Veronika Ruttkay

British Literature in the Long Eighteenth Century: Preliminary Considerations

from a course of lectures with Katalin G. Kállay

Doing literary history looks like a peaceful enough activity. Something close to the job of a museum guard or an (imaginary) librarian dusting off old volumes and putting them back on their shelves from time to time. But as anyone familiar with popular culture will know, museums – like libraries – have a nocturnal life of their own. Just like in the 2006 film *Night at the Museum* where, once the visiting hours are over, all the exhibits come to life. "During the day the library is a world of order," Alberto Manguel writes in a book about libraries and their rich cultural history.[1] At night, "the ghosts have voices."[2] This conceit is far from new. At the beginning of the literary period which is the subject of this lecture – the 18th century (more or less) – Jonathan Swift published a brilliant satire entitled *The Battel of the Books* and even specified the place and date of the battle: "Fought last Friday … at St. James's Library." Here the library becomes a place of carnage as books are desperately fighting for their lives, with many of them fatally wounded in combat.

Swift's narrator offers some speculations about the unruly volumes at St. James's: "In these Books, is wonderfully instilled and preserved, the Spirit of each Warrier, while he is alive; and after his Death, his Soul transmigrates there, to inform them. This, at least, is the more common Opinion."[3] This suggests that the soul of dead authors lives on in their books and continues fighting on their behalf. But the narrator's own opinion is even more interesting. He thinks that hostilities have something to do with the kinds of places libraries are:

> But, I believe, it is with Libraries, as with other Cemeteries, where some Philosophers affirm, that a certain Spirit, which they call *Brutum hominis*, hovers over the Monument, till the Body is corrupted, and turns to *Dust* or to *Worms*, but then vanishes or dissolves: So, we may say, a restless Spirit haunts over every *Book*, till *Dust* or *Worms* have seized upon it; which to some, may happen in a few Days, but to others, later …

[1]	Alberto Manguel, *The Library at Night* (Toronto: Knopf Canada, 2006), 12.
[2]	Manguel, *The Library at Night*, 15.
[3]	Jonathan Swift, *A Full and True Account of the Battel, Fought last Friday, Between the Antient and the Modern Books in St. James's Library*, in *The Writings of Jonathan Swift: Authoritative Texts, Backgrounds, Criticism*, edited by Robert A. Greenberg and William Bowman Piper (New York and London: W W Norton & Company, 1973), 376–396, 378.

Here the library is described as a kind of graveyard, where the "impure" lower spirits of the dead still haunt the books, their visible monuments. No wonder the place is disturbed by night. In this lecture I wish to suggest that this may be the case not only with libraries but also their close relations: literary canons. Canons are selections of texts considered essential by a given culture for its own reproduction – or, to put it differently, they are collections of literary monuments. But there is something unruly about them and the way they come about. At the turn of the 18th century, Swift was writing about the battle between the Ancients and the Moderns: classical authors like Virgil, Homer, or Aristotle, versus their critics, rivals, and feeble imitators, brought forward in great numbers by the printing press. The Moderns are trying to squeeze out the Ancients from their prominent position and the Ancients fight back. But something like this happens again and again whether we think of the most recent challenges to the canon or the "Quarrel of the Ancients and the Moderns" at the French Academy in the 17th century. Each new age sifts through the legacy of the past and selects what it deems worthy of preservation – and forgets about the rest.

It is largely due to such acts of restructuring that we can speak of distinct phases in literary history at all. The literature of the past comes to us mediated through intervening lenses. We can only see it through the perspective of earlier ages, and often – as in the case of 18th-century literature – through a number of conflicting perspectives. So, if we examine it a bit more closely, literary history deals with not so much a collection of monuments as a ghostly battlefield, where opposing views are present even about the most elementary things. What is a literary movement? Who are its "representative" authors and what exactly do they represent? What are the boundaries and salient features of a literary historical period? How do we know where one ends and the other one begins? The roughly two hundred years that are the subject of this lecture series may be construed in a number of different ways. The poems of the Scottish poet Robert Burns, for example, have been discussed by literary scholars under the heading of "pre-romanticism," "the age of sensibility," "sentimentalism," "romanticism," and, of course, the 18th century.

