

stage; married, and spent his wife's fortune, living for a while in much splendor as a country gentleman, and afterward in a reduced condition as a rural justice with a salary of five hundred pounds of "the dirtiest money on earth." Fielding's masterpiece was *Tom Jones*, 1749, and it remains one of the best of English novels. Its hero is very much after Fielding's own heart, wild, spendthrift, warm-hearted, forgiving, and greatly in need of forgiveness. The same type of character, with the lines deepened, re-appears in Captain Booth, in *Amelia*, 1751, the heroine of which is a portrait of Fielding's wife. With *Tom Jones* is contrasted Blifil, the embodiment of meanness, hypocrisy, and cowardice. Sophia Western, the heroine, is one of Fielding's most admirable creations. For the regulated morality of Richardson, with its somewhat old-grannified air, Fielding substituted instinct. His virtuous characters are virtuous by impulse only, and his ideal of character is manliness. In *Jonathan Wild* the hero is a highwayman. This novel is ironical, a sort of prose mock-heroic, and is one of the strongest, though certainly the least pleasing, of Fielding's writings.

Tobias Smollett was an inferior Fielding with a difference. He was a Scotch ship-surgeon, and had spent some time in the West Indies. He introduced into fiction the now familiar figure of the British tar, in the persons of Tom Bowling and Commodore Trunnion, as Fielding had introduced, in Squire Western, the equally national type of the hard-swearing, deep-drinking, fox-hunting Tory squire. Both Fielding and Smollett were of the hearty British "beef-and-beer" school; their novels are downright, energetic, coarse, and high-blooded; low life, physical life, runs riot through their pages—tavern brawls, the breaking of pates, and the off-hand courtship of country wenches. Smollett's books, such as *Roderick Random*, 1748; *Peregrine Pickle*, 1751, and *Ferdinand Count Fathom*, 1752, were more purely stories of broadly comic adventure than Fielding's. The latter's view of life was by

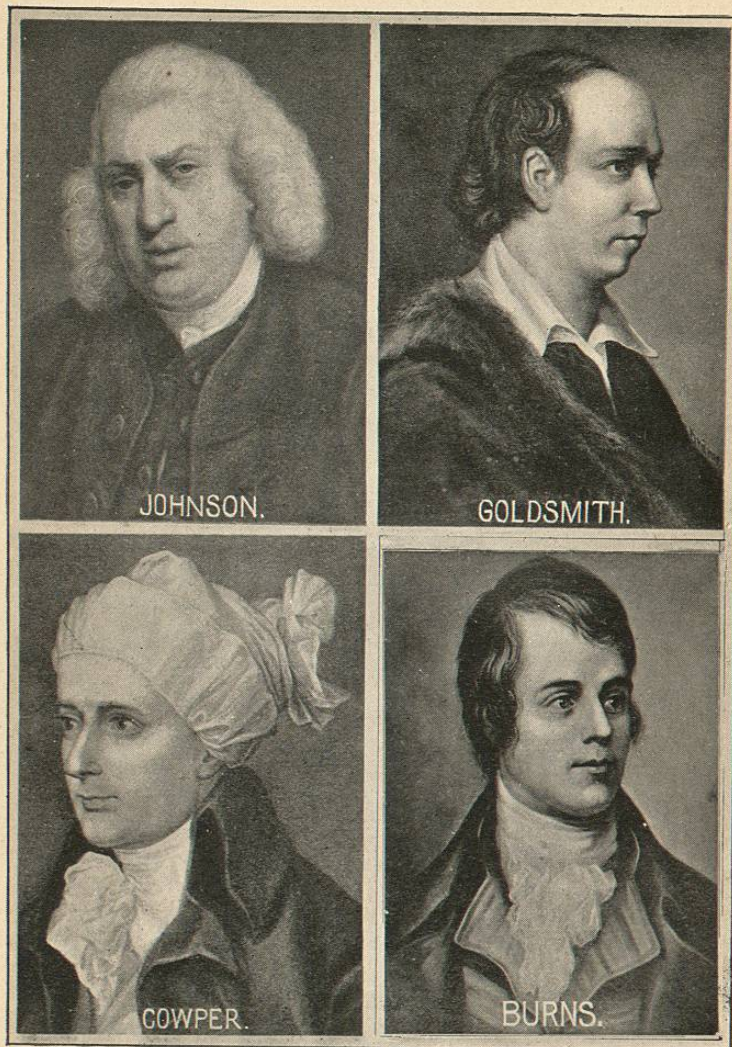
no means idyllic; but with Smollett this English realism ran into vulgarity and a hard Scotch literalness, and character was pushed to caricature. "The generous wine of Fielding," says Taine, "in Smollett's hands becomes brandy of the dram-shop." A partial exception to this is to be found in his last and best novel, *Humphrey Clinker*, 1770. The influence of Cervantes and of the French novelist, Le Sage, who finished his *Adventures of Gil Blas* in 1735, are very perceptible in Smollett.

