1973

The French Influence on Eighteenth-Century English Literature

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THE FRENCH INFLUENCE ON EIGHTEENTH - CENTURY
ENGLISH LITERATURE

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Senior Thesis
Honors Program

Approved:
THE FRENCH INFLUENCE ON EIGHTEENTH-CENTURY ENGLISH LITERATURE

The development of English literature in the eighteenth century was strongly influenced by France and French writers. Lately there has been an attempt to belittle the French influences. It is true that in the past the Gallic influence has been exaggerated, but it really cannot be overlooked.

Historically it is true to treat England and France as one country in respect to their literary activity between the middle of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. Roughly, there were about 100 years, between the execution of Charles I in 1649 and the execution of Louis XIV in 1793, during which there was a solid block of Franco-British or Anglo-French literary achievement. The Civil War in England gave the English political exiles in Paris a chance to acquire French taste, but this Entente Littéraire was ended when the French Revolution through Trafalgar and Waterloo caused a revulsion from the French example.¹

The critical tradition in England was influenced greatly by French scholars beginning in the middle of the seventeenth century. The main catalyst for bringing English criticism out of the Renaissance culture was undoubtedly increasing contacts with France, that country which

under Louis XIV and Richelieu had won unchallenged prestige as the first power of Europe and the center of literary and social arts of the continent. Many of these contacts were of a personal kind. French influence, for example, had begun soon after the marriage of Charles I with Henrietta Maria of France in 1625 who had come to England with an entourage of courtiers and wits. After this English life was permeated with French custom on manners, morals, fashions, and dress: and in the literary sphere a like transformation became visible.²

Never before in England's history, before the French court's arrival, had the production of literature and interest in books been more widely diffused among the upper and educated classes in the country, and it was to France with its array of geniuses that all looked for guidance. The England of the common people at the end of the seventeenth century was much the same as it had been under James I or Charles I. But the England of the educated, the governing, and the literate classes was changing, chiefly by reason of the closer contact with French thought and the experience of French manners.³

The threads of French taste were woven into English literature even before the beginning of the eighteenth century. The English translators were busy all the time; the group of Englishmen in Paris with Queen Henrietta Maria during the period of the Civil War--John Evelyn, Sir William D'avenant, Sir John Denham--brought home their harvest about 1650. John Dryden, too, though he left escapes and safety valves for


the free British hate of fetters, was deeply submissive to French influences and built much in criticism on Chapelain, Boileau, and Corneille. A potent force in the English theatre of the period was Molière. The tone of the plays, the methods of their conduct, and the conception of the characters declare the dominant influences of France.\(^4\)

During the last quarter of the seventeenth century, English criticism entered on a new phase notable for marked changes, as a result of which more fundamental questions were asked in criticism. This extension of interests was due primarily to French activities especially the crystallization of French neoclassicism.

In 1674 Boileau's *Art Poétique* and Rapin's *Réflexions sur la Poétique* appeared. The effects were instantaneous and widespread in England, and as a result a new field of literary inquiry was opened up, a new direction was given to critical studies as well as to standards of literary judgment.\(^5\)

Frequent acknowledgments are made to the French sources in England's attempts at criticism made in the last two decades of the seventeenth century. The first fruits of this new French influence were seen when Thomas Rymer translated Rapin's *Réflexions* into English within one year of its publication in France. By this translation, the first clear exposition of the neoclassical theory was presented to English readers. Another effective exposition of that theory came from the influence of Boileau's *Art Poétique* which inspired translations and adaptations of the work, thus giving rise to a new form of critical treatise in verse.

\(^4\) Magnus, op. cit., p. 296.

\(^5\) Atkins, op. cit., p. 79.
An attempt was made in 1682 by the Earl of Mulgrave in his *Essay Upon Poetry* to commend Boileau's works to English readers. His poem, closely modeled on Boileau's, treats the subject with special reference to English conditions and needs rather than those of the French as Boileau had done.

