Introduction

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In these early years of the new century, there is an urgent need to rewrite the literary histories of Britain that are now nearly a hundred years old and showing their age for contemporary students and scholars. The last Cambridge Literary History of the period – volumes VIII to X of a twenty-volume set, *The Cambridge History of English Literature* – appeared between 1906 and 1917, at its end right in the thick of the Great War. Devoted mainly to essays on the great male writers of the period – for example, volume IX is subtitled 'From Steele and Addison to Pope and Swift' and volume X is called 'The Age of Johnson' – these volumes remain an impressive achievement, full of essential information and deep as well as gracefully worn learning that modern scholars might well envy and seek to emulate. The old *Cambridge History of English Literature* is still very useful and well worth reading. But there is a serenity in its essays by predominantly male Oxbridge dons that at the beginning of another new century we no longer possess; there is in those volumes an untroubled confidence in their enterprise and in the value of literary history that has been eroded if not destroyed by nearly a century of intellectual upheaval as well as by profound social and moral transformations in Anglo-American culture and in the world at large. Since that first Cambridge history appeared, literary studies have changed as radically as the political and social world we live in, and in the last forty years or so, since the early 1960s, there has been a disorienting succession of intellectual revolutions (the word is not too strong) whereby the notion that literature is a privileged artistic and cultural institution has been challenged by many critics. In their traditional effort to find moral value and aesthetic structure and coherence in the great works from the past, literary studies are for many contemporary observers in crisis. For the most part, the academic study of literature has sought to develop other methods and perspectives that respond to what some critics and scholars feel has been overlooked or at least not appreciated fully – the inescapable involvement of literary works in the historical and cultural world of which they are a part. The history of literature is

now inseparable from the history of just about everything else, and all students of literature now possess a heightened and even obsessive awareness of the deep, inescapable interpenetration of the literary and the socio-cultural.

But perhaps more than in other chronologically considered 'fields' of English literature, criticism and scholarship on the Restoration and the eighteenth century have tended to resist new approaches, as scholars often enough in the past have sympathised with the (apparent but not always simple or straightforward) socially conservative attitudes of some of the most powerful writers such as Dryden, Pope, Swift, Johnson and Burke of this century and a half we call for a traditional but quite arbitrary convenience the 'long eighteenth century'. And yet in spite of such lingering nostalgia in some quarters, scholarly and literary-historical understanding of this long eighteenth century has, I think, clearly altered in various significant and even dramatic ways. Thanks in large measure to a series of intellectual revisions or one might even say reconceptions in the larger field of literary study and in related fields such as social and political history and, most recently, the newly invigorated history of publishing and printing or the 'history of the book', the literary canon for the long eighteenth century, from 1660 to about 1780, has been expanded substantially and the number of authors and works that a new history of this period will need to consider is much larger and more diverse than it was forty years ago. (Or, in the most radical formulation of new approaches, the notion of a canon of great works and writers serving a cultural and moral elite has been vigorously challenged and in some cases effectively abandoned in favour of a comprehensive ambition to understand all writing as part of the larger field of ideological production.) In addition to contention about which authors and works need to be considered by literary history, attention and emphasis in literary study of the Restoration and eighteenth century have shifted decidedly away from those formal genres encompassing poetry and drama, moral essays and prose satire to more demotic and journalistic writing, to the emerging popular novel and under the impetus of feminist criticism to women writers, both novelists and poets.

Now sharing the stage with the almost exclusively male intellectual elite, whose writings in the past constituted our idea of eighteenth-century British literary culture, is a varied cast of writers, including some (male and female) from the working classes, and a motley supporting crew of hack writers, journalists and pamphleteers, as well as enterprising or often enough unscrupulous printers and booksellers (publishers) who provided the entrepreneurial energy and capital behind much of this writing. Scholars in the field now appreciate as never before the unprecedented growth, especially in London, of a new

market for printed matter in these years, and the solemn idea of literature has been traded in by many commentators for the more inclusive and disorderly notion of literary or textual production for this new and expanding market. In recent years, literary history in general has altered its methods and approaches in response to this newly heightened awareness of the complex process of literary production. Many critics and scholars have strenuously attempted to widen literary history's perspective and to complicate its self-understanding, reminding itself always of the sometimes neglected truism that literature is a part of culture at its largest and most enveloping, not just a reflection or expression of cultural activity but also an active participant in creating and propagating the ideas, feelings and programmes that constitute culture (which is always, we need to keep reminding ourselves, an arena of struggle and contestation for dominance as rival versions of what is important strive with each other). The object of historical study for most scholars in the field is now, in short, literary and cultural production in a wider arena than that defined by the traditional canon and by the expressive acts of individual authors, and the notion of literature as a stately succession of masterpieces produced by author-heroes who manage somehow to speak across the centuries to a universalised audience has been largely replaced by a far less exalted and elitist understanding of literature (a concept that has itself been interrogated and demystified, replaced for many by the neutral term, 'writing') and by a deeper and broader sense of the cultural and the ideological functions that literature serves within its particular socio-historical situations.

