

CHAPTER TWELVE

Conclusion

A row of eighteenth-century houses, or a room of normal eighteenth-century furniture, or a characteristic piece of eighteenth-century literature, conveys at once a sense of satisfaction and completeness. The secret of this charm is not to be found in any special beauty or nobility of design or expression, but simply in an exquisite fitness. The eighteenth-century mind was a unity, an order; it was finished, and it was simple. All literature and art that really belong to the eighteenth century are the language of a little society of men and women who moved within one set of ideas; who understood each other; who were not tormented by any anxious or bewildering problems; who lived in comfort, and, above all things, in composure. The classics were their freemasonry. There was a standard for the mind, for the emotions, for the taste: there were no incongruities. When you have a society like this, you have what we roughly call a civilisation, and it leaves its character and canons in all its surroundings and its literature. Its definite ideas lend themselves readily to expression. A larger society seems an anarchy in contrast; just because of its escape into a greater world it seems powerless to stamp itself on wood or stone; it is condemned as an age of chaos and mutiny, with nothing to declare. In comparison with the dishevelled century that follows, the eighteenth century was neat, well dressed and nicely appointed. It had a religion, the religion of quiet common sense and contentment with a world that it found agreeable and encouraging; it had a style, the style of the elegant and polished English of Addison or Gibbon. Men who were not conscious of any strain or great emotion asked of their writers and their painters that they should observe in their art the equanimity and moderation that were desirable in life. They did not torture their minds with eager questions; there was no piercing curiosity or passionate love or hatred in their souls; they all breathed the same air of distinguished satisfaction and dignified self-control. English institutions suited them admirably; a monarchy so reasonable nobody could mind; Parliament was a convenient instrument for their wishes, and the English Church was the very thing to keep religion in its place. What this atmosphere could produce at its best was seen in Gibbon or in Reynolds; and neither Gibbon nor Reynolds could lose themselves in a transport of the imagination. To pass from the eighteenth century to the Revolt, from Pope to Blake, or from Sheridan to Shelley, is to burst from this little hothouse of sheltered and nurtured elegance into an infinite wild garden of romance and mystery. For the eighteenth century such escape was impossible, and if any one fell into the fatal crime of enthusiasm, his frenzy took the form of Methodism, which was a more limited world than the world he had quitted.

The small class that enjoyed the monopoly of political power and social luxuries, round whose interests and pleasures the State revolved, consisted, down to the French war, of persons accustomed to travel, to find amusement and instruction in foreign galleries and French

salons, and to study the fashions and changes of thought, and letters and religion, outside England; of persons who liked to surround themselves with the refinements and the decorations of life, and to display their good taste in collecting old masters, or fine fragments of sculpture, or the scattered treasures of an ancient library. Perhaps at no time since the days when Isabella d'Este consoled herself for the calamities of her friends and relatives with the thought of the little Greek statues that were brought by these calamities into the market, has there been a class so keenly interested in the acquisition of beautiful workmanship, for the sake of the acquisition rather than for the sake of the renown of acquiring it. The eighteenth-century collectors bought with discernment as well as with liberality: they were not the slaves of a single rage or passion, and consequently they enriched the mansions of England with the achievements of various schools. Of course the eighteenth century had its own fashion in art, and no admiration is more unintelligible to modern taste than the admiration for Guercino and Guido Reni and the other seventeenth-century painters of Bologna. But the pictures that came across the Channel in such great numbers were not the products of one school, or indeed the products of one country. Dutch, Flemish, French, Italian, they all streamed into England, and the nation suddenly found itself, or rather its rulers, very rich in masterpieces. The importance of such a school of manner as this, with its knowledge of other worlds and other societies, its interest in literature and art, its cosmopolitan atmosphere, can only be truly estimated by those who remember the boorish habits of the country gentlemen of the earlier eighteenth century described by Fielding. With the French war this cosmopolitan atmosphere disappeared. Thenceforth the aristocracy were as insular in their prejudices as any of their countrymen, and Lord Holland, who preserved the larger traditions of his class, provoked suspicion and resentment by travelling in Spain during the Peninsular War.(1*)