Yet another of these treatises in verse, dealing however not with the neoclassical doctrine but with the much-troubled-over doctrine of translation came from the Earl of Roscommon. His *Essay on Translated Verse* published in 1684 reflects the French influence. Previous to this the English had sometimes used the method of free translation. Roscommon called attention to some of the finer points in free translation. And he also offered certain warnings: that in works admired in ancient Rome and others written in strictly classical language "may neither suit our genius nor our clime;"6 and in one instance he warns his readers against what he regarded as Homer's use of false decorum.7 Finally, because he thought that the rules of rhyme had tended to cramp the style of translators, he boldly suggested that the blank verse of Milton be adopted.8

Such were the main channels along which French influences affected critical discussion in England with the special influences of Boileau and Rapin. Yet, however, despite the efforts of Rymer and Mulgrave, French theories were only partially accepted while definite objections by Dryden and Temple came out into the open.

Before 1700 the French influence had really been partial, intermittent, and tentative; after 1700 the teachings of Rapin, Boileau, and Le Bossu became even more influential. A more mature acquaintance with

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6 Ibid., p. 39.  
7 Ibid., p. 70.  
8 Ibid., p. 90.
the works of French critics now brought about a general acceptance of their teachings, and neoclassicism was ostensibly recognized as the orthodox creed.

At the end of the seventeenth century, John Dryden showed brilliance in his literary works. His greatness resides both in resistance and attainment of French ideals. He was convinced that what Englishmen had learned in the Salons and Académie of Paris was full of good counsel for English letters. But he was equally convinced that imitation should be checked by values of a writer's own native soil. He wrote, "The genius of our countrymen in general being rather to improve an invention than to invent themselves." His own originality was essentially an originality of treatment. (Sir A. W. Ward, Cambridge History of English Literature, Vol. VII, p. 57.) Dryden was thoroughly English and simultaneously European. He lived in the age when "the stamp of a Louis," as he himself wrote, "is not much inferior to the medal of an Augustus Caesar."9 Thus he sought loyally to transfer that idea to the literature of his own country. He could even be described as being jealous of France. He wrote in Astraea Redux, "Heaven that seemed regardless of our fate, For France and Spain did miracles create."10

Dryden's underlying objections to neoclassicism persisted through all this general acceptance of French neoclassicism and eventually gained followers. From the first the doctrines were not being passively accepted; most critics treated the stringent rules of the theory selectively. Increasing value was attached to more liberal theories, submitted by critics such as Saint-Evremond, Bonhours, and La Bruyere. These

9Hausk, op. cit., p. 223.
10Ibid., p. 225.
doctrines were now applied to practical uses and were accompanied by some independent thinking as well. Critical efforts moved toward independence from an adopted creed or the discussion of specific questions and toward inquiring into the aims and methods of criticism in general. The neoclassical theory was the recipient of much of the criticism of the remaining decades of the eighteenth century. But the English critics of the eighteenth century restorations did take their cues from the French. The exact, but cold, Boileau said that what the English had received through the French influence was a great deal of good sense.\(^{11}\)

The real progress and lasting significance in literary criticism that came from France to England in the eighteenth century was not the growth and subsequent dissolution of neoclassicism, but rather the more enlightened conception of literary criticism formed in that process. Neoclassicism suggested other theories, and it varied judicial methods and acute judgments—elements which effectively prepared the way for the critical achievements of the nineteenth century.\(^{12}\)

Eighteenth Century Europe's literature traded motif and thought among all the countries. The more numerous these interchanges became, the greater grew the need for some kind of order, a hierarchy of values with some kind of order and authority at the top of all. For a while at least this lofty power was France. Because she possessed political power without which literature feels she is in the air; because she had the advantage of numbers and a teeming population; because she had a long cultural tradition at the back of her; and finally because she had just


\(^{12}\) Atkins, op. cit., p. 356.
emerged from the age of Louis XIV with its scores of geniuses, she it was who from the seventeenth century onward had offered herself as a model. And, instead of her light growing dim, as usually happens after the attentions had set in, she took on a new lustre. Corneille and Racine had not given away all they had when other stars appeared. The upward trend went on, and the writers who now brought honor to her name also had the quality for exciting emulation. Thus France still retained the literary supremacy which had come to her as a heritage, and she vindicated her position by continuing her substantial contributions. In their anxiety to catch up to her, the other European nations first took her for a guide. They sought to arrive at her level in classical forms wherein she excelled and still continued to excel, and to do that they aimed at thinking as she did. These were the days when the French language of Versailles was spoken also on the banks of the Thames, the days when many authors, discarding their native tongues, adapted the French that allowed them to be read and understood in every European land.

