are *Buried Alive* and *The Old Wives' Tale,* which some find difficult to read.

Joseph Conrad (1857-1924) brought a new quality into the novel. Conrad was a Pole and his real name was Teodor Josef Konrad Korzeniowski, born in the Ukraine, in love with sea from an early age. This led him eventually to a British merchant ship, A Master's certificate, and a mastery of the English language. Conrad produced his first novel at the age of forty, but then made up for lost time by turning out a book every year. He normally writes of the sea, of the Eastern islands, of the English character as seen against a background of the exotic or faced with difficulties. His handling of English is distinctive, a little foreign in its lack of restraint and its high color, but admirably suited to the description of storms, laboring ships with skippers shouting through high winds, the hot calm of a pilgrim-ship in the Red Sea. Conrad's one of the finest books is perhaps *Lord Jim*, where moral conflict is admirably presented in the character of the young Englishman who loses his honor through leaping overboard when his ship seems to be in danger, but expiates his sin by dying heroically at the end. Conrad is also famous for his short novel, *Heart of Darkness, The Nigger of the Narcissus, Nostromo, Victory* and *the Secret Agent.*

Verse generally did not flourish in the England of the early modern period. However, there were a number of poets who wrote about love and country matters. Robert Bridges was one of them. Some others, such as Rupert Brooke, had no chance to develop, for the First World War swallowed them. Wilfred Owen lived long enough to be influenced by his war experiences in the direction of a new and terrible poetry. Satire came out of that War, as in the poems of Robert Graves. An Irishman William Butler Yeats (1865-1939) may be said to dominate the greater part of the early modern period. Yeats's early work is full of Irish melancholy. Exquisite music, evocation of Irish myth and Irish landscape, and a quality of eerie mystery are to be found in his earlier works; but in later life the inspiration and form of his work changed radically. Yeats forged his own philosophy, made a personal mythology based on the image of ancient Byzantium, – a symbol of the undying in art – and wrote a rough, terse verse, avoiding true rhyme, capable of expressing of abstruse ideas or speaking all-to-intelligible home-truths about life, religion , and love.

To the Present Day

The 20th century was much concerned with finding something to believe in. It was common in the last twenty years of Victorian era. But whereas the first of the moderns were satisfied with their hedonism or liberalism or medievalism, the later age demanded something deeper – it wanted the sense of a continuous tradition, the sense of being involved in a civilization. Most of the writers we discussed in the previous chapter were trying to manufacture something to believe in, but most of the more modern writers wanted to belong to something already there. An artist has to have subject matter – a civilization, a religion, a myth and the emotions of people who belong to these things, but it should not have to be the artist's job to create his subject matter, and it should be ready waiting. An artist who can look back to a few hundred years of continuous belief and tradition is in a far happier position. For example, Ford Madox Ford, in some of his novels, used a kind of Don Quixote as hero – the last of his race, and hence somewhat absurd. The religion of Francis Thompson is a personal creed, mystical, outside the general tradition. Galsworthy's world is a dying one. Liberalism, with its great shout of progress, was to turn sour on people who experienced the First World War and found that science meant gas and guns. Where were new writers to look?

Americans reflected two aspects of American life – Puritanism and materialism – and found a myth in the continuity of European culture, especially as revealed in the Latin countries. **Henry James** (1843-1916) was an American, born in New York, educated at Harvard, a member of great American family that had produced also a philosopher, William James, the bother of Henry James. William James was one of the most important original philosophers of the age. Henry James felt that his spiritual home was Europe. His most significant novels beginning with *The American* and ending with *The Ambassadors* and *The Golden Bough* deal with the theme of the impact of Europe on visiting Americans: The Americans feel themselves uncivilized, young, inexperienced, and Europe seems so old, wise and beautiful. Europe absorbs America; it has continuity of tradition, and the tradition itself is old and valuable.

Ezra Pound (1885-1972) and **Thomas Stearns Eliot** (1888-1965), both Americans, made their homes in Europe. Both seemed concerned with trying to conserve what is best in European culture before European civilization is finally destroyed. Pound followed various Italian and French poets of the Middle Ages and Browning, translated Chinese and Anglo-Saxon, looking for something to build on. He came to fruition of his talent in *Hugh Selwyn Mauberley*, an autobiographical poem which sums up his position as a poet who detests the civilization of materialism and is trying to build up a culture based on the past. Eliot, after satirizing the puritanical world of New England and condemning its philistinism, produces, in 1922, an epoch-making poem of some 400 lines, *the Waste Land*, which set out in a new poetical technique a picture of a materialistic age dying of lack of belief in anything: the solution to the problem of living in such an arid waste land of civilization is to accept it as a kind of fiery purgation and to gather together such scraps of civilization and faith as have not yet been destroyed. *The Waste Land* makes tough demands on the reader: it frequently quotes from the literatures of Europe and India, uses a rapidly

shifting point-of-view (sometimes it is the poet speaking, sometimes a woman in a pub, sometimes a prostitute, sometimes the Greek mythical figure Tiresias, who is half-man and half-woman and thus contains in himself all the other characters), and uses verse which owes something to practically every English poet of the past, though Eliot's voice is always heard clearly enough.

