The troubled century and a half between the Glorious ("Bloodless") Revolution of 1688 and the First Reform Bill of 1832 may be called England’s Age of Revolution. Though the nation escaped a bloody political upheaval at the beginning of the era and another near its end, society was undergoing changes of great magnitude. The English Bill of Rights of 1689 drastically limited the monarch’s role in government. Queen Anne (1702-14) was the last English ruler to veto an act of Parliament. During the reign of her successor, George I, who spoke only German, the conduct of the realm fell almost totally into the hands of the prime minister. Even more striking than the political changes were the economic and social. From about 1780 on, cottage industries such as spinning and weaving were being taken over by factories in large cities. During the course of this “industrial revolution,” the economy changed from agricultural to industrial, and the population began to shift to the cities.

Least obvious but most important of all was a revolution within the mind. Whereas before 1688 England’s leading thinkers were concerned chiefly with defining duties—to a loving God and to the authorities He had wisely established—after 1688 serious thinkers were mainly engaged in declaring rights. This revolution was not so much political as moral and spiritual. It amounted to a rejection of the restraints of Christian belief and practice.

The rebellion was in two stages. First, the age enthroned reason as the source of all wisdom and the test of all value. Then, frustrated by the limitations of reason, it enshrined the heart. When man severs his ties with the One by whom “all things consist” (Col. 1:17), he finds himself at war with himself as well as with his Creator. Literature of the neoclassical period tends to exalt reason against divine revelation. Literature of the romantic period tends to exalt the imagination and feelings against reason and against God. In the literature of both periods we can trace the beginnings of modern secular humanism, the religion of man.
The story of the Age of Revolution fortunately does not end here. There arose in response to the degeneracy of the age a countermovement of evangelical belief and fervor. Nothing since the Norman Conquest of 1066 has changed England so decisively as the work of the Wesley brothers, John and Charles. Their propagation of the gospel by sermon and song laid a moral foundation for the nation's expansion in the coming years.
1688-1789

After the upheavals of the midcentury, it was inevitable that intellectual leaders should favor moderation and restraint and that political leaders should look suspiciously upon religious enthusiasm as disruptive of a well-ordered society. The new mood favored the rule of reason in all areas of life—an attitude known as rationalism. Rationalism prevailed not only in England but also in continental Europe, where it took on a virulent antireligious tone.

The era of rationalism, spanning the late seventeenth century and most of the eighteenth, has been called the Enlightenment. In literature and the other arts it is known as the period of Neoclassicism. Educated people saw their society as having emerged from long centuries of superstition and crudity into the clear light of reason. Poets such as John Dryden (1631-1700) and Alexander Pope (1688-1744) looked to the writers of the time of Augustus (Roman emperor from 27 B.C. to A.D. 14) for inspiration and models of style. It was in keeping with the dawning age for the court to welcome Charles II to his new dominions as the English Augustus and for its leading writers to style themselves Augustans.

POLITICAL EVENTS

The concern for reasonableness and moderation might seem to have produced an era of peace. On the contrary, England from 1688 to 1785 was seldom free from the threat, or actuality, of war. Conflicts with European nations were costly and at times disappointing. English complacency was shattered and prestige tell after embarrassing reversals in the war with the American colonies (1775-83) took a sizable chunk out of her empire. Nevertheless, the nation remained strongly positioned to defend and expand its dominions in the coming years.

Internally, England survived uprisings or invasions in 1708, 1715, and 1719 in favor of the “Old Pretender” (James Edward Stuart, son of the deposed James II), and in 1745-46 in favor of the “Young Pretender” (Charles Edward Stuart, grandson of James II, known as “Bonnie Prince Charlie”). The last of these disturbances, an invasion from Scotland, was especially alarming, penetrating as far south as the Midlands. But an even more serious obstacle to domestic peace was the continuing struggle between the Whigs and the Tories and between factions within the parties. The division was both economic (between Whig commercial and Tory agricultural interests) and social (between Whig democratic progressivism and Tory aristocratic traditionalism). These struggles, foreign and domestic, kept England in a state of unease, while prompting the greatest political oratory and satire of the nation’s history.

SOCIAL AND ECONOMIC CONDITIONS

In society as well as in government, the century and a half after the Glorious Revolution was a period of turbulent and often painful change. England was in transition from an agricultural to an industrial society; and, though all classes were eventually to benefit from the higher standard of living, the burden of adjustment rested primarily on the common man.
English society of this period divides broadly into the agricultural and commercial-professional segments. In 1688 probably about five-sixths of the population gained their livelihood from the soil. Among these we may distinguish the landed and the landless. The landed included the great nobles—those with long-established titles and extensive estates—and the gentry or lesser aristocracy, whose numbers had been swelled by wealthy land buyers from the commercial and professional classes. The landless included the tenant farmers and agricultural laborers. The commercial and professional segment included on the highest level the great merchants and governmental officers, many of whom also owned estates, and on a lower level the small businessmen, artisans, legal solicitors, and physicians. Lowest of all in this group were the petty wage earners and servants in the cities.

