

04. Long 18th century: Enlightenment, Classicism and the rise of the novel

A major change took place in 1660 with the so called Stuart Restoration: King Charles II was restored to the English throne and the Commonwealth period with the rule of Oliver Cromwell ended; Church of England was restored as the national church, excluding, again, Protestant Dissenters and Roman Catholics to a considerable extent from public life (they could not, for example, hold public offices, study at universities or vote). After the son of Charles II, James II, attempted to re-establish Catholicism in Britain, another change took place with the so called Glorious Revolution of 1688 when William of Orange and his wife Mary, the daughter of James II, became King and Queen of England and agreed to rule jointly with the Parliament. By the end of the 17th century the two main political parties were fully established: the Tories (supporters of the Crown and of the Church of England) and the Whigs (the more liberal party, advocating tolerance). In literary history the Restoration often marks the beginning of the so-called Long Eighteenth Century, a term which attempts to express that some basic characteristics of the culture of the 18th century were already taking shape in the latter half of the 17th century and lasted into the beginning of the 19th century. Another term that belongs with this period is Augustan Age, drawing a parallel with the period of the Roman emperor Augustus who ruled at the time of the great Classical writers Horace, Virgil, and Ovid (1st century BC): the 18th century revives, as it were, these Classical authors; hence also the name Classicism. Another term associated with this period is the Enlightenment (or the Age of Reason), and connected to that, science, rationalism, deism. This period covers also other very important developments in British history: the founding of Great Britain (1707, Act of Union by which Scotland and England were united), the rise of Great Britain as a naval superpower and the growth of the British Empire (overseas colonies), but later also the loss of American colonies in the American War of Independence (1776), and major changes in international politics with the French Revolution (1789) and Napoleonic wars (1803-1815).

The Enlightenment reflects and expresses the political changes: long gone is the old medieval notion of the divine origin of political power. The Renaissance brought a focus on the individual human being and this line of thinking is carried out further in new thoughts about government and society. In the mid-seventeenth century Thomas Hobbes argued that society is based on the voluntary agreement of individuals by which people protect themselves from constantly fighting with each other (*Leviathan*, 1651). Philosopher John Locke went even further to claim that man is naturally free and that political power can be challenged when it does not protect the natural rights of people. Locke is also one of the chief philosophers of empiricism; in his *Essay Concerning Human Understanding* (1690) he famously articulates his philosophy of man as “tabula rasa” – a blank slate: man has no innate ideas or moral principles, these are imprinted upon him through the experience of the senses and arranged meaningfully by reason. Isaac Newton’s discoveries in physics and mathematics also date from this period. The intellectual climate of the eighteenth century is strongly shaped by these new advances in science and the importance that science gains in shaping people’s worldview, by empiricism and the emphasis on reason and rational explanation. One of the lasting results of this fascination with scientific knowledge and rational ordering of ideas was the foundation of large encyclopedias (in Britain, the *Encyclopaedia Britannica*, 1768-1771).

The discoveries of the *laws* of nature, ie. of the underlying order of the natural world, contributed to the belief that there was a divine intelligence who created the world. But, because this God obviously does not always reward good and punish evil in this world, He certainly does this in the afterlife, and in the meantime man’s duty on earth is to live in accordance with the laws of nature and of reason, to live in benevolence and virtue. This is the belief called deism, or “natural religion”: God is understood as the creator of the universe and as the ultimate judge of men, but man’s life is governed by his own reason. Deists agree that the created world is a revelation of God, the Book of Nature; however, the second major source of revelation that has been central to Christianity throughout the preceding centuries, the Bible, the Book of Scripture, is no longer accepted literally or without question. The mysteries of the Christian faith and the need for salvation through faith in the sacrifice of Christ softly fade away in the deist worldview. Salvation through faith and/or through the sacraments administered

by the Church is not really needed anymore because in the Enlightenment a new understanding of human nature prevails: contrary to the traditional doctrine of man's innate sinfulness, the Age of Reason holds that man is basically good and what human nature needs is not supernatural regeneration but mere cultivation. The Enlightenment has no appreciation for the supernatural, for mystery or for any kind of secret knowledge, which was still an alluring idea in the Renaissance; on the contrary the Enlightenment is willing to accept human limitations and focus on the useful and the practicable. John Locke expressed this conviction in his *Essay Concerning Human Understanding*:

I suppose it may be of use to prevail with the busy mind of man to be more cautious in meddling with things exceeding its comprehension; to stop when it is at the utmost extent of its tether; and to sit down in a quiet ignorance of those things which, upon examination, are found to be beyond the reach of our capacities (...) Our business here is not to know all things, but those which concern our conduct.

tether - a chain or rope used for tying animals

With the Enlightenment view of man as good comes also the emergence of sentimentalism. If man is naturally good, then he finds his highest happiness in doing good, in being benevolent to others. This is the underlying principle of sentimentalism, which gradually becomes a prominent characteristic of much of 18th (and 19th century) literature.