A genius of much finer mold was Lawrence Sterne, the author of *Tristram Shandy*, 1759-1767, and the *Sentimental Journey*, 1768. *Tristram Shandy* is hardly a novel: the story merely serves to hold together a number of characters, such as Uncle Toby and Corporal Trim, conceived with rare subtlety and originality. Sterne's chosen province was the whimsical, and his great model was Rabelais. His books are full of digressions, breaks, surprises, innuendoes, double meanings, mystifications, and all manner of odd turns. Coleridge and Carlyle unite in pronouncing him a great humorist. Thackeray says that he was only a great jester. Humor is the laughter of the heart, and Sterne's pathos is closely interwoven with his humor. He was the foremost of English sentimentalists, and he had that taint of insincerity which distinguishes sentimentalism from genuine sentiment, like Goldsmith's, for example. Sterne, in life, was selfish, heartless, and untrue. A clergyman, his worldliness and vanity and the indecency of his writings were a scandal to the Church, though his sermons were both witty and affecting. He enjoyed the titillation of his own emotions, and he had practiced so long at detecting the latent pathos that lies in the expression of dumb things and of poor, patient animals, that he could summon the tear of sensibility at the thought of a discarded postchaise, a dead donkey, a starling in a cage, or of Uncle Toby putting a house fly out of the window, and saying, "There is room enough in the world for

thee and me." It is a high proof of his cleverness that he generally succeeds in raising the desired feeling in his readers even from such trivial occasions. He was a minute philosopher, his philosophy was kindly, and he taught the delicate art of making much out of little. Less coarse than Fielding, he is far more corrupt. Fielding goes bluntly to the point; Sterne lingers among the temptations and suspends the expectation to tease and excite it. Forbidden fruit had a relish for him, and his pages seduce. He is full of good sayings both tender and witty. It was Sterne, for example, who wrote, "God tempers the wind to the shorn lamb."

A very different writer was Oliver Goldsmith, whose *Vicar of Wakefield*, 1766, was the earliest, and is still one of the best, novels of domestic and rural life. The book, like its author, was thoroughly Irish, full of bulls and inconsistencies. Very improbable things happened in it with a cheerful defiance of logic. But its characters are true to nature, drawn with an idyllic sweetness and purity, and with touches of a most loving humor. Its hero, Dr. Primrose, was painted after Goldsmith's father, a poor clergyman of the English Church in Ireland, and the original, likewise, of the country parson in Goldsmith's *Deserted Village*, 1770, who was "passing rich on forty pounds a year." This poem, though written in the fashionable couplet of Pope, and even containing a few verses contributed by Dr. Johnson—so that it was not at all in line with the work of the romanticists—did, perhaps, as much as any thing of Gray or of Collins to recall English poetry to the simplicity and freshness of country life.