Things are not made easier by the fact that literary movements and especially literary historical periods tend to be created in retrospect. The poets William Wordsworth and S. T. Coleridge did not think of themselves as belonging to "the first generation of British Romanticism" when they published *Lyrical Ballads* in 1798. They didn't even know they were "Romantic." What they did know was that they found much of the writing of the 18th century shallow, dull, and pedantic, as opposed to the great works of earlier authors such as Milton or Shakespeare (they say so in their critical writings). In fact, it was this rejection that defined the image of 18th-century literature – "English Neoclassicism" or "the Augustan age" – for generations to come, even though, as Swift's *Battel of the Books* clearly shows, the 18th century was anything but boring. Its tensions and rivalries were played out not only on the printed page, but in clubs, networks and literary coteries, such as the

one around Alexander Pope (the "Scriblerus Club," where Pope, Swift and others satirized their contemporaries). Similar groupings were also vital to early 19th-century literature: the circle around Lord Byron and Percy Bysshe Shelley (the "Satanic School," as it was called by its detractors) or the one around Leigh Hunt and John Keats (the so-called "Cockney School"). Some of these labels have lost their original capacity to insult. But even the term "Lake Poets" – a seemingly peaceful designation – was first used by reviewers to ridicule Wordsworth, Coleridge and Robert Southey, otherwise quite different poets, who all had addresses in the Lake District. In this culture of literary hostilities, William Hazlitt could write a whole essay "On the Pleasures of Hating," speculating that the driving force behind all intellectual life was, ultimately, antipathy: "without something to hate, we should lose the very spring of thought and action" (Hazlitt himself was a fierce critic and was not entirely joking).[4]

When it comes to prose fiction, it is good to remember that our most familiar categories have also been shaped retroactively. Readers who enjoyed adventure narratives by Daniel Defoe or Henry Fielding did not know they were witnessing the "Rise of the Novel" any more than that they were part of the "Rising Middle Classes." In fact, their favourite reading material was called "romance" or "history" at least as often as "novel." It took the early 19th century to register this seismic shift and to consolidate the generic label, as booksellers started publishing cheap reprints of 18th-century books (thanks to new printing regulations that made such publications profitable). By this point, the unprecedented accumulation of printed material had created a new situation, when the canon of "the English novel" could be defined for the first time in history, and critical surveys were made about its historical emergence. Again, the important question is what was reprinted – and what was forgotten. Thinking about this, the literary critic Clifford Siskin has coined the phrase "The Great Forgetting": a wave of amnesia that affected the literary output of certain groups more than others, such as women writers.[5] Even more drastically, Franco Moretti has talked about "The Slaughterhouse of Literature" – the number of forgotten books is just so much higher than the modicum of texts preserved in cultural memory.[6] Recent scholarship has made attempts to recover as much printed material from the 18th and 19th centuries as possible. But there is no going around the fact that the texts studied in our lectures and seminars is what survived the slaughter.

So where does that leave students of 18th-century literature? If we take a look at present-day anthologies, we will find that the two-hundred-year period covered

[4]   William Hazlitt, "On the Pleasures of Hating," in *The Complete Works of William Hazlitt*, Vol. 12, edited by P. P. Howe (London and Toronto: Dent, 1931), 127–136, 127.

[5]   Clifford Siskin, *The Work of Writing: Literature and Social Change in Britain 1700–1830* (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1998), 218.