For example, the five male novelists of the mid-century that posterity seems to have decided were the best – Defoe, Richardson, Fielding, Smollett and Sterne – have been surrounded in new and interesting ways by their predecessors and contemporaries, mostly women, as well as by an intensified emphasis on the insistent needs of the marketplace as it generated a historically unprecedented kind of audience eager to read a new species of popular and even sensational fiction. The new novel of the eighteenth century has been to some extent reconceived by current scholarship and criticism as a response to these unprecedented market conditions and publishing opportunities, an anticipation of modern mass entertainment media, and as a field of competing formats and discourses at various levels (a reaction to deep cultural and social changes) rather than a unified triumph of individual artistic vision and literary and moral authority that founds a new species of narrative. Like other literary forms, moreover, the new novel has been implicated in the suspicion (encouraged by the work of the French intellectual historian Michel Foucault and by the American critical school that calls itself 'New Historicism' as well)

that high culture is in some important sense related to the exercise of power, which is seen as essentially a means for the ruling minority not only to imagine itself as an entity but also to regulate or police marginal and unruly sectors of society, specifically women and the labouring majority of the population. So for many critics the moral and social realism of Richardson and Fielding is now profitably (if partially) understood from this perspective as one option among several, as a cultural position rather than as a universalist discovery or neutral extension of a newly developed and more sensitive set of representational narrative techniques.

For another example of revisionist perspectives, the work of the Scriblerians or Tory satirists as they have been called – Pope, Swift, Gay, Arbuthnot and their circle – has been enriched and complicated by giving equal time, as it were, and sympathetic attention to the hard-pressed professional writers ('Dunces' is Pope's term in *The Dunciad*) they satirised, and the group's often antagonistic and contemptuous relationship to popular and demotic writing and entertainment has been explored as the secret source of their comic vigour and subversive humour. Without these colourful opponents, it can be argued, the Scriblerians are merely nostalgic reactionaries, but facing the forces of modern 'Dulness', as they called it, they come into sharp focus as vigorously and memorably oppositional. Indeed, popular writing, entertainment and instruction for an emerging mass-market audience, now appears clearly to be in the ascendant during the early decades of the eighteenth century, and the high literary culture of those years can be seen as in many ways an attempt to control or contain (or appropriate) these new social and cultural phenomena, which some critics contend anticipate later developments in mass and popular culture.

At the same time, late twentieth-century 'literary theory' – with its persistent attention to what it sees as the disabling instability and potential incoherence of the text and the limitations of language as a means of representing or reproducing reality – has created a critical climate that has eroded the monumental status of those authors traditionally considered central to the period. Much recent scholarship has turned profitably from a curatorial or antiquarian emphasis on preserving and reverently annotating the masterpieces of the age and from the tracing of literary-historical genealogies to a historical contextual approach that is sensitive, especially, to the economic pressures of the evolving marketplace for print in which they were produced. As our own literary culture at the beginning of the twenty-first century moves slowly away from the dominance of print media, scholars have become aware of the origins of that dominance in the early eighteenth century (especially in England, with

its uniquely liberal bourgeois culture and in the larger European context its relatively free and uncensored press), and eighteenth-century British writing has been located within those shifting social and economic circumstances that created in London a new and indeed unprecedented secular marketplace for books and ideas in which those writers who have traditionally been thought of as the period's major authors (Dryden, Addison, Steele, Defoe, Pope, Swift, Gay, Fielding, Richardson, Johnson, Boswell and others) played their role and indeed defined themselves within these new conditions for literary and cultural production. To some extent, literary historians have always been aware, to take a few obvious examples, that Dryden wrote his plays to support himself and to please aristocratic patrons, that Defoe worked feverishly to make his living in the print market as a journalist and political operative, that Pope's career depended upon his skilful marketing of his Homer translations, that Swift hoped to prosper and gain ecclesiastical preferment by writing for his political masters, that Gay and Fielding made a great deal of money from their plays, that Johnson was essentially a very talented hack, a writer who produced his work to order for money, that all eighteenth-century writing, in short, had particular and practical purposes, material origins and effects. But current scholarship always seeks to highlight these questions, to place such circumstances in the foreground of their discussions, to reinsert literary activity at the dead centre of the practical and actual world that generated it, in a word, to historicise it.