Except for the comedies of Sheridan and Goldsmith, and, perhaps, a few other plays, the stage had now utterly declined. The novel, which is dramatic in essence, though not in form, began to take its place, and to represent life, though less intensely, yet more minutely than the theater could do. In the novelists of the 18th century, the life of the people, as distinguished from "society" or the upper classes, began to invade



literature. Richardson was distinctly a *bourgeois* writer, and his contemporaries—Fielding, Smollett, Sterne, and Goldsmith—ranged over a wide variety of ranks and conditions. This is one thing which distinguishes the literature of the second half of the 18th century from that of the first, as well as in some degree from that of all previous centuries. Among the authors of this generation whose writings belonged to other departments of thought than pure literature may be mentioned, in passing, the great historian, Edward Gibbon, whose *Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire* was published from 1776–1788, and Edmund Burke, whose political speeches and pamphlets possess a true literary quality.

The romantic poets had addressed the imagination rather than the heart. It was reserved for two men—a contrast to one another in almost every respect—to bring once more into British song a strong individual feeling, and with it a new warmth and directness of speech. These were William Cowper (1731–1800) and Robert Burns (1759–1796). Cowper spoke out of his own life-experience, his agony, his love, his worship and despair; and straightway the varnish that had glittered over all our poetry since the time of Dryden melted away. Cowper had scribbled verses when he was a young law student at the Middle Temple in London, and he had contributed to the *Olney Hymns*, published in 1779 by his friend and pastor, the Rev. John Newton; but he only began to write poetry in earnest when he was nearly fifty years old. In 1782, the date of his first volume, he said, in a letter to a friend, that he had read but one English poet during the past twenty years. Perhaps, therefore, of all English poets of equal culture, Cowper owed the least impulse to books and the most to the need of uttering his inmost thoughts and feelings. Cowper had a most unhappy life. As a child he was shy, sensitive, and sickly, and suffered much from bullying and fagging at a school whither he was sent after his mother's death. This happened when he was six years old;

and in his affecting lines written *On Receipt of My Mother's Picture*, he speaks of himself as a

Wretch even then, life's journey just begun.

In 1763 he became insane and was sent to an asylum, where he spent a year. Judicious treatment restored him to sanity, but he came out a broken man and remained for the rest of his life an invalid, unfitted for any active occupation. His disease took the form of religious melancholy. He had two recurrences of madness, and both times made attempts upon his life. At Huntingdon, and afterward at Olney, in Buckinghamshire, he found a home with the Unwin family, whose kindness did all which the most soothing and delicate care could do to heal his wounded spirit. His two poems *To Mary Unwin*, together with the lines on his mother's picture, were almost the first examples of deep and tender sentiment in the lyrical poetry of the last century. Cowper found relief from the black thoughts that beset him only in an ordered round of quiet household occupations. He corresponded indefatigably, took long walks through the neighborhood, read, sang, and conversed with Mrs. Unwin and his friend, Lady Austin, and amused himself with carpentry, gardening, and raising pets, especially hares, of which gentle animals he grew very fond. All these simple tastes, in which he found for a time a refuge and a sheltered happiness, are reflected in his best poem, *The Task*, 1785. Cowper is the poet of the family affections, of domestic life, and rural retirement; the laureate of the fireside, the tea-table, the evening lamp, the garden, the green-house, and the rabbit-coop. He draws with elegance and precision a chair, a clock, a harpsichord, a barometer, a piece of needle-work. But Cowper was an outdoor as well as an indoor man. The Olney landscape was tame, a fat, agricultural region, where the sluggish Ouse wound between plowed fields and the horizon was bounded by low hills. Nevertheless Cowper's natural descriptions are

at once more distinct and more imaginative than Thomson's. *The Task* reflects, also, the new philanthropic spirit, the enthusiasm of humanity, the feeling of the brotherhood of men to which Rousseau had given expression in France, and which issued in the French Revolution. In England this was the time of Wilberforce, the antislavery agitator; of Whitefield, the eloquent revival preacher; of John and Charles Wesley, and of the Evangelical and Methodist movements which gave new life to the English Church. John Newton, the curate of Olney and the keeper of Cowper's conscience, was one of the leaders of the Evangelicals; and Cowper's first volume of *Table Talk* and other poems, 1782, written under Newton's inspiration, was a series of sermons in verse, somewhat intolerant of all worldly enjoyments, such as hunting, dancing, and theaters. "God made the country and man made the town," he wrote. He was a moralizing poet, and his morality was sometimes that of the invalid and the recluse. Byron called him a "coddled poet." And, indeed, there is a suspicion of gruel and dressing-gowns about him. He lived much among women, and his sufferings had refined him to a feminine delicacy. But there is no sickliness in his poetry, and he retained a charming playful humor—displayed in his excellent comic ballad *John Gilpin*; and Mrs. Browning has sung of him,

How, when one by one sweet sounds and wandering lights departed,  
He bore no less a loving face, because so broken-hearted.