In 1922 there also appeared an important work in prose which inevitably sometimes sounds like verse. This was *Ulysses,* by the Irishman **James Joyce** (1882-19419). *Ulysses* is a novel of enormous length dealing with the events of a single day in the life of a single town, the author's native Dublin. Before *Ulysses* Joyce published some charming verse, a volume of short stories called *Dubliners,* and a striking autobiographical novel, *The Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man.* The hero of this novel, Stephen Dedalus appears again in *Ulysses*, this time subordinated in a secondary role: the hero is a Hungarian Jew, long-settled in Dublin, called Leopold Bloom. The novel has no real plot. Like the Greek hero whose name provides the title, Bloom wanders from place to place, but has very un-heroic adventures, and finally meets Stephen, who then takes on the role of a sort of spiritual son. After this the book ends. But the eight-hundred pages are not filled with padding; never was a novel written in conciser prose. We are allowed to enter the minds of the chief characters, are presented with their thoughts and feelings in a continuous stream. Each chapter corresponds to an episode in Homer's *Odyssey* and has a distinct style of its own; for example, in the Maternity Hospital scene the prose imitates all the English literary styles from *Beowulf* to Carlyle and beyond, symbolizing the growth of foetus in the womb in its steady movement through time. The skill of the book is amazing. *Ulysses* is the most carefully-written novel of the 20th century.

One reaction against the Liberalism of wells and Shaw was to be found in the novels and poems of the Englishman **David Herbert Lawrence** (1885-1930), who, in effect, rejected civilization and wanted men to go back to the 'natural world' of instinct. Lawrence's novels – *Sons and Lovers*, *The Plumed Serpent* and *Lady Chatterley's Lover*, to mention a few – are much concerned with the relationship between man and woman, and he seems to regard this relationship as the great source of vitality and integration. *Lady Chatterley's Lover* was banned until 1960 because it, too frankly, glorified physical love. Lawrence will have nothing of science: instinct is more important; even religions are too rational, and, if man wants a faith, he must worship the 'dark gods' of primitive peoples. Nobody has ever presented human passion, man's relationship to nature, the sense of the presence of life in all things. His poems presents bitter satire on the 'dehumanization' of man in the 20th-century.

Often associated with Lawrence is **Aldous Huxley** (1894-1963), whose early novels showed a world without aim or direction and offered no solution to the puzzle of a seemingly meaningless existence. *Point Counter Point* especially seemed to show that man is a creature too mixed, too divided by 'passion and reason' to find much happiness. This book tried certain experiments – several stories going on at the same time, on the analogy of the musical counterpoint; the employment of vast scientific knowledge in ironic descriptions of human actions – as though to say, 'Science has no solution either'. *Brave New World* brilliantly satirized Wellsian Utopias, showing that, if man became completely happy and society completely efficient, he would cease to

be human and it would become intolerable. Huxley found a faith in brotherly love and (at a time when war perpetually threatened) in non-violence.

Evelyn Waugh (1903-66) proved himself one of the best modern humorists, depicting the empty search for amusement which animated 'bright young people' of the leisured classes after the First World War.

Graham Greene (1904-1991), a novelist and a short story writer, was obsessed with the problem of good and evil, and his books are a curious compound of theology and stark modern realism.

Edward Morgan Forster (1879-1970), another representative of the modernist novel in England, wrote also short stories, essays and critical works. His famous novels are *Howard's End, Where Angels Fear to Tread,* and *A Passage to India.* They are distinguished by very taut construction and the creation of suspense through incident – Forster did not think a plot very important. His *Aspects of the Novel* is admirable criticism and entertaining reading.

Virginia Woolf (1882- 1941) is another novelist hard to classify. She dispenses with plot and even characterization, preferring to analyze in the closest possible detail a mood or thought as presented at a given moment in time. Like Joyce, she uses an interior monologue device to depict 'the stream of consciousness' of his characters. Her prose is careful, exquisitely light, approaching poetry in its power to evoke mood and sensation. Her view of novel was a comprehensive one; she did not wish to limit herself to the mere story-telling of men but wanted to see the novel absorb, as many literary devices as possible, to break away from prose and use verse instead. To many readers her novels do not appear to be works of fiction at all: they seem too static, too lacking in action and human interest – a kind of literary form neither completely dramatic nor completely lyrical. Perhaps her best works are *Mrs. Dalloway, To the Lighthouse,* and *The Waves.* Her two books of literary criticism, *The Common Reader I* and *II* are significant works which penetrate the aspects of the modern novel.

Some novelists found their subject matter in modern political ideologies, and one of the most important of these was **George Orwell** (1904-50), whose early works expressed pungently a profound dissatisfaction with the economic inequalities, the hypocrisies, the social anachronisms of English life in the 1930s, but whose last and finest novels attract the Socialist panaceas which, earlier, seemed so attractive. In his *Animal Farm*, which is a parable of the reaction to all high-minded revolutions, the animals take over the farm on which they have been exploited for the selfish ends of the farmer, but gradually the pigs, in the name of democracy, create a dictatorship over the other animals far worse than anything known in the days of human management. The final slogan of the book, "All animals are equal, but some are more equal than others" has become one of the bitter catch-phrases of our cynical age.

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