An English literary historian who was also the Bishop of Coventry, Richard Hurd, wrote Letters on Chivalry and Romance in the middle of the eighteenth century. These letters again emphasize the historical French influence in English literature and in fact trace the influence back far prior to the eighteenth century. The purpose of Hurd's letters was to prove the pre-eminence of the Gothic manners and fiction above the classics. He says, "The greatest geniuses of our own and foreign countries such as Ariosto and Tasso in Italy and Spenser and Milton in England, were

seduced by the barbarities of Gothic romances."\textsuperscript{14} He also asks if there may not be something in the Gothic literature particularly suited to the views of geniuses. He draws a remarkable correspondence between the manners of the old heroic times and the chivalry of Gaul's knights. This critic is even daring enough to give Gothic manners the preference over the heroic in English literature.

Hurd also posits another explanation for the English romances choosing to follow the Goths over the classic pagans is the subject matter. "For the solemn fancies of witchcraft and incantation, the horrors of the Gothic were above measure striking and terrible. One would not even compare Canidia of Horace with the witches in Macbeth."\textsuperscript{15} The actions of the modern bards were not only more gallant, but also more sublime, more terrible, more alarming than those of classic fables. In any work one will find that the manners painted and the superstitions are the more poetical for being Gothic.\textsuperscript{16}

During the classical period of the eighteenth century in English literature, the term "Gothic" was synonymous with "barbarous" and "lawless." Addison, a widely read English critic of this period, criticized the poets of his day as being extremely Gothic. In his Spectator paper \#62 he says of the current English poets, "I look upon these writers as Goths in poetry, who like those in architecture, not being able to come up with the beautiful simplicity of the old Greeks and Romans, have endeavored to supply its place with all the extravagances of an irregular fancy." In his following paper (\#63) discussing false wit he says, "In a very dark groove, a monstrous fabric built

\textsuperscript{14}Beirs, op. cit., p. 221 \textsuperscript{15}Ibid., p. 223.

\textsuperscript{16}Ibid., p. 224.
after the Gothic manner and covered with innumerable devices in that barbarous kind of sculpture." In his essay on taste (1740) Addison again belittles the Gothic in saying, "I have endeavored in several of my speculations to banish this Gothic poor taste which has taken possession among us." Addison also commented on the French critics when he said in Spectator #62:

Bonhours, whom I look upon to be the most penetrating of all the French Critics, has taken pains to shew, That it is impossible for any Thought to be beautiful which is not just, and has not its Foundation in the Nature of things: That the basis of all Wit is Truth: and that no Thought can be valuable, of which good Sense is not the Ground-work.17

It is interesting that Addison would describe Gothic interest as poor taste while praising the contemporary French critics for their work. Even though his reaction to the ancient Gothic influence on English literature was negative, at least it does show that he did see enough of it remaining in his country's literature to react to it.

English literature of this period was also influenced on its trek to modernity by the French philosophers. They worked to open and sometimes shock the minds of the English philosophers and writers. What is modern in the philosophy of eighteenth century England is a preoccupation, present in familiar form with Rousseau, with the problem of the reconciliation of naturalness and urbanity. Urbanity in this sense is the property of civilized men living in cities which have parks, like the eighteenth century estates in London.

Jean-Jacques Rousseau is one writer whose life and work lie completely within the eighteenth century. He altered the face of Europe's literature and political thought. He was a natural-landscape gardener, preferring

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17 Ibid., p. 226
nature, unadorned to the twisted nature imposed by man. He was comparable to Petrarch as a herald of a new way of life. His ideas met with fervent opposition in England. "Rousseau is a very bad man," said Samuel Johnson to famous English biographer James Boswell. 18 Boswell had just returned from France where he had studied with many of that country's leading writers; he did not concur with this opinion. But Johnson's comment was representative of his time. Burke's anti-revolution essay was also anti-Rousseau, in so far as Rousseau was an author of the ideas expressed in the Revolution. Burke thought that those ideas would be bad for England. Yet everything Rousseau desired has been achieved by Englishmen since his time: The Reform Act of 1832, the Abolition Act of 1834, and so on. The English scholars and statesmen of our day do not repeat Dr. Johnson's negative ideas. Rather they are full of praise for Rousseau's contributions. 19 Rousseau died in 1778, but his influence did not disappear. Out of his outspoken tradition came a long procession of great writers, eager and hopeful to build on his foundation.

