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I

A Survey

The seventeenth century has long been recognized as one in which the transition from the medieval world to the modern was greatly accelerated. It is a century in which man revised his conception of the external universe and of his relation to it, revised also his conception of himself and of the powers of his own mind: it is the century of Galileo, Harvey, and Newton, of Descartes, Hobbes, and Locke. The debate of which we hear more and more as it grows older is whether man should obey the tradition or revolt against it; whether he should continue to follow the old guides or should follow new leaders in search of other promised lands. The rationalists slowly win ground, and heresy is no longer solitary and hidden. For some there begins to be a politics without divine law, a religion without mystery, a morality without dogma. It is the century when, in Seeley's phrase, England passed "out of the atmosphere of theology into that of commerce," and what Gardiner called "the mundane spirit" triumphed over Puritanism. Where the emphasis had been upon order and degree, hierarchy and discipline, man's duty to God and the Prince, some now placed it on rights—the rights of the individual conscience, of criticism, of reason. And in the

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next century there emerges for some a religion of humanity, the belief in a heavenly city upon earth, not indeed in their time but for a not too distant posterity. These changes in thought and belief, for which there had been a long preparation, seem to come to their crisis in the late seventeenth century.

In small things as in great a change is perceptible. In his admirable *Renaissance Guides to Books* Professor Archer Taylor has shown that even in so humble a matter as bibliography there is a break in cultural tradition at the end of the century. In the Middle Ages and long after the invention of printing, when a man could still take all knowledge for his province, universal catalogues of books and manuscripts could be provided with some hope that they might be complete. Conrad Gesner's *Bibliotheca Universalis,* first published in 1545, gave a catalogue "omnium fere scriptorum, a mundi initio ad hunc usque diem," and in his *Pandectae* of 1548 he provided a subject index of all books and all knowledge. We may be surprised at the number and variety of the helps to learning the readers of those days were offered. There was even a list of those books which scholars promise but do not write. It was soon found necessary to print a supplement. The continuity of the tradition is shown by the way in which a new work absorbed and enlarged an old: the Protestant Bale in his catalogue of English writers building upon the Augustinian monk Boston of Bury, and Pits, the Catholic priest, making use of Bale. Historical evaluation was not found to be necessary, and the writers of all ages stood together on one level and in one index. It is as if knowl-

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edge was immutable, not to be assailed by the passage of time.

Then, as Professor Taylor shows, about the end of the seventeenth century the old universal bibliographies begin to die off; they are no longer reprinted or brought up to date. Authors of the past, especially the remote past, come to be treated not as authorities, but at most as sources. The first great modern philosophical systems begin to be devised. "Theology, philosophy, and the other liberal arts all start their cultural tradition anew with the eighteenth century." The ancients are no longer regarded as the sum of human wisdom, and the progressive theory of history comes into being, that bad as things may be at the moment they are steadily improving.

So it was at the end of the century, but at its beginning men were far from being friendly to any idea of progress. J. B. Bury and Richard Foster Jones have shown how widespread in Elizabethan and Jacobean times was the belief that nature was decaying, that the moderns had much deteriorated from the ancients physically and morally, that the world was in its old age and nearing its dissolution. On this belief Donne founds much of his *First Anniversary,* and it gives to Raleigh's *History of the World* an elegiac strain—"the long day of mankind drawing fast towards an evening, and the world's tragedy and time near at an end." As late as *Urn Burial* it inspired the Janus-faced Sir Thomas Browne to some of his greatest music.

In England this view was first attacked in an extended argument in 1627 in George Hakewill's courageous and

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spirited folio, *Apology of the Power and Providence of God in the Government of the World;* but as optimistic and more influential was the message of Bacon. While he held that the world was in the autumn of its days, he believed that to that autumn was appointed the bearing and fructifying of the plant of knowledge. For him the golden age was the last age, not the first. Now Bacon is a smaller man for us than he was for the seventeenth century. For one thing we know so much more than we used to know of the advancement of learning in the sixteenth century, and what we know has not increased his stature as a man of science. Yet it is not easy to exaggerate the influence his doctrines had upon his century: his advocacy of a more searching inquiry into men's minds and motives, his insistence on *fructus* and the useful arts, his antiauthoritarian attitude to the ancients, his optimistic support of the moderns indicated in the very title *The Advancement of Learning*, his passionate belief in the beneficial effects of experimental science "for the glory of God and the relief of man's estate." These doctrines diffuse themselves through the century. Much greater men of science than he was did him homage, and Joseph Glanvill was right to consider Solomon's House in the *New Atlantis* as a prophetic scheme of the Royal Society.