Parallel to the deist beliefs of the liberal intellectuals, however, was a revival of Christian piety in a new Protestant movement of the first half of the 18th century: Methodism. This was a revival of religion in England but similar religious revivals were also going on elsewhere: in Scotland, in British America (the Great Awakening) or also for example in Bohemia and Germany (Pietism, the Restored Unity of the Brethren and the Moravian Church). The Methodist revival in England was led especially by John and Charles Wesley and by George Whitfield; they preached the need for a personal belief in Christ, the necessity of a personal conversion, conviction of sin and repentance, and stressed the importance of life in holiness. They would appeal to the listeners' emotions, they preached dramatically and there was often crying or even fainting among the audience. This was not, of course, supported by the English Church, so these gatherings would take place in open fields or in barns. A great part of the society looked deridingly on these revivals. Such tendencies were suspicious, they created disorder, they were too close to fanaticism ("enthusiasm" was the 18th century term)—the opposite of the moderate and rational spirit of the Enlightenment. And yet this new religiosity left a lasting influence. It never disappeared but became one of the sources and varieties of Evangelical Christianity, and Evangelical believers (alongside some of their Anglican or Catholic counterparts) played a major role in many social reforms of the 18th and 19th century, including the abolition of the slave trade.

All these changes in worldview necessarily influence literature and thinking about literature in this period. Turning away from the Renaissance interest in the obscure, the complex, the extravagant (think of Spenser or metaphysical poetry), the writers of the Enlightenment prefer clarity, restraint, regularity, sense. There is a great interest and admiration for the Classics who, as it was widely believed, were unsurpassed in their ability to depict universal Nature. There is also a strong influence of French literature and French literary theory and its contemporary ideals of simplicity and elegance. Generally, writers and thinkers of this period value simplicity and the power of a work of literature to affect readers. Their main focus is on Nature: Nature as that which is universal, representative and permanent in human experience. This is what they valued in the works of classical Antiquity and what they sought in their own work: general truths, universal ideas, representative characteristics, all expressed in clear, elegant, appropriate, restrained but also fresh and surprising (not shocking) language. That is the other all-important element of Enlightenment literary aesthetics besides Nature: Wit. Wit is associated with originality (though they wouldn't have used this word but rather "fancy" or "imagination"), liveliness, the ability to see unusual connections and to create fresh imagery. Wit, however, must be restrained by judgment to follow "decorum," ie. what is appropriate. Judgment must restrain, though not suppress, passion; judgment makes wit and passion more effective through discipline. Great attention was also

paid to the technical skill of the poet, the skillful use of poetic devices, of rhyme and meter; always, however, appropriate to genre and to theme. What was unique to English literary thinking was its appreciation for the great English authors: Chaucer, Spenser, or Shakespeare were highly valued, despite the fact that their writing did not always conform to the Classicist literary rules and classification. Shakespeare, for example, was praised because he was able to depict universal Nature and at the same time depict individuals in their diversity; this excellence secured him admiration even if he broke Classicist rules for good drama.

The Enlightenment penchant for clarity, combined with the rise of the middle class and the power of the common man (as opposed to the previous concentration of power in the hands of nobility), also led to a new social-literary phenomenon of the 18th century: journalism. The increasingly prosperous middle class had both the education and the leisure to read, and one of their reading interests were magazines and newspapers. The most famous and trend-setting journals of the early 18th century were *The Tattler* and *The Spectator*, published in London by Richard Steele and Thomas Addison. These were coffee-house magazines (the coffee-house is one of the new luxuries of the period), commenting on social events, giving advice and commentary on matters of morality, taste, literature, art and life in general. Together with them the period also gave rise to a large amount of satirical writing focused on politics and various cultural debates, as we shall note with respect to several authors.

The rise of the upper middle class brings one more widespread literary development, and that is the prevalence of letter writing and journaling. In 18th century terms, these were also understood as “literature,” as was also another genre that particularly flourished in this period, historiographical writings. And all these influences (the large reading public, the interest in social and personal writing and in history) combined to bring about one of the lasting literary influences of the 18th century: the novel, a genre which gradually established itself during the century.