At the close of the year 1786 a young Scotchman, named Samuel Rose, called upon Cowper at Olney, and left with him a small volume, which had appeared at Edinburgh during the past summer, entitled *Poems chiefly in the Scottish Dialect by Robert Burns*. Cowper read the book through twice, and, though somewhat bothered by the dialect, pronounced it a "very extraordinary production." This momentary flash, as of an electric spark, marks the contact not only of the two chief British poets of their generation, but of two literatures. Scotch poets, like Thomson and

Beattie, had written in southern English, and, as Carlyle said, *in vacuo*, that is, with nothing specially national in their work. Burns's sweet though rugged Doric first secured the vernacular poetry of his country a hearing beyond the border. He had, to be sure, a whole literature of popular songs and ballads behind him, and his immediate models were Allan Ramsay and Robert Ferguson; but these remained provincial, while Burns became universal.

He was born in Ayrshire, on the banks of "bonny Doon," in a clay biggin not far from "Alloway's auld haunted kirk," the scene of the witch dance in *Tam O'Shanter*. His father was a hard-headed, God-fearing tenant farmer, whose life and that of his sons was a harsh struggle with poverty. The crops failed; the landlord pressed for his rent; for weeks at a time the family tasted no meat; yet this life of toil was lightened by love and homely pleasures. In the *Cotter's Saturday Night* Burns has drawn a beautiful picture of his parents' household, the rest that came at the week's end, and the family worship about the "wee bit ingle, blinkin' bonnily." Robert was handsome, wild, and witty. He was universally susceptible, and his first songs, like his last, were of "the lasses." His head had been stuffed, in boyhood, with "tales and songs concerning devils, ghosts, fairies, brownies, witches, warlocks, spunkies, kelpies, elf-candles, dead-lights," etc., told him by one Jenny Wilson, an old woman who lived in the family. His ear was full of ancient Scottish tunes, and as soon as he fell in love he began to make poetry as naturally as a bird sings. He composed his verses while following the plow or working in the stack-yard; or, at evening, balancing on two legs of his chair and watching the light of a peat fire play over the reeky walls of the cottage. Burns's love songs are in many keys, ranging from strains of the most pure and exalted passion, like *Ae Fond Kiss* and *To Mary in Heaven*, to such loose ditties as *When Januar Winds*, and *Green Grow the Rashes O*.

Burns liked a glass almost as well as a lass, and at Mauchline, where he carried on a farm with his brother Gilbert, after their father's death, he began to seek a questionable relief from the pressure of daily toil and unkind fates, in the convivialities of the tavern. There, among the wits of the Mauchline Club, farmers' sons, shepherds from the uplands, and the smugglers who swarmed over the west coast, he would discuss politics and farming, recite his verses, and join in the singing and ranting, while

Bousin o'er the nappy  
And gettin' fou and unco happy.

To these experiences we owe not only those excellent drinking songs, *John Barleycorn* and *Willie Brewed a Peck o' Maut*, but the headlong fun of *Tam O'Shanter*, the visions, grotesquely terrible, of *Death and Dr. Hornbook*, and the dramatic humor of the *Jolly Beggars*. Cowper had celebrated "the cup which cheers but not inebriates." Burns sang the praises of *Scotch Drink*. Cowper was a stranger to Burns's high animal spirits, and his robust enjoyment of life. He had affections, but no passions. At Mauchline, Burns, whose irregularities did not escape the censure of the kirk, became involved, through his friendship with Gavin Hamilton, in the controversy between the Old Light and New Light clergy. His *Holy Fair*, *Holy Tulzie*, *Twa Herds*, *Holy Willie's Prayer*, and *Address to the Unco Gude*, are satires against bigotry and hypocrisy. But in spite of the rollicking profanity of his language, and the violence of his rebound against the austere religion of Scotland, Burns was at bottom deeply impressible by religious ideas, as may be seen from his *Prayer under the Pressure of Violent Anguish*, and *Prayer in Prospect of Death*.