But influential as Bacon was, his disciples later in the century were not in every particular Baconian. The notion that the world was on its last legs dwindled and almost disappeared. Those who did not deny it ignored it. Again, some of his disciples were much more one-sided in their attacks on the ancients than was Bacon. Bacon was neither an "ancient" nor a "modern." Unlike Descartes he did not construct a sys-

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tem which is independent of the past; rather he desired to establish what he called a "sociable intercourse" between antiquity and progress or "proficience." More important for our purposes, his prose style—or rather prose styles, for he had several—cannot easily be squared with the tenets of his followers, whether we think of the aphoristic style of his *Essays*, where the *brevitas* of Tacitus and Lipsius is carried as far as it can go in the English language, or think of the eloquence of many a passage in the *Advancement*, where he is preaching the gospel of science. We should look in vain late in the century for a passage like that in which he praises the durability of learning, look in vain for anything so eloquent or for anything that pays such due tribute to the tradition of learning. I mean the passage that ends:

> if the inuention of the Shippe was thought so noble, which carryeth riches, and commodities from place to place, and consociateth the most remote regions in participation of their fruits: how much more are letters to bee magnified, which as Shippes, passe through the vast Seas of time, and make ages so distant, to participate of the wisdome, illuminations, and inuentions the one of the other?

But in the third quarter of the century the plain style triumphed. It triumphed so completely that elaborate prose was driven out, and for some generations Milton, Browne, and Taylor had no notable successors.

Only by a gross simplification can a revolution so sudden and so complete be attributed merely, or even chiefly, to the new rationalism and the successes of experimental science. The attack on ornate prose came from many different

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quarters. One of these, to which several contemporary writers drew attention, and some of our older historians of literature, was the tone and temper of the court of Charles II. The court, of course, represented but a small part of the country, though an influential part. There were many writers who did not come within its orbit: the men of science themselves, Boyle, Wren, Newton, Ray. And while we cannot call him a distinguished man of science, there is John Aubrey, a considerable antiquary as later ages have been glad to acknowledge. There are the preachers South, Barrow, Tillotson, who though court preachers kept themselves unspotted from the court. There are the statesmen, Clarendon, Halifax, Burnet, who had access to the court yet did not write for it, but left their memoirs in manuscript for the benefit of posterity. There is the diarist and virtuoso John Evelyn, who never willingly went to court, so he would have us believe, but minded his books and his garden, and found that circle big enough for him. And at the court itself there is Evelyn's friend Margaret Blagge (later Mrs. Godolphin) who contrived to live there, he tells us, the life of a saint. It was felt to be fitting that when she was constrained to act at court in John Crowne's pastoral comedy *Calisto*, she was cast for the part of Diana.

And lastly, right outside these circles whether courtly or learned, completely untouched by the aristocratic tradition of education upon which all these writers were reared, not even a member of the already powerful middle class but of the usually inarticulate peasantry, there is that most articulate genius, John Bunyan.

Yet when we have made all allowances, the fact remains

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that the court of Charles II exercised a strong positive influence upon literature and the drama. It is the last English court of which this may be said. Of the nature of this court, its dubious morals and its addiction to the pleasures of each day, its taste for wit and satire and raillery, many a contemporary record tells us. The letter I am about to quote was written from Oxford in 1665 when the court had taken refuge there from the Great Plague of London. Its spirits were far from being damped by the terrors of that visitation.

> There is no othere plague here but the infection of love; no other discourse but of ballets, dance, and fine clouse; no other emulation but who shall look the handsomere, and whose vermillion and spanish white is the best; none other fight then for "I am yours." In a word there is nothing here but mirth, and there is a talk that there shall be a proclamacion made that any melancholy man or woman coming in this towne shall be tourned out and put to the pillory, and there to be whep till he hath learned the way to be mary *à la mode*.

That fits easily into the world frequented by Sedley and Rochester, reported by Etherege, and satirized by Wycherley.

