

Gibbon had planned his *Decline and Fall*, and it was not until 1788 that the last three of its eight volumes made their appearance. By that time Pope had been dead for more than four-and-forty years. His influence was still felt, and continued to be felt; but it was an influence that was gradually expending itself, while, side by side with it, other influences were gathering strength and volume. Slowly and almost imperceptibly at first, men were beginning to discard the gradus-epithet and the formal phrase, to substitute blank verse for the machine-made heroic couplet, to exercise themselves tentatively in older and long-neglected stanzaic forms, to write Odes and Elegies and Sonnets, and above all to exhibit an enfranchised proclivity towards romantic expression and the imitation of nature. That this was done systematically or all at once is not to be advanced. But that it existed is manifest from the attitude of such of those conservatives in poetry as still clung to the practice and teaching of Pope. In Goldsmith's first book, the *Enquiry into the Present State of Polite Learning in Europe*, he is found condemning blank verse as a 'disagreeable instance of pedantry,' and as a measure which 'nothing but the greatest sublimity of subject can render pleasing.' In the Dedication to the *Traveller*, he returns to the charge. 'The art of poetry, he says, is in danger from 'the mistaken efforts of the learned to improve it.' 'What criticisms have we not heard of late in favour of blank verse, and Pindaric odes, choruses, anapests, and iambics, alliterative care and happy negligence?' Elsewhere he falls foul of the fashion set by Gray's *Elegy*, which he regarded as 'overloaded with epithet,' and seriously proposed to amend by 'leaving out an idle word in every line;' while of Pope he writes that he 'carried the language to its highest perfection; and those who have attempted still further to improve it, instead of ornament, have only caught finery.' These last lines were written in 1764, and it is clear that, in the opinion of the author of the *Traveller*, which appeared in the same year, a considerable change had already come over the spirit of English poetry since Pope's death.

The change, in reality, had begun before that date, with the solemn-paced blank verse—then second only to that of Milton—and with the accurate nature-painting of Thomson's *Seasons*, and his revival in the *Castle of Indolence* of the Spenserian Stanza. After Thomson comes

Young, who, beginning as a Popesque satirist, proceeded, long after middle age, as the unrhyming author of those sombre and declamatory *Night Thoughts* which at once reflected and dominated the brooding unrest of the age. To Thomson followed the 'oaten stop' and 'pastoral song' of Collins, whose *Persian Eclogues* and *Odes*, with their clear-toned and varied music brought new harmonies into English metre—harmonies which were farther elaborated by the patient art of Gray's undying *Elegy* and his wonderful *Pindaric Odes*. These—since the lesser names may be here omitted—were, save for the spasmodic outbreak of post-Popian satire in the hectoring couplets of Churchill's *Rosciad*, the dominant influences in English poetry until the date of Goldsmith's *Traveller*, which (like his later *Deserted Village*) was in the old manner, reflected through a medium more modern than its author imagined. Then, stirring men's minds with portentous cloud-form and shadowy suggestion, came the mysterious utterances of Macpherson's *Ossian*: to be succeeded by those *Reliques* of Percy, which opened to English poetry so much of unlessoned art and primitive simplicity; by the mediæval forgeries of Chatterton; and by the revelation, in Warton's *History*, of the neglected riches hidden in the barbaric and half-lit past which lay behind Dryden. All these things, with their searchings and unveilings, were 'prologue to the omen coming on,' and 'harbingers preceding still the fates' of that splendid advent, with the approaching century, of the new-risen spirit of Romance. There were still writers, the Whiteheads and Hayleys and Swards and Darwins, who clung feebly and ineffectually to the passing classic fashion; but of those who fill worthily the space between the epoch-making *Ossian* of 1763 and the still more epoch-making *Lyrical Ballads* of 1798, the greatest names are Cowper and Burns and Crabbe and Blake. The first two belonged to the Eighteenth Century as defined at the outset of this paper; the last two far outlived it. Owing nothing to each other, distinct in gifts and speech, and having only in common their poetical sincerity, it is sufficient to say of them here that Cowper and Crabbe, more or less, but in a manner coloured strongly by an altered environment, preserved the old tradition, while Blake and Burns are too original and individual to be discussed except with that larger treatment which they will hereafter receive in this volume. But those who wish to estimate