Most of the commercial power was concentrated in London, a city with almost two-thirds of a million inhabitants (about one-tenth of the entire population). London was not seriously challenged in industrial activity until the end of the eighteenth century, when the great manufacturing centers of the Midlands were pulsating with steam-powered machinery, blackening the land for miles with smoke and soot. Elsewhere the landscape was pleasantly dotted with small towns and villages and the estates of the nobles or gentry. London, then as today, was the legal and commercial center of the realm.

This somewhat flexible class structure was reflected in Parliament, which met in the London suburb of Westminster. Only the well-to-do were considered safe participants in representative government, for only they, presumably, had an interest in preserving society as it was. Of the landholders, the great nobles occupied the House of Lords, whereas the gentry controlled the House of Commons. The commercial and professional classes were also strongly represented in the House of Commons, which because of its increasing wealth and its power over taxation had become dominant over both the upper house and the king. Membership in the upper
house depended upon birth; membership in the lower house, upon ability, property ownership, and, frequently, political connections. The rise of the House of Commons to virtual sovereignty in the second half of the eighteenth century was assisted by two striking economic revolutions.

The industrial revolution grew out of certain practical conditions and an advancing technology. By 1763 England ruled the seas. Her expanding commercial empire was crowding out the French, Dutch, and Spanish from valuable markets and sources of raw materials. At home, trade monopolies were breaking up, increasing competition. Workshops sprang up, forerunners of the factories that were to be pouring out goods in staggering quantities by the end of the century. The construction of improved highways in the 1760s and 1770s made possible rapid overland transportation of products. Soon relays of horses were drawing coaches carrying mail, passengers, and heavier cargo across England at a thundering pace unimagined before.

These conditions set the scene for a veritable explosion of industrial productivity, but they would not have produced expansion on so large and immediate a scale without certain key inventions. James Watt's invention of the steam engine (patented 1769), along with the automation of spinning by James Hargreaves (1764), Richard Arkwright (1768), and Samuel Crompton (1779) and of weaving by Edmund Cartwright (1786), revolutionized textile manufacture. Despite vehement and even violent protests from hand spinners and weavers, textile production shifted from the home to the factory.

The processing of wool and flax into cloth, historically England's major industry, was related to another economic development. This second economic revolution, in agriculture, enabled the advance of industry. From 1760 on, Parliament permitted millions of acres of public land to pass into private ownership, forcing small farmers and herdsmen from rural England. Owners of large estates displaced tenant farmers in order to take advantage of new methods for growing and harvesting crops. The result was greater productivity but also the disappearance of small farms and sheepfolds. The displaced rural folk streamed to the cities where they provided a work force for the growing industries. Massed in drab, crowded tenements, they formed a new class of industrial wage earners, exploitable by both mill owners and labor agitators. England grew rich but also ripe for revolution.

**RELIGION**

Within fifty years of the Glorious Revolution, evangelical faith had burst so low that when John Wesley began to preach the gospel it seemed like a new truth. In the Anglican church, rationalism was taking hold and orthodoxy was deadening into traditionalism. Outside the church, Nonconformity was losing its fervency. Sermons were likely to be bland ethical admonition; services, ritual. Theology tended to stress the common ground of all religions.

Certain features of Anglicanism were congenial to the slackening of evangelical faith. Anglican clergy generally assumed a regenerated congregation became infant baptism and did not preach the need of salvation as a personal, instantaneous experience. The Anglican service manual (Book of Common Prayer) contains
gospel but also a view of the ordinances of baptism and the Lord's Supper as sacraments, channeling grace to the participant. This view allows the ordinances to be regarded as contributing to salvation. In Anglican services the gospel, though grandly expressed, was easily overlaid by sacramentalism and ritual.

Rationalists who rejected the authority of the Bible accepted the guidance of reason. Among them were the theologians known as latitudinarians because they believed in doctrinal freedom and breadth. They favored natural theology (concerned with truths about God evident to the reason) over revealed theology (concerned with truths about God set forth in the Bible) and minimized the supernatural.

Eighteenth-century deists, who succeeded the rationalists, went a step further, denying all teachings of revealed theology that could not be proved from natural theology. They therefore rejected the deity of Christ, His atoning death and bodily resurrection, and the miracles of Scripture. As a result, deistic belief, like latitudinarian theology, can be summed up in a very few propositions: (1) the existence of a Creator, or "First Cause," who, having brought the universe into being, left it to operate by its own laws; (2) the potential goodness of man, whose faults may be corrected by education and rational persuasion; (3) the prospect of an afterlife in which virtue will be rewarded and vice punished. Deism prevailed throughout the century among intellectuals, including many of the more influential clergy. Whether accepted or not, it gave an intellectual tone to formal religion and encouraged rational piety rather than religious earnestness. Such religion had little effect upon upper-class morality and left the masses little better than barbarians.

