

Literary History: A Systematic Approach

Lecture 4: The Backlash of Neoclassicism (c. 1700-1780)

1) Inspiration vs. Imitation

2) Transparency as Explicit Ideal:

Pope's *Essay on Criticism* (1709)

3) A Period of Transition:

Akenside's *The Pleasures of Imagination* (1744-1772)

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1) Inspiration vs. Imitation

Inspiration [< God]

(*poeta vates*)

⇒ Utterance

⇒ subjective/
emancipatory elements



Imitation [< Tradition < God]

(*poeta doctus*)

⇒ Composition

⇒ normative/
compensatory elements

[True poets] most properly do imitate to teach & delight : and to imitate, borrow nothing of what is, hath been, or shall be : but range [...] into the divine consideration of what may be and should be.

[T]he poet, he nothing affirmeth, and therefore never lieth. [...] [T]he poet never maketh any Circles about your imagination, to conjure you to beleieve for true what he writeth : he citeth not authorities of other histories, but even for his entrie, calleth the sweete Muses to inspire unto him a good invention.

Sir Philip Sidney, *The Defence of Poesie* [1595]. Reprint Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1904.

2) Transparency as Explicit Ideal

The Neoclassic Period

The Restoration (1660-1700: John Milton, John Bunyan, John Dryden)

The Augustan Age (1700-1750: Alexander Pope vs. Daniel Defoe, Samuel Richardson, Henry Fielding, Tobias Smollett)

The Age of Johnson (1750-1798: Dr Samuel Johnson)

[F]rom the proper disposition of single sounds results that harmony that adds force to reason, and gives grace to sublimity; that shackles attention, and governs passion.

Samuel Johnson, *The Rambler* No. 88 (Jan 19, 1751).

The problem is how to assume authority without simply doing so, how to both claim and disclaim authority so as to exert power without being crushed by guilt. [...] [The problem can be solved by creating] the illusion of a free-standing discourse, authorized by its fidelity to experience, its self-circumscribing formal coherence, and [...] its effortless issuing from a personal source that at once grounds that discourse and is unproblematically expressed by it.

(Bogel 1987, 198/206)

Alexander Pope, *Essay on Criticism* (1709)

First follow Nature, and your judgement frame
By her just standard, which is still the same;
Unerring Nature, still divinely bright,
One clear, unchanged, and universal light,
Life, force, and beauty must to all impart,
At once the source, and end, and test of art.
(Part I, ll. 67-73)

Those rules of old discovered, not devised,
Are Nature still, but Nature methodized;
Nature, like liberty, is but restrained
By the same laws which herself ordained.
Hear how learn'd Greece her useful rules indites,
When to repress and when indulge our flights:
[...]
Learn hence for ancient rules a just esteem;
To copy Nature is to copy them.
(Part I, ll. 88-93 and 139f.)

'Tis with our judgements as our watches, none
Go just alike, yet each believes his own.

[...]

Authors are partial to their wit, 'tis true,
But are not critics to their judgement too?

(Part I, ll. 9f. and 17f.)

Yet if we look more closely, we shall find
Most have the seeds of judgement in their mind:
Nature affords at least a glimmering light;
The lines, though touched but faintly, are drawn right.

(Part I, ll. 19-22)

Pride, where wit fails, steps in to our defense,
And fills up all the mighty void of sense.
If once right reason drives that cloud away,
Truth breaks upon us with resistless day.
Trust not yourself: but your defects to know,
Make use of every friend – and every foe.

(Part II, ll. 210-214)

In wit, as nature, what affects our hearts
Is not the exactness of peculiar parts;

[...]

No single parts unequally surprise,
All comes united to the admiring eyes.

[...]

Avoid extremes; and shun the fault of such
Who still are pleased too little or too much.

(Part II, ll. 243f., 249f., 384f.)

Poets, like painters, thus unskilled to trace
The naked nature and the living grace,
with gold and jewels cover every part,
And hide with ornaments their want of art.
True wit is nature to advantage dressed,
What oft was thought, but ne'er so well expressed;

[...]

But true expression, like the unchanging sun,
Clears and improves whate'er it shines upon;
It gilds all objects, but it alters none.
Expression is the dress of thought, and still
Appears more decent as more suitable.

(Part II, ll. 293-298 and 315-319)

True ease in writing comes from art, not chance,
As those move easiest who have learned to dance.

(Part II, ll. 362f.)

The couplet is able to produce a sense of closed order, not only because of the repeated uniformity of the rhyme scheme, but also because each couplet anticipates a closure in which the second line answers the first. [...] The couplet is fundamental to the operation by which Augustan poetry produces a position for the subject. Although the success of the Romantic revolution for us now tends to make all Augustan poetry seem stylized and artificial, nevertheless the couplet positively encourages rather than impedes the aim of transparency. [...] Relative to the Renaissance verse forms which preceded it, Augustan poetry eradicates complex rhyme schemes in favour of the couplet. [...] [T]he very uniformity of the couplet, constantly repeated, tends to make it invisible except as a sign for continuation [...] In Augustan practice meaning is developed along the syntagmatic chain across the individual couplets and down the paragraph. In this respect meaning is developed in independence from the verse form, each couplet being treated as a bead strung along the syntagmatic chain which runs through it.

