PART THREE

THE REST OF THE GALLERY
INTRODUCTION

Some thirty English writers were represented in painting often enough for their iconographical records to be a more or less significant part of their reputation as it developed through the years.* The following summaries of their “art histories,” arranged chronologically by author but without strict attention to their birth dates, will make increasingly apparent what has already been shown in connection with individual plays of Shakespeare: though a clear correlation can often be perceived between the popular and/or critical reputation and the artistic fortunes of a given work or author, equally often the two tendencies seem to have gone their independent ways.

The correlation is evident in the case of Thomson, whose long-sustained popularity with artists and public, as reflected in the number of paintings exhibited, diminished at the very time (after 1850) that that other measure of popularity, the number of new editions published, also declined. But in other instances, a similarly neat matching of the two curves was prevented by various factors—shifting taste in art (which did not necessarily involve a similar shift in literary opinion), the varying ways in which the content of a literary work was embraced or rejected by the public irrespective of its author’s critical status, and the discrepancy between a work’s standing with the reading public and its critical reputation. Gray’s popularity in art proceeded more or less independently of his fame as a poet, because the two subjects that were primarily derived from his poetry, those relating to the legend of the Welsh bard and the mood captured in the “Elegy in a Country Churchyard,” were staples in the painting of the time, and it just happened that Gray had written the most familiar expressions of them. The fact that most such paintings were linked with Gray did not necessarily mean that Gray himself was still widely read.

The comparative history of Sterne’s popular and critical reputation and his appearance in Victorian art represents another kind of discrepancy. Although his literary stock remained fairly high in the wake of the Romantic critics’ enthusiasm for him, the spreading nervousness about his “indecency” combined with revelations of his untidy private life to reduce his readership. Thus his acceptability in art theoretically was contingent on at least two opposing forces. The situation was complicated by the fact that Sterne’s two books, Tristram Shandy and A Sentimental Journey, had quite different qualities that in the Victorians’ estimate made one unacceptable and the other welcome. Their respective fortunes in art clearly reflect those differences.

Similar disjunctions can be noticed in the exhibition records of Crabbe, Moore, and four of the five major Romantic poets. (The sixth, Blake, was almost never represented, for two obvious reasons—he was his own illustrator, his poems being securely locked into his engravings, and they were in any event virtually unknown to the public.) The popularity and critical standing each volume achieved during, or shortly after, the poet’s lifetime seems to have had little if anything to do with its use, or neglect, by artists. Byron, incomparably the most popular of the Romantics, is the exception. Subjects from his poems were painted almost as soon as the poems were issued, and—most important—once he was established as a

*For additional references to the authors represented in this part, as well as to those who are not, see the Index.
source of pictures, his popularity in art proceeded independently of his subsequent literary reputation. When the reaction set in, in the 1830s, the production of pictures was unaffected.

Tennyson approached his first popularity as a source of art at the same time that his critical stature was being established, in the 1840s. In the next decade, reflecting the great success of *In Memoriam* (1850), more and more paintings from his earlier poems were exhibited. His critical reputation began to wane in the late 1860s, but he continued to be popular with artists, who knew very well what the wide public, who remained loyal to the laureate, wanted.

Several isolated episodes in the history of literary pictures involve poets who cannot, by any stretch of the imagination, be included among those who count. They are tiny pockets of ephemeral interest, small anterooms to the main gallery, that in their respective eccentric ways illustrate the conjunction of art and literature and the vicissitudes and vagaries of literary fame. Two typical ones may be cited. In the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries, as a minor but significant symptom of the Romantic temper (back to Simplicity, in poets' lives as in their poetry), attention was repeatedly directed to poets with humble origins. At the very turn of the century, the sentimental favorite among these was Robert Bloomfield, born in 1766, a poor London shoemaker and subsequently a maker of Aeolian harps, the musical symbol of Romanticism. Bloomfield wrote in 1798 (the year Wordsworth's and Coleridge's *Lyrical Ballads* appeared) and published two years later a book of poems called *The Farmer's Boy*. The strong echoes the volume contained of Thomson's * Seasons*—still, at that time, one of the most popular poems in existence—doubtless helped its fortunes. Set in Suffolk, the locale also of Crabbe's poetry, *The Farmer's Boy* celebrated rural life just as *The Village* stressed its hardships. The book went through nine editions the first six years, and fourteen in Bloomfield's lifetime.1