But if the art and literature of the eighteenth century show the predominance of a class that cultivated its taste outside England, and that regarded art and literature as mere ministers to the pleasure of a few,(2*) they show also that that class had political power as well as social privileges. There is no art of the time that can be called national either in England or in France, but the art of eighteenth-century England bears a less distant relation to the English people than the art of eighteenth-century France to the people of France, just in proportion as the great English houses touched the English people more closely than Versailles touched the French. English art is less of mere decoration and less of mere imitation, for, though it is true that Chippendale, Sheraton, and the Adam brothers were all in one sense copying the furniture of other countries -- Holland, China, France -- they all preserved a certain English strain, and it was the flavour of the vernacular, so to speak, that saved their designs from the worst foreign extravagance. They were designing, indeed, for a class and not for a nation, but it was for a class that had never broken quite away from the life of the society that it controlled. The English aristocracy remained a race of country gentlemen. They never became mere loungers or triflers, kicking their heels about a Court and amusing themselves with tedious gallantries and intrigues. They threw themselves into country life and government, and they were happiest away from London. The great swarms of guests that settled on such country seats as Holkham were like gay and boisterous schoolboys compared with the French nobles who had forgotten how to live in the country, and were tired of living at Versailles. If anything could exceed Grey's reluctance to leave his great house in Northumberland for the excitements of Parliament, it was Fox's reluctance to leave his little house in Surrey. The taste for country pleasures and for country sports was never lost, and its persistence explains the physical vitality of the aristocracy. This was a social fact of great importance, for it is health after all that wins half the battles of classes. No quantity of Burgundy and Port could kill off a race that was continually restoring its health by life in the open air; it did not matter that Squire Western generally spent the night under the table if he generally spent the day in the saddle. This inheritance of an open-air life is probably the reason that in England, in contrast to France and Italy, good looks are more often to be found in the aristocracy than in other classes of society.

It was due to this physical vigour that the aristocracy, corrupt and selfish though it was, never fell into the supreme vice of moral decadence. The other European aristocracies crumbled at once before Napoleon: the English aristocracy, amidst all its blunders and errors, kept its character for endurance and fortitude. Throughout that long struggle, when Napoleon was strewing Europe with his triumphs and, as Sheridan said, making kings the sentinels of his power, England alone never broke a treaty or made a surrender at his bidding. For ten years Pitt seems the one fixed point among the rulers of Europe. It is not, of course, to be argued that the ruling class showed more valour and determination than any other class of Englishmen would have shown: the empire-builders of the century, men of daring and enterprise on distant frontiers, were not usually of the ruling class, and Dr. Johnson once wrote an essay to explain why it was that the English common soldier was the bravest of the common soldiers of the world. The comparison is between the English aristocracy and the other champions of law and order in the great ordeal of this war, and in that comparison the English aristocracy stands out in conspicuous eminence in a Europe of shifting and melting governments.

The politics of a small class of privileged persons enjoying an undisputed power might easily have degenerated into a mere business of money-making and nothing else. There is plenty of this atmosphere in the eighteenth-century system: a study merely of the society memoirs of the age is enough to dissipate the fine old illusion that men of blood and breeding have a nice and fastidious Sense about money. Just the opposite is the truth. Aristocracies have had their virtues, but the virtue of a magnificent disdain for money is not to be expected in a class which has for generations taken it as a matter of course that it should be maintained by the State. At no time in English history have sordid motives been so conspicuous in politics as during the days when power was most a monopoly of the aristocracy. No politicians have sacrificed so much of their time, ability, and principles to the pursuit of gain as the politicians of the age when poor men could only squeeze into politics by twos or threes in a generation, when the aristocracy put whole families into the House of Commons as a matter of course, and Burke boasted that the House of Lords was wholly, and the House of Commons was mainly, composed for the defence of hereditary property.