[6]   Franco Moretti, "The Slaughterhouse of Literature," *Modern Language Quarterly* 61, no. 1 (2000): 207–227, doi.org/10.1215/00267929-61-1-207

by this lecture course is usually divided into three separate phases: the literature of the 18th century, Romanticism, and Victorian literature. Such a division has its own value, and we are going to rely on these broad categories in the coming weeks. But in a preliminary discussion it is worth observing that these are hardly compatible terms. The "literature of the 18th century" is based on the calendar. "Romanticism" is the name of a literary movement or style. And the third one, "Victorian literature," is based on the reign of a monarch who was crowned in 1837 and died in 1901. The problem with "Romanticism" as a literary period is that it is too blurred around the edges. Did it start with the works of William Blake in the 1780s, or maybe some time earlier? And did it end when Victoria ascended the throne? To answer such questions, we would need to know what "Romanticism" really means – but then again, isn't that something we can only learn from the works written during that period? Such definitions look suspiciously circular. The other two categories, the "literature of the 18th century" and "Victorian literature," are hardly less problematic, but for different reasons. We all suspect that literary phenomena do not adhere to calendar time. And even if writers do respond to events in political history (such as the reign of Queen Victoria), literature cannot correspond to them in any strict sense. So, these categories are either too vague or too clear-cut for our purposes.

To fit the label a bit more to the phenomenon, literary historians now prefer to use "the long 18th century" as an organizing term, starting around the Restoration in 1660. You will remember that from 1642, England went through a Civil War. The trial and execution of King Charles I in 1649 was followed by the Commonwealth and Interregnum – a period without a monarch – under the military dictatorship of Oliver Cromwell. However, in 1660 Charles II returned from exile in France and the Stuart monarchy was restored. Many of the cultural phenomena that define the 18th century take their origin from around this time. After the Restoration, theatres were "re-opened" (new playhouses were erected with royal patronage) and the Royal Society was established, where the scientific discoveries of Isaac Newton, Robert Boyle and others were discussed. After the Great Fire in 1666, much of London was re-built according to new standards of taste and from more lasting materials. The regeneration of culture in this period was often understood in analogous terms, as a kind of rebuilding or rising from the ruins. In *An Essay of Dramatic Poesy* (1668), the most prominent poet of the age, John Dryden announced: "with the restoration of our happiness, we see revived Poesy lifting up its head, and already shaking off the rubbish which lay so heavily on it."[7] And this is how the same Dryden envisioned London rising like a Pheonix from its ashes, in the poem *Annus Mirabilis: The Year of Wonders, 1666*:

---

[7]　John Dryden, from *An Essay of Dramatic Poesy*, in *The Broadview Anthology of British Literature Vol 3: The Restoration and the Eighteenth Century*, edited by Joseph Black et al. (Peterborough: Broadview Press, 2006), 101–111, 110.

> Me-thinks already, from this Chymick flame,
>> I see a City of more precious mold:
> Rich as the Town which gives the Indies name,
>> With Silver pav'd, and all divine with Gold.
>
> Already, Labouring with a mighty fate,
>> She shakes the rubbish from her mounting brow,
> And seems to have renew'd her Charters date,
>> Which Heav'n will to the death of time allow.
>
> More great than humane, now, and more August,
>> Now deifi'd she from her fires does rise:
> Her widening streets on new foundations trust,
>> And opening into larger parts she flies.[8]   (lines 1169–1180)

18th-century writers often saw themselves inhabiting the spaces created in the Restoration period – just as they were using the same buildings (theatres, libraries, etc.) while they went on shaping and extending them. Major landmarks took several decades to (re)build. The completion of the new St. Paul's Cathedral, designed by Sir Christopher Wren after the Great Fire, took about forty years. This should remind us that, apart from struggles, ruptures and discontinuities, we should also attend to fundamental continuities if we want to understand the age. After all, the concept of "restoration" included both a caesura and a returning to normal – a resuming or continuation by putting an end to something in between. Thus, the disruption could be perceived as a crisis successfully overcome. In *Annus Mirabilis,* Dryden envisioned the future London as both the same and infinitely more glorious than its former self. A "deified" and sublime city with wider streets, precious materials and a renewed charter (founding document) that will guarantee its survival until the end of times. Through such rhetorical "reconstructions," even rupture and destruction could be understood as part of a higher plan unfolding in English history.