The French philosophes did much to further the cause of humanism and change the course of literature in eighteenth century England. Humanism here denotes the vindication of what the humanities, as distinct from the sciences, all pursue in common: these pursuits include a direct knowledge and expression of the modes, qualities, values, and meanings that constitute man's inner experience. It was perhaps Pascal who first expressed concern for the worth and significance of man in a European continent overly concerned for developments of science. It fell to the lot of the Enlightenment, as the immediate heir of this science-humanism tension, to seek a compromise between the two. Science had come to be

perceived as the pursuit of the knowledge that all things have a nature and behavior essentially independent of subjective being, and that these natures ought to be explained in and of themselves.²⁰

Scientific truth had come to be set up to overwhelm human truth, which, unlike the former, attempts to assume a personal stance to the way things are and what things mean. Seen from this angle the French Enlightenment seems less an age of reason than of imbalance between reason and the heart. This is the imbalance that the philosophes sought to correct.

It is sometimes thought that the philosophes' goal of humanizing the sciences was just an instance of their optimism. But it seems that their work was more directed to the goal of balance in life. The philosophes would not accept the divergence of science and the humanities as a fait accompli.

The philosophes were possessed of a remarkable talent for synthesizing scientific discourse. They were against specializing in one or the other domain and were bold enough to search for a unified approach to man's situation in the world. This was the vision that was the basis of humanism in the eighteenth century. They hoped that what neither science nor humanism could achieve alone, namely the integration of man with the total reality, could be achieved by a humanization of science.²¹

At the middle of the eighteenth century, the French philosophes


were the talk of all Europe. They engaged the European mind with feelings of fear, apprehension, and enthusiasm. When Edmund Burke visited with them in Paris in 1772, he came away with the impression that they were an evil group dedicated to the uprooting of Christianity—a sect of literary men atheists in religion and libertines in morality. He was especially concerned with the threat of these ideas reaching England. On the other hand, David Hume visiting Paris ten years before Burke had found them, "men of the world, living in entire or almost entire harmony among themselves, and quite irreproachable in their morals." 22

The French in particular were overwhelmed with what was going on, for France was coming to be recognized throughout Europe as the directive force in intellectual thought. An Italian, the Marquis Caraccioli, Neopolitan Ambassador at the Court of Versailles, summed up Western Europe's attitude toward France in 1776, "Yesterday all was Roman, today, all is French." 23 It was her language and her social institutions that were France's chief assets as the intellectual fulcrum of Europe.

The character of the philosophe was not exclusive to Paris or even to France. One of the most representative examples of the type is found in the character of Jeremy Bentham, who devoted his whole life to recasting the laws and institutions of England in terms of individual and social happiness—ideas that he had gained from the French.

The French philosophers espoused a systematic anti-clerical program. They admired sentimental literature in which in impulse of benevolence is celebrated, but they could never defend charity. Because the philosophers themselves belonged to a social class that depended on the

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23 Ibid., p. 123.
perpetuation of the poor classes for its existence, they could hardly treat the condition as a fault of the social order. Two unclearly-defined views of why poverty existed were championed by the philosophers. One was their own analysis that society is corrupted by superstition and ignorance; that the canaille were addicted to this ignorance; and that after society is purified by reason and education there will be time enough to consider the plight of the poor. The other, older view was that old economic principle expressed by Voltaire when he said that it is the poor, laboring class that are the basis of any society.

If this analysis of the French philosophes' ideas is correct, we need not puzzle over the idea that Johnson gained from the French that the poor as a social class would last indefinitely, but that the poor people could be thought of only as suffering individuals rather than as a dull mass to sliced into dreary categories. Dr. Johnson, whether in public literary works or in private conversation, expressed only an imaginative sympathy for the poor.

It is natural then that Johnson in two of his finest works, one in prose and one in verse, should have expressed this attitude borrowed from the French of elevating himself above most of the men he had touched. The prose work is the attack on Jenyns' description of poverty. Jenyns discouraged education of the poor for fear of depriving them of that ignorance which acted as an opiate for their suffering. He was rebuked by Johnson with a caustic comment that poverty is something to be experienced, not just read about in books.