But the politics of the eighteenth century are not a mere scramble for place and power. An age which produced the two Pitts could not be called an age of mere avarice. An age which produced Burke and Fox and Grey could not be called an age of mere ambition. The politics of this little class are illuminated by the great and generous behaviour of individuals. If England was the only country where the ruling class made a stand against Napoleon, England was the only country where members of the ruling class were found to make a stand for the ideas of the Revolution. Perhaps the proudest boast that the English oligarchy can make is the boast that some of its members, nursed as they had been in a soft and feathered world of luxury and privilege, could look without dismay on what Burke called the strange, wild, nameless, enthusiastic thing established in the centre of Europe. The spectacle of Fox and Sheridan and Grey leading out their handful of Liberals night after night against the Treason and Sedition Bills, at a time when an avalanche of terror had overwhelmed the mind of England, when Pitt, Burke, and Dundas thought no malice too poisoned, Gillray and Rowlandson no deforming touch of the brush too brutal, when the upper classes thought they were going to lose their property, and the middle classes thought they were going to lose their religion, is one of the sublime spectacles of history. This quality of fearlessness in the defence of great causes is displayed in a fine succession of characters and incidents; Chatham, whose courage in facing his country's dangers was not greater than his courage in blaming his country's crimes; Burke, with his elaborate rage playing round the dazzling renown of a Rodney; Fox, whose voice sounds like thunder coming over the mountains, hurled at the whole race of conquerors; Holland, pleading almost alone for the abolition of capital punishment for stealing before a bench of bishops; a man so little given to revolutionary sympathies as Fitzwilliam, leaving his lord-lieutenancy rather than condone the massacre of Peterloo. If moral courage is the power of

combating and defying an enveloping atmosphere of prejudice, passion, and panic, a generation which was poor in most of the public virtues was, at least, conspicuously rich in one. Foreign policy, the treatment of Ireland, of India, of slaves, are beyond the scope of this book, but in glancing at the class whose treatment of the English poor has been the subject of our study, it is only just to record that in other regions of thought and conduct they bequeathed a great inheritance of moral and liberal ideas: a passion for justice between peoples, a sense for national freedom, a great body of principle by which to check, refine, and discipline the gross appetites of national ambition. Those ideas were the ideas of a minority, but they were expressed and defended with an eloquence and a power that have made the man important and a glorious part of English history. In all this development of liberal doctrine it is not fanciful to see the ennobling influence of the Greek writers on whom every eighteenth-century politician was bred and nourished.

Fox thought in the bad days of the war with the Revolution that his own age resembled the age of Cicero, and that Parliamentary government in England, undermined by the power of the Court, would disappear like liberty in republican Rome. There is a strange letter in which, condoling with Grey on his father's becoming a peer, he remarks that it matters the less because the House of Commons will soon cease to be of any importance. This prediction was falsified, and England never produced a Caesar. There is, however, a real analogy in the social history of the two periods. The English ruling class corresponds to the Roman senatorial order, both classes claiming office on the same ground of family title, a Cavendish being as inevitable as a Claudius, and an AEmilius as a Gower. The equites were the second rank of the Roman social aristocracy, as the manufacturers or bankers were of the English. A Roman eques could pass into the senatorial order by holding the quaestorship; an English manufacturer could pass into the governing class by buying an estate. The English aristocracy, like the Roman, looked a little doubtfully on new-comers, and even a Cicero or a Canning might complain of the freezing welcome of the old nobles; but it preferred to use rather than to exclude them.