Throughout the 18th century writers kept returning to the founding gestures of the Restoration to define their own cultural position. Samuel Johnson in his *Lives of the Poets* (an early form of literary history through critical biographies) commemorated Dryden's achievement as follows: "What was said of Rome, adorned by Augustus, may be applied by an easy metaphor to English poetry, embellished by Dryden, *lateritiam invenit, marmoream reliquit*, he found it brick, and he left it marble."[9] Johnson here applies the imagery of rebuilding to the very language of

---

[8]   John Dryden, *Annus Mirabilis: The Year of Wonders, 1666,* in *The Works of John Dryden, Vol I*, edited by Edward Niles Hooker and H. T. Swedenberg, Jr. (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1959), 59–105, 103.

[9]   Samuel Johnson, *The Lives of the Poets: A Selection*, edited by Roger Lonsdale, introduction and notes by John Mullan (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009), 207.

English poetry – but he is following in Dryden's footsteps, inhabiting the same intellectual space as his predecessor. It is easy to see even from this short assessment which qualities he appreciated most about Dryden's works: clarity of design, formal elegance, and a written style stabilized through careful attention to classical models. The allusion to the Roman Emperor Augustus adds a veneer of antiquity to what is, in essence, a kind of modernization. What Johnson really means is that Dryden *modernized* English poetry by making it more permanent, that is to say, more classical. This makes him the founder of modern English verse: "To him we owe the improvement, perhaps the completion of our metre, the refinement of our language, and much of the correctness of our sentiments."[10]

Returning to earlier models could thus be conceived as a kind of renovation, "improvement," or modernization. Such was the secret of the Restoration, and such were the values of the so-called "Augustan poetry" that dominated much of the long 18th century. The implicit comparison between the reign of Augustus and modern-day England was rehearsed in endless variations, from the "age of Dryden" (1660–1700) to the "age of Pope" (1700s–1744) up to the "age of Johnson" (1744–1784). Poetic London was often styled as "Augusta," renewing a fourth-century name for the city of Londinium.[11] Interestingly, the analogy with ancient Rome could also be used for satirical purposes. As opposed to *Annus Mirabilis* and its vision of a glorious new city, Dryden's satire *Mac Flecknoe* presents "the fair Augusta" as a ramshackle place teeming with all forms of corruption, prostitution, and terrible poets. Through this Dryden initiated a counter-narrative to the dominant narrative of the age: improvement through restoration. According to this satirical version (indebted to the Roman poet Juvenal), culture is on a course of decline: clarity, order, and wit are the interruption, rather than the rule. But the "Augustan style" shone brightly even in adversity – or especially so. Dryden and his 18th-century followers (like Pope, author of a devastating satire entitled *The Dunciad*) criticized their own times by the standards of the past, advocating a return to ancient models against the imminent threat of decline. Classical genres such as the satire, the epistle, the eclogue, and the georgic were at the height of their popularity. The Latin poets Virgil, Horace, and Ovid (all active during the reign of Augustus) were translated and imitated to create a lasting and flexible poetic idiom – something worthy of the empire that modern Britain was to become.

In a sense, Dryden's prophecy was fulfilled. London and, by extension, England, did become "great" in the 18th century. A new political entity, the Kingdom of Great Britain was formed through the 1707 Act of Union with Scotland. Almost a hundred years later (in 1801), the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Ireland came into being. The intervening years are often characterized with domestic peace and prosperity, but it was also a time of wars: mostly with France and Spain, for colonial possessions (including the Seven Years' War), but also in Scotland, where

---

[10]   Johnson, *The Lives of the Poets*, 207.
[11]   For "Augusta", see Francis Sheppard, *London: A History* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1998), 43.

two Jacobite Rebellions were crushed, and in Ireland, up to the defeat of the United Irishmen's Rebellion in 1798. Meanwhile two great events shook the monarchy to the core: the American and the French Revolutions. To see why Britain still managed to prosper both economically and culturally in all these years, we need to remember another key development of the late 17th century: the Glorious Revolution of 1688, when Parliament invited William of Orange and his wife Mary (daughter of James II) to the English throne. With their coronation and the passing of the Bill of Rights in the following year, the foundations of a constitutional monarchy were laid down. The source of sovereign power became "the Crown in Parliament," which meant that absolute monarchy (like the one in France) became impossible in England. Thus, a remarkably stable system was created through a paradoxical "Bloodless Revolution."