This age, an age without newspapers of modern calibre, had great need of men like Johnson and Voltaire. Even if some of their importance must be classified as journalistic, they were nevertheless two of the
effective men of letters of the century. They encouraged cross-currents of literary ideas between England and France.

Voltaire's *Candide* and Johnson's similar work *The History of Rasselas* were both published in 1759 in the midst of a great, decisive duel for the possession of the New World. France and England met in those books with the purpose of recreating a spirit or cause in the Old World. The New World for which the battles were being fought could not altogether silence the "new spirit" which looked on man's miseries and saw that they came from remediable causes. Dr. Pangloss, the tutor in *Candide*, had brought up the character Candide in the comfortable belief that "things cannot be otherwise than they are. They who say that everything is right do not express themselves correctly; they should say that everything is best." But Candide's life convinced him by shifting experiences, that this doctrine did not fit the harshness of reality. He knew that the practical philosopher should be content to work out his own life. Rasselas, listening to many counselors came to much the same conclusion. He retired from his voyages of curiosity to the "happy valley" from where he had begun his wanderings.

Sir Leslie Stephen aptly joins these two tales—the Frenchman's and the Englishman's, written while their countries were at war—as "common expressions of the powerful melancholy produced in strong intellects by the sorrows of the world." In France, where the pursuit of vainglory and Bourbonism were hastening men along the road to revolution, Voltaire's rebuke to the optimists was the more striking and brilliant of the two.

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25 Ibid., p. 203.
works. In England, where serious men by evidence of economists and researchers, were pondering the domestic aspects of war, Johnson's tale, if less conclusive, was even sadder in its common wisdom: Rasselas valiantly strove for happiness that wisdom alone could not find.

The French Revolution was the movement that democratized the thought and writing of the eighteenth century. The Revolution in the course of its events became universal in its extent; yet the experiment was most dramatic and open in France and the French writers had the talent to apply the revolutionary ideas most effectively to contemporary conditions. It was in France that constructively presented schemes for the reorganization of society were proposed and accepted enthusiastically. France was the playing field where old and new ideas met face to face.

The philosophers of the French Revolution no longer regarded man as a transcendent being: they saw him as a sociable animal capable of wonderful development. He was a physical composition of chemical substances just like all other bodies; he was part of nature and subject to all her limitations and laws.26

Coleridge was one English writer whose career was not lightly influenced by the French Revolution and its writers. Coleridge had two impulses for direction in his life: the one, to withdraw from life and bury himself in thought; the other, to play a man's part in world affairs. The French Revolution with its agitation was the strongest influence which lured him into the public world. It was therefore directly concerned with his poetic productivity.27

27 Ibid., p. 158.
In 1789 when the Bastille fell, Coleridge celebrated the event in an ode ending with the sympathetic response: "Glad Liberty has come." He identified with the French people's cause in his line, "Fallen is the oppressor, friendless, ghastly, low; And my heart aches, though Mercy struck the blow." By 1794 Coleridge was an avowed opponent of any English poet against France.

At the end of the eighteenth century, on the threshold of the Romantic era, we see more clearly influence on England's literature. Broadly speaking, in retrospect of the century, we see the constant cross-currents in the literature. The literary movement in England was dominantly social, and in France it was dominantly political.

Within the broad spectrum of the literature of the eighteenth century was the age of classical ideals admiring yet not always achieving simplicity and proportion, dignity and restraint. Perhaps it was the straight-jacket of classic form that provoked the maniac reactive moods of many of the creative men of this time. The men of the eighteenth century believed that one could learn to do almost anything by knowing the rules. The century specialized in activities that could most easily be reduced to rules and formality. It also evolved rules of personal conduct and manners as safeguards in society. Ever since Louis XIV proposed the exact degrees of hat-raising formality, the code had spread through Europe.

Thomas Hobbes summed up the general direction and English reaction to French influences in saying that the rules were not to inhibit voluntary reactions, "But to direct them not to hurt themselves with their own

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28 Ibid., p. 160
29 Ibid.
impetuous desires; as hedges are set, not to stop travellers, but to keep them in the way."30

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30 White, op. cit., p. 287.
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