In both societies the aristocracy regarded the poor in much the same spirit, as a problem of discipline and order, and passed on to posterity the same vague suggestion of squalor and turbulence. Thus it comes that most people who think of the poor in the Roman Republic think only of the great corn largesses; and most people who think of the poor in eighteenth-century England think only of the great system of relief from the rates. Mr. Warde Fowler has shown how hard it is to find in the Roman writers any records of the poor. So it is with the records of eighteenth-century England. In both societies the obscurity which surrounded the poor in life has settled on their wrongs in history. For one person who knows anything about so immense an event as the disappearance of the old English village society, there are a hundred who know everything about the fashionable scenes of high politics and high play, that formed the exciting world of the upper classes. The silence that shrouds these village revolutions was not quite unbroken, but the cry that disturbed it is like a noise that break for a moment on the night, and then dies away, only serving to make the stillness deeper and more solemn. The *Deserted Village* is known wherever the English language is spoken, but Goldsmith's critics have been apt to treat it, as Dr. Johnson treated it, as a beautiful piece of irrelevant pathos, and his picture of what was happening in England has been admired as a picture of what was happening in his discolouring dreams. Macaulay connected that picture with reality in his ingenious theory, that England provided the village of the happy and smiling opening, and Ireland the village of the sombre and tragical end. One enclosure has been described in literature, and described by a victim, John Clare, the Northamptonshire peasant, who drifted into a madhouse through a life of want and trouble. Those who recall the discussions of the time, and the assumption of the upper classes that the only question that concerned the poor was the question whether enclosure increased employment, will be struck by the genuine emotion with which Clare dwells on the natural beauties of the village of his childhood, and his attachment to his home and its memories. But Clare's day was brief and he has few

readers.(3*) In art the most undistinguished features of the most undistinguished members of the aristocracy dwell in the glowing colours of a Reynolds; the poor have no heirlooms, and there was no Millet to preserve the sorrow and despair of the homeless and dispossessed. So comfortably have the rich soothed to sleep the sensibilities of history. These debonair lords who smile at us from the family galleries do not grudge us our knowledge of the escapades at Brooks's or at White's in which they sowed their wild oats, but we fancy they are grateful for the poppy seeds of oblivion that have been scattered over the secrets of their estates. Happy the race that can so engage the world with its follies that it can secure repose for its crimes.

De Quincey has compared the blotting out of a colony of Alexander's in the remote and unknown confines of civilisation, to the disappearance of one of those starry bodies which, fixed in longitude and latitude for generations, are one night observed to be missing by some wandering telescope. 'The agonies of a perishing world have been going on, but all is bright and silent in the heavenly host.' So is it with the agonies of the poor. Wilberforce, in the midst of the scenes described in this volume, could declare, 'What blessings do we enjoy in this happy country; I am reading ancient history, and the pictures it exhibits of the vices and the miseries of men fill me with mixed emotions of indignation, horror and gratitude.' Amid the great distress that followed Waterloo and peace, it was a commonplace of statesmen like Castlereagh and Canning that England was the only happy country in the world, and that so long as the monopoly of their little class was left untouched, her happiness would survive. That class has left bright and ample records of its life in literature, in art, in political traditions, in the display of great orations and debates, in memories of brilliant conversation and sparkling wit; it has left dim and meagre records of the disinherited peasants that are the shadow of its wealth; of the exiled labourers that are the shadow of its pleasures; of the villages sinking in poverty and crime and shame that are the shadow of its power and its pride.

NOTES:

1. See a remarkable letter from Lord Dudley. 'He has already been enough on the Continent for any reasonable and either of curiosity or instruction, and his availing himself so immediately of this opportunity to go to a foreign country again looks a little too much like distaste for his own.' -- Letters to Ivy from the first Earl of Dudley, October 1808.
2. See on this subject a very interesting article by Mr. L. March Phillippe in the *Contemporary Review*, August 1911.
3. Helpstone was enclosed by an Act of 1809. Clare was then sixteen years old. His association with the old village life had been intimate, for he had tended geese and sheep on the common, and he had learnt the old country songs from the last village cowherd. His poem on Helpstone was published in 1820.