18th-centure literature thrived on this compromise – including even those who were critical of it, such as Dryden. After all, a certain amount of conflict was now acceptable as part of the system. Think of the two emerging political parties, the Tories and the Whigs, who were fighting in Parliament but still needed to co-operate at a fundamental level. As Jonathan Swift put it in another London poem, "A Description of a City Shower" (1710):

> Triumphant Tories, and desponding Whigs,
> Forget their feuds, and join to save their wigs.[12]

The possibility of disagreement even in politics or religion, without any fatal consequences, transformed the culture of the long 18th century. The German sociologist and philosopher Jürgen Habermas associated the age with the birth of a new public sphere: a "place" (real or virtual) where even commoners could exchange their opinions without being overseen by the Church or the Crown. In the newly fashionable coffee-houses and on the pages of newspapers and periodicals public discussion ranged from politics and business to fashion, art, society, and scientific advances. Whoever wanted to engage in such debates had to rely on the power of reason and wit to convince their opponents. But they also had to be polite, if possible – to be good listeners as well as good speakers or writers. Sociability and politeness became the chief virtues of the long 18th century, associated with civilized urban life. We might recognize in this the influence of the Enlightenment as a broad intellectual movement: the philosopher John Locke advocated toleration, primarily in matters of religion, to overcome the violent conflicts of the past. In the long 18th century, a new mentality called secularism gradually emerged. The new emphasis on peaceful disagreement also had to do with the growth of a modern commercial society, where negotiation and exchange came to be understood as mutually rewarding, at least potentially. However, what matters for us now is that

---

[12]   Jonathan Swift, "A Description of a City Shower," in *The Broadview Anthology of British Literature Vol 3*, 304.

in the long era following the Civil War, which included the Restoration and the 18th century, battles were preferably fought in books, rather than in real life. Of course, hostilities did not disappear, and as we have seen, literary culture was thriving on animosity. But this also implies that animosity could now be channelled into more acceptable forms, including literature. We might take it as a sign of the times that one of the most outstanding works of the 18th century, Alexander Pope's *The Rape of the Lock*, was written by a commoner (the son of a linen merchant) to reconcile a feud between two aristocratic families. How far Pope succeeded in this will be the subject of the next lecture.

Abstract

This paper is based on an introductory lecture from a lecture course with Katalin G. Kállay on 18th and 19th century British and American literature. It considers the problems of defining distinct periods in literary history such as the Augustan age or Romanticism. Through the example The Battel of the Books by Jonathan Swift, it highlights the inherent tensions shaping the literary canon and argues that key concepts of literary history are created retroactively, through the interplay of conflicting perspectives. The second half of the paper discusses aspects of the Restoration and the literature of the long 18th century highlighting the dynamic between modernization and the return to past models. The writings of John Dryden, Alexander Pope, Jonathan Swift, and Samuel Johnson are used to illustrate key points.

Keywords: literary canons, periodization, long eighteenth century, Augustan age, Restoration

Rezümé
Brit irodalom a hosszú 18. században

A rövid tanulmány alapja egy bevezető előadás a Kállay G. Katalinnal közösen tartott egyetemi kurzusból, mely a 18–19. századi angol és amerikai irodalmat tekinti át. Témája az irodalomtörténeti periodizáció és ennek elméleti problémái, például az utólagosság, a körkörös leírások és a kánonképzés feszültségei, melyek idővel feledésbe merülnek. A tanulmány második fele a restauráció és a hosszú 18. század irodalmának néhány alapvető jellegzetességét mutatja be a régiek és az újak (a modernizáció és a helyreállítás) dinamikája alapján. Ehhez Jonathan Swift, John Dryden, Alexander Pope és Samuel Johnson műveiből hoz példákat.

Kulcsszavak: irodalmi kánonok, irodalomtörténeti korszakolás, hosszú 18. század, „Augustusi kor", restauráció