In addition, thanks largely to the influential work of revisionist historians of various and indeed opposing persuasions such as J. G. A. Pocock, J. C. D. Clark, John Brewer, W. A. Speck, E. P. Thompson, Linda Colley and others, this new contextualist approach to the literature of the period has been accompanied and stimulated by a thorough re-examination of the politics and history of the emerging fiscal and military nation state (Brewer's terms) that Britain became in the course of the eighteenth century. These historians and others have banished some old simplifications, and misleadingly absolute oppositions, between Whig and Tory, court and country, aristocrats and bourgeoisie, have been complicated. In Clark's strongly argued revisionist view, the liberal and Whiggish picture of an essentially secular, progressive and enlightened eighteenth-century Britain has given way to an understanding which is attentive to the strong persistence of traditional forms of moral authority and religious belief. This historical revisionism stresses the difficult birth pangs of early modernity in the eighteenth century and the slow shift from traditional landed forms of wealth and hierarchal social organisation to a credit and consumer economy and a relatively fluid (compared to other European

nations) social order. From quite another perspective on the period, leftist social historians associated with the pioneering work of E. P. Thompson have stressed just how efficiently the British ruling classes, their power and status derived from traditional landed wealth and new money made in commerce and in overseas adventures as well as in systematic state corruption, imposed their dominance by a combination of increasingly brutal repression and persuasive political theatre that employed the rituals of monarchy and aristocracy to maintain social stability. Recent historical study also pays special attention to the unresolved dynastic tensions in Britain whereby Jacobitism was more than a fringe belief and loyalty to the exiled Stuarts lingered dangerously and powerfully until the middle of the century as a challenge to the Hanoverian establishment. These redefined political and moral ideologies and conflicts are both reflected and refracted in literary discourse, and the new *Cambridge History of English Literature*, 1660–1780 seeks to trace relationships between the shifts in ideology and various transforming literary genres such as the periodical moral and political essay, the Georgic poem, the travel account and the novel, which promote and reflect political, economic and imperial alterations in British identity. The new *Cambridge History of English Literature, 1660–1780* takes into account Britain's emergence by the middle and later years of the eighteenth century as the single most powerful European imperial nation and explores colonial themes and transatlantic affiliations in literary expression, as Britain comes to surpass France and Spain as the dominant power in North America and in India. Indeed, a number of the chapters dwell on the key project of much eighteenth-century imaginative writing: to construct a national literary tradition and in the process to participate in the invention of the modern *British* nation. (It is worth noting, by the way, that in spite of our calling it the 'Cambridge History of English Literature' this volume takes in the literary history of Britain, of writing in the English language from the political entity we now call the United Kingdom.)

The chapters in the new *Cambridge History of English Literature, 1660–1780* seek to articulate and to exemplify, but also in some cases to evaluate critically (and even at times sceptically), these new emphases and approaches. Part of the guiding purpose of this collaborative volume is the traditional and in fact essential responsibility of literary history: to provide for the student new to the period an introduction to the varieties, sources and purposes of imaginative writing or literary expression from the Restoration to the 1780s. The volume moves steadily and comprehensively if not always directly or chronologically through the history of literary activity, tracing its shifting standards of aesthetic worth and purpose, its reception and its conditions of production, in the long

eighteenth century in Britain. Some chapters feature a fullness of information on particular topics and offer readers the recovery (for example, the chapter on drama in the mid and late century or the chapter on the sentimental novel) of works and authors no longer widely read or studied. In some cases, the treatment in the chapters strives to be recuperative, with the effort being to repair a long-standing neglect of material (such as poetry and novels written by women) or to describe a subject, uncongenial to contemporary readers but vital to the majority of an eighteenth-century audience, such as religious writing, or to recover a perspective and purpose (for example, the political density and specificity of the political and polemical essay) that we need to take in order to understand the period more completely or fully than we have in the past. In some cases, our contributors have sought to restore the actualities of literary practice, to describe what the theatre, for example, was really like in the Restoration and in the middle of the century, to evoke the climate in which poetry was produced and consumed by a fairly wide audience, in which the social, moral or political essay was a vehicle for a generally recognised and valued eloquence, in which the prose poems of the bard, 'Ossian', that James Macpherson said he had translated from the Scots Gaelic, caused a sensation. A couple of chapters treat philosophical and historical writing, which in the eighteenth century was part and parcel of the ensemble of texts that an educated person would have included in the category of literature.