"As a painter of simple natural scenery, and of the still life of the country," wrote Hazlitt, "few writers have more undeniable and assuming pretensions than the ingenious and self-taught poet."2 He became something of a celebrity, in token whereof Hoppner painted his portrait. There was, in fact, a Bloomfield fad, offering painters a chance to depict Thomsonian rural subjects with a fresh and, for the moment, well-known literary name attached. Most Bloomfield paintings, then and later, came from *The Farmer's Boy*, especially from the two poems "Richard and Kate" and "Walter and Jane." As early as 1802, a picture called *Richard and Kate*, or *Fair Day*, was shown at the Royal Academy. Sir George Beaumont painted *A Moonlight, from Bloomfield's Farmer's Boy*, which he showed to Joseph Farington in 1804.3 Most paintings seem to have been closest in subject and treatment to Morland's genre pictures of rural life. Julius Caesar Ibbetson's *A Farm Yard* (RA 1806), for example, is said by his biographer to have been a scene on a Fellside farm, in which "the young countryman in his smock-frock is seated on a wheelbarrow basking in the sunshine, his sole occupation at the moment is to be a farmer's boy— 'meek, fatherless, and poor'."4 Two of Constable's paintings (*Ploughing Scene in Suffolk*, better known as *Dedham Vale* [RA 1814], and *A Harvest Field* [B1 1817]) were accompanied by quotations from Bloomfield.

The year the poet died (1823), the British Institution exhibited one of the several recorded paintings representing scenes in Bloomfield's life,
descriptively catalogued as View of Mr. Austen's Farm at Sapiston in Norfolk, "where Bloomfield the Poet was first employed as a farmer's boy; the upper end window was that of his first sleeping room." Except for this tangentially related picture, there was a hiatus in Bloomfield art until 1839, when a picture of his grave was shown. Then, for mysterious reasons, the fashion revived, to persist as late as 1871 (Lamb's at Play, at the Royal Academy) and even 1879 (Young Poet Robert Bloomfield, at the Society of British Artists). In this span of years, there were three illustrated editions, one with designs by the well-known artist Birket Foster (1845) and another (1871) that joined Bloomfield's poems with those of another sentimentally remembered poet from the beginning of the century, Henry Kirke White.* Altogether, some twenty paintings of actual subjects from Bloomfield's poetry and life are recorded, and, in addition, at least as many rural genre scenes that simply bore a quotation from The Farmer's Boy or one of the later collections. Three-quarters of the latter pictures dated from the time of his revived fame, 1839–74. The artistic record is witness enough that, however far Bloomfield disappeared into critical oblivion, his name still meant something to picture-buyers.

The case of paintings from The Social Day is equally a curiosity, but of art history only, since its author's protracted campaign to storm the heights of Parnassus utterly failed. Peter Coxe (*1844) was a London art aul­tioneer and dealer who prospered in the early years of the nineteenth century when a number of great collections, including those of Sir William Hamilton and the French émigrés Charles Alexandre de Calonne and the Duke of Orleans, came onto the market. He sold off Mack­lin's Gallery in 1800–1801 and Loutherbourg's collection after that artist's death in 1812, and subsequently retired with a modest fortune. Coxe was a fairly preposterous figure, a persistent nuisance, and, worst of all, an aspiring poet. He is adequately sketched in David Wilkie's diary entry for 6 November 1808, when the young Scots artist had been in London for three years:

Had a call from Lord Mulgrave; after he went away came Peter Coxe, who began reading to me part of a work which he had in the press against Napoleon; but was interrupted by Lord Mulgrave, who brought in his lady to look at the picture of The Cut Finger; his lordship went away, and I heard the remainder of the work read; we then walked out, and observing a house to let in one of the streets, we went in to inquire about it, when Mr. Coxe pulled out his MS, and began to read it to the woman who had the house in keeping. I left him, and took a look at the Elgin marbles.5

Coxe was also a sore trial to John Constable and his exasperated wife. "... That great bore Peter Cox was here nearly an hour on Saturday reading the paper & talking of himself," Mrs. Constable wrote her absent husband from their home in Charlotte Street in 1823. "I hope you will not admit him so often into your painting room." Some months later, in June 1824, Constable reported to his wife, on holiday at Brighton, that

at tea time Peter Coxe called. Johnny [their servant] said I was at Brighton, still he came in—and we heard him talking loud in the painting room. Fisher got up and locked the parlor door. Just as Peter was going & John was letting him out, Caroline and Miss [name omitted] her friend rapped at the door—Johnny looked confused but said quite brisk, pray ladies walk in. Peter was off—and they came in.

On the next Sunday but one, "Mr. Coxe called after church—wanted to

*Kirke White (1785–1806), the son of a butcher, wrote poems abounding in evangelical piety. He died in his first year at Cambridge, where he had gone on a schol­arship. A year after his death, Southey published his Remains, which went into a number of editions. Among the poems was an "Ode Addressed to H. Fuseli, Esq., R.A., on seeing Engravings from his designs," in which White twice addressed the artist as "Mighty Magician!" and described him also as "Genius of Horror and romantic awe, / Whose eye explores the secrets of the deep, / Whose power can bid the rebel fluids creep, / Can force the inmost soul to own its law." A handful of paintings me­morialized White's brief life.
Peter Coxe had the additional distinction of being the brother of Archdeacon William Coxe, whom Constable met while visiting the Fishers at Salisbury in 1812. The archdeacon, a prebendary in that Trollopian cathedral, was also a dedicated gourmand. "Mr. Coxe," wrote Farington, "is a singular man in many respects: very little attention to others in His manners, and remarkable for His love of good eating. On His leaving Stourhead, Sir Richard Hoare said 'He is gone away well filled, and I had given Him venison every day'" (Farington [2], 7:70–71 [17 December 1811]). In 1828, Archdeacon Fisher wrote Constable, "Poor Coxe . . . is no more. He died of old age, unable to contend with two helps of Salmon & lobster sauce, washed down with large drafts of Perry [fermented pear juice]" (Constable, 6:237).

While The Social Day was hanging fire, its promised appearance was amply publicized in the yearly art exhibitions. In 1817–19 alone, the Royal Academy exhibitions included at least six paintings commissioned as illustrations (the published volume would contain thirty-two).

One of these was by Wilkie himself (The Broken China Jar, or The Ghost Laid, 1816); two were by the animal painter Abraham Cooper (The Deserted Child Found, 1816; The Turnpike Gate, 1819); two more by Cooper's colleague in the animal line, James Ward (The Descent of the Swan Seeking His Own Element, an Allegory, and The Favourite Spaniel Watching the Tomb of Her Deceased Mistress, both 1817); and a sixth by a specialist in battle scenes, George Jones (A Domestic Party at Cards, 1817). Another contribution, not exhibited until 1832, was Constable's watercolor of Jaques and the Wounded Stag, which Coxe had chosen from the artist's portfolio when they met at Salisbury twenty years earlier. Still another illustration, by Stothard, seems not to have been shown until a loan exhibition at the British Institution in 1894. There is no record of anyone's actually reading The Social Day.

*Jones once had a substantial reputation as a painter, but his present-day fame resides in his being the subject of a celebrated anecdote. He took pride, frequently expressed, in his having (he said) once been mistaken for the Duke of Wellington. Upon hearing this, the Duke observed that it was strange, but he had never been mistaken for Mr. Jones.