(Easthope 1983, 119f.)

Alexander Pope, 'Windsor Forest' (1713)

The Groves of *Eden*, vanish'd now so long,
Live in Description, and look green in Song:
These, were my breast inspired with equal Flame,
Like them in Beauty, should be like in Fame.
Here Hills and Vales, the Woodland and the Plain,
Here Earth and Water seem to strive again,
Not *Chaos*-like together crush'd and bruis'd,
But as the World, harmoniously confus'd:
Where order in variety we see,
And where, tho' all things differ, all agree.
[...]

See Pan with Flocks, with Fruits *Pamona* crown'd,
Here blushing *Flora* paints th' enamel'd Ground,
Here *Ceres'* Gifts in waving prospects stand,
And nodding tempt the joyful Reaper's Hand,
Rich industry sits smiling on the Plains,
And Peace and Plenty tell, a STUART reigns.

(ll. 1-36)

3) A Period of Transition

Mark Akenside, *The Pleasures of Imagination* (1744 - 1772)

'Design' (1744):

[Men] of warm and sensible temper have sought means to recall the delightful perceptions which they afford, independent of the object which originally produced them.

Yet, after all, the subject before us [i.e. the imagination], tending constantly to admiration and enthusiasm, seemed rather to demand a more open, pathetic, and figured style. This too appeared more natural, as the author's aim was not so much to give formal precepts, or enter into the way of direct argumentation, as, by exhibiting the most engaging prospects of Nature, to enlarge and harmonize the imagination, and by that means insensibly dispose the minds of men to a similar taste and habit of thinking in religion, morals, and civil life.

Call now to mind what high capacious powers
Lie folded up in Man

(Book I, ll. 222f.)

Mind, mind alone (bear witness, Earth and Heaven!)
The living fountains in itself contains
Of beauteous and sublime.

(Book I, ll. 481-483)

[T]he attentive mind,
By this harmonious action of her powers,
Becomes herself harmonious: wont so oft
In outward things to meditate the charm
Of sacred order, soon she seeks at home
To find a kindred order, to exert
Within herself this elegance of love,
This fair inspir'd delight [...]

(Book III, ll. 600-606)

Without fair Culture's kind parental aid
[...]

in vain we hope
The tender plant should rear its blooming head,
Or yield the harvest promised in the spring.

(Book III, ll. 538-542)

Edward Young, “Conjectures on Original Composition” (1759)

imitation of nature	vs.	imitation of authors
↓		↓
original composition, innovation, genius		negative effects

Ancients and Moderns (Encyclopaedia Britannica)

[S]ubject of a celebrated literary dispute that raged in France and England in the 17th century. The ‘ancients’ maintained that classical literature of Greece and Rome offered the only models for literary excellence; the ‘moderns’ challenged the supremacy of classical writers. The rise of modern science tempted some French intellectuals to assume that, if Descartes had surpassed ancient science, it might be possible to surpass other ancient arts. The first attacks on the ancients came from Cartesian circles in defence of some heroic poems [...] that were based on Christian rather than classical mythology. The dispute broke into a storm with the publication of Nicolas Boileau’s *L’Art poétique* (1674), defining the case for the ancients and upholding the classical traditions of poetry. From then on, the quarrel became personal and vehement. Among the chief supporters of the moderns were Charles Perrault and Bernard de Fontenelle. Supporters of the ancients were La Fontaine and La Bruyère.

In England the quarrel continued until well into the first decade of the 18th century. In 1690 Sir William Temple, in his *Essay upon Ancient and Modern Learning* attacking the members of the Royal Society, rejected the doctrine of progress and supported the virtuosity and excellence of ancient learning. William Wotton responded to Temple’s charges in his *Reflections upon Ancient and Modern Learning* (1694). He praised the moderns in most but not all branches of learning, conceding the superiority of the ancients in poetry, art, and oratory. The primary points of contention were then quickly clouded and confused, but eventually two main issues emerged: whether literature progressed from antiquity to the present as science did, and whether, if there progress, it was linear or cyclical. These matters were seriously and vehemently discussed.

I Poetic Form

- the emergence of poetic subjectivity in the 16th and 17th century
- the formal invisibilisation of poetic subjectivity in the 18th century
- the Romantic emancipation of poetic subjectivity as cultural domestication
- modernism as a reflexive turn

(cf. Reinfandt 2003, 93-146)

II Authorship

- the subject in and of the poem since the 16th century
▲▼
- authorship and authority in the 18th century
▼▼
- Romanticism as a turning point towards modern authorship

(cf. Reinfandt 2003, 147-214)

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