On to this scene of religious apostasy and moral degeneracy burst the fiery preaching of John Wesley (1703-1791) and George Whitefield (1714-70). They did not intend to found a new denomination or sect. Instead they sought a spiritual awakening within the Anglican church. It would begin with the salvation of the unconverted and continue with their sanctification by strict "methodic" discipline.
The influence of Wesleyanism upon England is incalculable. It laid a spiritual foundation for the strict middle-class morality of the Victorian period, so often and so wrongly despised. It blunted the ill effects of the industrial revolution. In teaching other worldly values and compassion for the downtrodden, it helped commoners be content with their lot and inspired the upper classes to help them improve it. From the evangelical conscience came humanitarian reforms that relieved the distress of the industrial wage earners. Certainly, it delayed for a hundred years the spiritual bankruptcy of England. By keeping vital faith alive on all levels of society, it helped retard the spread of Darwinism in the nineteenth century.

CULTURE

The dominant culture of an age has at its core a set of deeply rooted beliefs. These beliefs may arise from the accumulated wisdom of society or from the emotional fervor of those who wish to change society. In either case, they amount to a kind of religious faith. The truth of these beliefs and the firmness with which they are held largely determine the soundness of society. Central among these beliefs is a concept of man, of the world in which he lives, and of what is necessary to his happiness. The fundamental belief of the neoclassical period is that man is a potentially reasonable being who lives in a logically ordered universe and whose happiness consists in his living reasonably with himself and with his fellow beings. Human reason, so regarded, is the power to draw accurate conclusions from observation. Its source is divine; and therefore, it was thought, to be ruled by reason is to be ruled by God.

Chief among the works of reason are the institutions of society, and therefore man in society is man at his best. The reasonable man lives prudently among his fellows and subjects his desires to the overriding interests of society. He cheerfully submits to the laws and customs that regulate his behavior in the human community, recognizing the importance of obedience and rank. Like all good citizens he upholds society by observing its rules and proprieties and by rejecting disruptive extremes. He cultivates human relationships. He believes that man lives most happily and worthily in contact with others and therefore prefers an urban to a rural environment. In the city he enjoys intellectual conversation and the bustle of human life. London, from the neoclassical viewpoint, summed up the happy existence for man. "When a man is tired of London," said Samuel Johnson, "he is tired of life."

The neoclassical idea of man and the world was neither new nor entirely at odds with the Christian world view that preceded it. The Bible places man at the center of the created order and permits (indeed commands) his dominion over the earth (Gen. 1:28). Man is responsible to rule both himself and the earth in accordance with the moral principles taught in Scripture and understood by his reason. These doctrines—the orderliness of creation and the importance of rational control—have been held by Christians of all times as well as by neoclassical deists. The difference is that, to the Christian, beyond human reason is divine wisdom, above scientific observation is divine revelation, and supporting the rule of reason in the individual or society is divine grace. The Christian deity is a God personally in touch with and constantly intervening in behalf of His creation flawed by sin. He is not the Clock
Language

When the neoclassical mind contemplated the English language, it saw a logical, or potentially logical, system similar to the universe of eighteenth-century physics. This system, unsurprisingly, closely resembled the familiar one of classical Latin grammar as it was taught in the better schools. It seemed wise to refine and stabilize language usage according to logical rules deduced from this system. The result was a series of English grammars, increasingly prescriptive, beginning in 1711 and climaxing with the work of Lindley Murray in 1795. These grammars systematized English language usage according to the rules of logic and Latin, defining an educated standard. To them we owe most of our ideas about grammatical correctness today.

The same concern for rational refinement of language encouraged the production of dictionaries. Samuel Johnson’s two-volume Dictionary of the English Language, published in 1755, surpassed its predecessors in the precision and thoroughness of its definitions and in its use of illustrative quotations. Like them, it helped to establish a standard of educated usage in vocabulary and spelling.

From the eighteenth century also came most of the features that distinguish modern British spoken English from American. The pronunciation of British ə like American o in words like half and bath and the dropping of r after vowels in such words as lord (pronounced laud) and jar (pronounced jaw) are relatively recent developments. American practice in these instances represents the older pronunciation. It is interesting that social status is conferred in British speech primarily by pronunciation but in American speech by observance of grammatical rules.

Learning and Thought

Scientific advances in the eighteenth century encouraged the idea that progress is inevitable. Henry Cavendish (1731-1810) broke down water into hydrogen and oxygen. Joseph Priestley (1733-1804) isolated oxygen. Both made important discoveries in electricity. Towering above all was the work of the mathematician-scientist Isaac Newton (1642-1727). Newton’s Principia, published in 1687, gave the age a logically self-consistent idea of the universe.