His farm turned out a failure, and he was on the eve of sailing for Jamaica, when the favor with which his volume of poems was received stayed his departure, and turned his steps to Edinburgh. There the peasant poet was lionized

for a winter season by the learned and polite society of the Scotch capital, with results in the end not altogether favorable to Burns's best interests. For when society finally turned the cold shoulder on him he had to go back to farming again, carrying with him a bitter sense of injustice and neglect. He leased a farm at Ellisland, in 1788, and some friends procured his appointment as exciseman for his district. But poverty, disappointment, irregular habits, and broken health clouded his last years, and brought him to an untimely death at the age of thirty-seven. He continued, however, to pour forth songs of unequalled sweetness and force. "The man sank," said Coleridge, "but the poet was bright to the last."

Burns is the best of British song-writers. His songs are singable; they are not merely lyrical poems. They were meant to be sung, and they are sung. They were mostly set to old Scottish airs, and sometimes they were built up from ancient fragments of anonymous popular poetry, a chorus, or stanza, or even a single line. Such are, for example, *Auld Lang Syne*, *My Heart's in the Highlands*, and *Landlady, Count the Lawin*. Burns had a great, warm heart. His sins were sins of passion, and sprang from the same generous soil that nourished his impulsive virtues. His elementary qualities as a poet were sincerity, a healthy openness to all impressions of the beautiful, and a sympathy which embraced men, animals, and the dumb objects of nature. His tenderness toward flowers and the brute creation may be read in his lines *To a Mountain Daisy*, *To a Mouse*, and *The Auld Farmer's New Year's Morning Salutation to his Auld Mare Maggie*. Next after love and good fellowship, patriotism is the most frequent motive of his song. Of his national anthem, *Scots wha hae wi' Wallace bled*, Carlyle said: "So long as there is warm blood in the heart of Scotchman, or man, it will move in fierce thrills under this war ode."

Burns's politics were a singular mixture of sentimental

Toryism with practical democracy. A romantic glamour was thrown over the fortunes of the exiled Stuarts, and to have been "out" in '45 with the Young Pretender was a popular thing in parts of Scotland. To this purely poetic loyalty may be attributed such Jacobite ballads of Burns as *Over the Water to Charlie*. But his sober convictions were on the side of liberty and human brotherhood, and are expressed in *The Twa Dogs*, the *First Epistle to Davie*, and *A Man's a Man for a' that*. His sympathy with the Revolution led him to send four pieces of ordnance, taken from a captured smuggler, as a present to the French Convention, a piece of bravado which got him into difficulties with his superiors in the excise. The poetry which Burns wrote, not in dialect, but in the classical English, is in the stilted manner of his century, and his prose correspondence betrays his lack of culture by its constant lapse into rhetorical affectation and fine writing.

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1. James Thomson. *The Castle of Indolence*.
  2. *The Poems of Thomas Gray*.
  3. William Collins. *Odes*.
  4. *The Six Chief Lives from Johnson's Lives of the Poets*. Edited by Matthew Arnold. Macmillan, 1878.
  5. *Boswell's Life of Johnson* [abridged]. Henry Holt & Co., 1878.
  6. Samuel Richardson. *Clarissa Harlowe*.
  7. Henry Fielding. *Tom Jones*.
  8. Tobias Smollett. *Humphrey Clinker*.
  9. Lawrence Sterne. *Tristram Shandy*.
  10. Oliver Goldsmith. *Vicar of Wakefield and Deserted Village*.
  11. William Cowper. *The Task and John Gilpin*. (Globe Edition.) London: Macmillan & Co., 1879.
  12. *The Poems and Songs of Robert Burns*. (Globe Edition.) London: Macmillan & Co., 1884.