Coverage of this sort of the textual field, to use an ugly but accurate contemporary term, is accompanied by the articulation in the chapters that follow of those debates and controversies that constitute the current state of knowledge and understanding of this body of writing, and I hope the book will thus serve as well the needs of a more experienced or knowledgeable group of readers. Various contributors explore the terrain of this expanded literary field and seek to provide a full account of the newly complicated and contexualised aesthetic value and cultural resonances of the authors and works in the traditional canon. Dryden, Rochester, Behn, Congreve, Pope, Swift, Addison, Steele, Lady Mary Wortley Montagu, Gay, Defoe, Thomson, Johnson, Boswell, Fielding, Richardson, Burney, Smollett and Sterne are significant presences in the volume, although only two chapters (on Dryden and Swift) deal specifically and exclusively with one author. Other chapters feature non-canonical authors and materials, paying attention especially to publishing history and literary production in a wider and neutral sense, to the interactions between 'popular' writing and elite culture. With some chronological overlapping, some chapters trace the transformations of modes and genres such as the periodical essay, the Georgic poem, prose fiction, the familiar letter, the political essay, the verse

epistle, drama and satire under the pressure of changing social and historical circumstances. Other chapters focus on the achievements of particular writers in relation to both changing generic forms and historical circumstances. Several chapters take up the vexed and crucial question of gender, highlighting the recent recuperation of women writers and their new visibility as major forces and figures with a tradition of their own and indeed a dominant and even founding importance in the emergence of the new novel. The traditional topics and subjects of literary history, in other words, have been retained, more or less, in the new *Cambridge History of English Literature, 1660–1780,* but our effort has been to see them from new or fresh perspectives, within the wider contexts of early twenty-first-century revisionist historiography and literary scholarship.

The guiding purpose in the volume as a whole is to pursue two main projects that I hope the reader will understand as engaging in an implicit dialogue with each other, revealing in their distinct interests and emphases the presence in current understanding of rival if often enough complementary accounts of British eighteenth-century literary culture: first, to tell again from our own early twenty-first-century perspective the story of aesthetic and formal achievement and enduring literary, intellectual and cultural power in these authors and others, and second, to understand all literary production during this period in the widest and most comprehensive social, historical, political and cultural contexts. To be sure, for those who work on the British eighteenth century, what is now labelled cultural studies (in non-polemical and relatively unselfconscious and often merely positivistic rather than critical forms) has traditionally been a large part of literary-historical understanding of the period, and pure aesthetic / formalistic analysis or belles lettrestristic appreciation has never really been an option for understanding writing that was so clearly rooted in its socio-cultural moment. Indeed, the formal analysis of literature divorced from moral or political or social purpose is a latter-day notion, only slowly emerging in critical thinking of the late eighteenth century, and although we may well read eighteenth-century works in a formalist spirit, such a viewpoint was literally inconceivable to those who created and read them. In an obvious and important sense, British eighteenth-century writing was deeply embedded in and overtly addressed social, political and moral issues, and literary historians have always stressed the essentially occasional and often specifically political or didactic and pragmatic purposes of even the most classic texts such as *Absalom and Achitophel*, *Robinson Crusoe*, *Gulliver's Travels*, *The Dunciad*, *The Beggar's Opera*, *Rasselas*, *Clarissa* or *Reflections on the Revolution in France*. What we tend to call 'literature' had not yet been compartmentalised

into belles lettres, and what we now consider essentially imaginative writing included a large and comprehensive field of literary and intellectual activity that was in fact inseparable from other discourses or disciplines that have since the eighteenth century been compartmentalised, and that we would now label history, theology, philosophy, law, politics and so on. This emergence of literature in our sense is in fact the topic of the last chapter in the volume and an implicit theme in many of the preceding chapters. So this history, overall, seeks to chart various kinds of intersections and cross-fertilisations across this tremendously varied and vital body of writing, to include much more than the poems, plays and novels that we have been accustomed to think of as the boundaries of imaginative writing, to give the reader some sense of the capacious variety and diversity of what the greatest critic of the age, Samuel Johnson, always referred to with reverence as literature.