The Newtonian view of the world was reinforced by the philosophy of John Locke (1632-1704), whose Essay on Human Understanding (1690) argues that human beings know only what they see, hear, feel, taste, or smell and what they can conclude from reflecting on their sensory experience. This view, known in philosophy as empiricism, dominated eighteenth-century thought in England and continental Europe. It leaves no room for the knowledge of God conveyed through the Scriptures or by the Holy Spirit acting upon the conscience. In political thought Locke was equally influential. His Two Treatises of Government (1690) defended the Glorious Revolution on the twin bases of natural rights (the freedoms man by nature is entitled to) and government by consent of the people. Locke’s political doctrines supported the American and French revolutionary efforts in 1776 and 1789.
The decades of the 1770s and 1780s saw the full fruits of eighteenth-century rationalism in the appearance of major works by the philosopher David Hume (1711-76), the economist Adam Smith (1723-90), the historian Edward Gibbon (1737-94), and the political scientist Jeremy Bentham (1748-1832). Their skeptical views strongly influenced a new generation of thinkers and helped form the intellectual climate of the next century.

Literature

In literature as in language the neoclassical period was an era of rule making. The artistic process, critics believed, should begin with direct observation of particulars and end with the forming of general principles and classifications of things. Poetry must illuminate permanent, unvarying truths rather than concern itself with incidental details. In literary criticism, as in other studies, the conclusions drawn from observation were regarded as permanently valid rules and became standards of correctness. Poetry was classified into ranked species descending from the lofty epic to the lowly epigram. These species or types, called genres, were considered unchanging, each with its particular governing principles but all subject to the general obligations of art: to teach and to delight.

The delightful teaching undertaken by the poet consisted in putting general truths into pleasing, memorable form. To neoclassical taste, art that pleases exhibits regularity, exactness, symmetry, neatness, and surface polish. For this reason, perfection in a lesser genre is preferable to imperfection in a greater. Accordingly neoclassical poets favored the lesser genres, mostly avoiding the more demanding genres of tragedy and epic. In poetry as elsewhere, reason, the "emancipator," produced restriction rather than freedom.

As might be expected in an age concerned with manners, the dominant literary mode was satire. The neoclassical satirists Dryden, Pope, and Swift adapted the various genres so as to attack social abuses with ridicule. Such writing was by no means emotionless, despite the rational ideals professed by the authors. Comedies, odes, epigrams, and verse epistles seethed with the passions of the age.

The ideal of a tidy life went hand in hand with that of a tidy poetry. Accordingly, the dominant verse form was the heroic couplet, a pair of rhymed lines in iambic pentameter. A small bound unit, the heroic couplet might seem to have reduced the composing of poetry to something like the bricklayer's art. But the simplicity of this verse form is only apparent. Intricately structured for symmetry and variety, the couplet formed a delicate system within the larger system of the poem.

Neoclassical refinement is not the whole story of literature from 1688 to 1789. A rising middle class created a new readership, eager for instruction. The desire for instruction was met by a new profession, journalism. It developed from the political propaganda of the English Civil War and Commonwealth period, typically expressed in the format of an anonymous or pseudonymous pamphlet. After 1660, the periodical, a kind of serial pamphlet, served the same purpose for political factions. Both parties, Whig and Tory, had their own periodicals and competed for the ablest writers.

Journalism influenced prose style toward simplicity and directness. It also helped shape the novel, an emerging genre, in the direction of realism and moralism. From
fictional sketches in early eighteenth-century periodicals came techniques of characterization and narration used by Henry Fielding (1707-54) and Samuel Richardson (1689-1761). A journalist, Daniel Defoe (c. 1660-1731), wrote what are often regarded as the first true novels in English. In its mode of description the novel departed from neoclassical abstraction, emphasizing details for the sake of realism. But it shared with neoclassicism a concern to impress upon the reader a moral point.

After the death of Pope (1744), neoclassicism was steadily undermined by forces in society it had dominated before. Free thinkers turned against some of the very premises of rationalism that had been the foundation of their thinking: a belief in a transcendent order of things based on human reason. Democratic radicals rejected the social status quo. Anarchists regarded civilization as a corrupting rather than fulfilling condition of human life and city life as oppressive. Literary taste swung from general feeling and perception to personal emotional experience. This preference gave rise to sentimental drama and fiction and to a poetry of melancholy reflection. Literary taste, like political, social, and religious feeling, was in transition.

But the leading writers, most notably Samuel Johnson and his circle, remained staunchly conservative, boldly challenging what they believed to be in conflict with reason and the happiness of man. Men of stout conviction, they stood apart from their times and produced works of lasting interest and value.