That Charles and his court were arbitrary masters we know from the personal histories of Cowley and Butler, of Otway and Dryden; and when in the last years of his life and of the century Dryden was in disgrace at court and entered into a lucrative agreement with the publisher Jacob Tonson, we feel it to be an important event not only in his literary life but in the history of letters. We can begin to anticipate the time when Johnson could say: "We have done with patronage. . . . When learning becomes general, an

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author leaves the great, and applies to the multitude." Yet the dependence of the young Dryden upon the suffrages of the court was not entirely harmful. I do not think he is merely using the language of compliment when he acknowledges the court to be the best and surest judge of writing or maintains that thanks to the benefit of converse which the writers of his time enjoyed with a king and court acquainted with the most polished courts of Europe, the solidity of the English nation had been mixed with the air and gaiety of the French. About the time that Dryden was praising the court in the dedication to his essay *Of Dramatic Poesy*, Thomas Sprat, the historian of the Royal Society, was also saying that the English genius was not so airy and discursive as that of some of its neighbors. Humor, wit, variety and elegance of language, he explained, come from frequent conversations in cities, and whereas the French nobility lived close together in cities, the English was scattered for the most part in country houses. Sprat ignored the court, but Dryden did not, could not, ignore the court, and something of the air and gaiety of his prose perhaps he owed to being conversant in courts and keeping the best company. He could hardly have owed them to Tillotson or to the Royal Society. Nor did he owe them entirely to Nature, for his conversation, he tells us, was slow and dull, and his humor saturnine and reserved.

At this point an evenhanded historian ought perhaps to put in a caveat. Before the Restoration there were signs that the fine raillery which Dryden praised and which is as sharply to be distinguished from banter as from railing was beginning to be valued as an instrument of destruction. One illustration must suffice. In late 1659 or early 1660 appeared a

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translation of Rabelais's *Pantagrueline Prognostication.* To this the translator, a royalist, prefixed a satire on the astrologer William Lilly who for years had made the stars favor the Roundheads and had even prophesied a good year in 1659 for Richard Cromwell. The work is anonymous but is much in the spirit of Milton's nephew, John Phillips, himself a Pantagruelist. "How easy it is," Dryden was soon to observe, "to call Rogue and Villain, and that wittily! But how hard to make a Man appear a Fool, a Blockhead, or a Knave, without using any of those opprobrious terms!" Many satirists there were who were willing to rail at Lilly, to call him rogue and villain, a star-peeping gull, an impudent deceitful cologuing quack, a proditorious fellow, Merlin's brat, a liar of the first magnitude, an audacious atheistical, railing Rabshakeh, and many other opprobrious terms. Not so our translator. He considers Lilly's serious prognostications as if they were on a level with Rabelais's mock prognostications:

> He is such a pleasant Astrologer. And thou resemblest him in this, that although thou art not altogether so good a Droll, yet every man when he reads thee, has a kind of tentation to laughter. And yet thou for thy part seemest so grave and serious that thou wilt easily pardon the Translator of this, having thy selfe so usefully rendred his jest into good earnest: and I know not perfectly whether he were thy Originall, or but an imperfect Type, or faint representation of thee, a greater Prophet to come. Thou hast all along his Style, Figures, and Policy, and all but the profession of Drollery. Thou knowest as well how to wrap thy deceits in a cloud of generalities, that they may not lye open to discovery or reprehension. Do but look upon thy Ephemerides, and thou canst tell us very gravely that some body or other shal dy next month, and as

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> plainly foreseest the fall of some great man in August, as we mortalls the dropping of a Pomwater in Autumn. In fine, thy Prophecies are as sure as Death: for Those, as This, are in themselves certaine, but the Time, Place, Manner, and Persons, and such petty circumstances, altogether uncertain.

This is not railing, and the good breeding of the prose, the quietness of the tone, the easiness of the pace distinguish it from banter. If it is not fine raillery, fine raillery is just around the corner. The dawn is breaking on an age which excels all others in the art of making a man ridiculous.

But to return to Dryden. He was a fellow of the Royal Society—until he stopped paying his dues—and sat on their committee for the reformation of the English tongue. Yet however sympathetic he was at first with their aims, and however much he may have approved of their skeptical way of approach, he cannot have been in full sympathy with their official doctrines on English prose. Or at least he could have agreed only if their precepts were confined to writings about science, to what De Quincey was to call the literature of knowledge as distinct from the literature of power. The society recommended its writers to observe a close naked natural way of speaking, delivering so many things almost in an equal number of words, to avoid the ornaments of language, to prefer the language of artisans, countrymen, and merchants to that of wits or scholars. But Dryden, while he cannot be said to use the language of wits and scholars, as certainly cannot be said to prefer the language of artisans, countrymen, and merchants. His language, like that of any prose writer of good taste in any age, "belongs to human nature as human." As Coleridge said of the language of

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