There were of course many historical antecedents and sources of the novel. There were various travel narratives which were widely popular, there were the great stories of the past, and there was the new widespread presence of letter writing and journaling. The English novel was characterized precisely by its focus on the middle class and its social and moral values. Also, because a large part of the upper class and middle class readers were women, the novel is connected with a new focus on female characters. There were also many women writers in the period. Many 18th century novels serve as models of social norms and warnings about deviating from them. We can also see the rise of the novel as the first emergence of literary realism. The new upper and middle class readership was interested in reading stories that seemed close to their own life and that taught and reaffirmed their moral values. Characters in the novels are seldom high aristocrats and never court members. The focus is on the personal life and private experience; on courtship and marriage as issues of family preference and personal choice, not political alliance; deaths, even if tragic, do not happen in battles or out political malice, like in Elizabethan tragedies. The message of the 18th century novel can be often summarized by the subtitle of one of the famous novels of the period, Samuel Richardson’s *Pamela* (1740): “Virtue Rewarded.”

Alexander Pope (1688-1744)

In Pope we meet, in many respects, one of the epitomes of Classicism: a poet of exceptional elegance and craft, a satirist, a literary critic, a translator of the Classics, a defender of taste, a believer in reason and humanistic learning, and author of the famous motto of English Classicism: “Whatever is, is right.” In some other ways he was not typical of his situation, however, and he achieved his success against major odds. First of all, he suffered from very poor health all his life: a childhood illness left him with a deformed spine and later in life he also suffered from severe headaches and other nervous problems. Because of his poor health he was unable to receive formal education but he made up for that by his abundant reading. And secondly, Pope was a Roman Catholic, so even as an adult he could not attend university. He was also excluded from the possibilities of literary patronage (this was how writers typically received income, by being sponsored by rich patrons). Pope, however, was so successful that he was the first English writer to earn a comfortable living just by his own writing. This financial success

came especially through his translations of Homer's *Iliad* and *Odyssey*. They were very popular; Pope took major liberties with the text, transforming, for example, the Greek hexameters into English heroic couplets and contemporary elegant poetic diction. He also edited the collected plays of Shakespeare, again with significant editorial interventions.

Pope was one of the most influential literary figures of the time, a friend of leading intellectuals, first from the Whig circles and later, after a bitter break with them, with the Tories. Pope was a merciless critic and satirist and he would fight bitterly with his opponents, not hesitating to attack them and ridicule them in his satires, like his poem *Dunciad* (1728), a mock epic, in which his literary enemies are represented as dunces. But Pope first became famous with a text of literary theory called *Essay on Criticism* (1711), written in heroic couplets, in simple and elegant language and expressing the main tenets of Classicist literary taste and rules: Nature, wit, the Classics, rules, genius. Pope first explains how these work together in harmony and compromise, then he goes on to analyze the mistakes of literary criticism and finally gives examples of good criticism. Here is an example of how he understands Nature, and how the Classical rules for good writing are "Nature methodized":

First follow Nature, and your judgment 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.
(...)
Those rules of old discovered, not devised,
Are Nature still, but Nature methodized;
Nature, like liberty, is but restrained
By the same laws which first herself ordained.

Pope's next famous work was a mock epic, or as he called it, a "heroi-comical poem" called *The Rape of the Lock* (1712), inspired by an argument that arose between two Catholic families after a young man had playfully cut off a lock of hair from a beautiful young lady. In the manner of mock epic the poem has constant references to the true, great epics like the *Iliad* or *Paradise Lost*, but transposes the heroic battles and deeds to the realm of the drawing room, cosmetics, jewelry, fashion, social outings, coffee drinking and card playing.

Pope also wrote a famous philosophical poem, *An Essay on Man* (1733-34). It is divided into four "epistles" in which Pope expresses the basic goodness and underlying order and harmony of the universe and discusses how man can achieve a virtuous life by understanding and accepting his place in the Great Chain of Being, by taming his passions by reason and by transforming his natural self-love into a love for others and for God. Pope attempted this essay as an expression of the most universal beliefs and values, therefore he never mentions any specifically Christian doctrines or Jesus Christ, but talks about God abstractly. Pope's optimism and his concern with appropriateness and moderation is typical for the 18th century:

Say first, of God above, or man below,
What can we reason, but from what we know?
Of man what see we, but his station here,
From which to reason, or to which refer?
Through worlds unnumber'd though the God be known,
'Tis ours to trace him only in our own.
He, who through vast immensity can pierce,

See worlds on worlds compose one universe,
Observe how system into system runs,
What other planets circle other suns,
What varied being peoples ev'ry star,
May tell why Heav'n has made us as we are.
But of this frame the bearings, and the ties,
The strong connections, nice dependencies,
Gradations just, has thy pervading soul
Look'd through? or can a part contain the whole?
Is the great chain, that draws all to agree,
And drawn supports, upheld by God, or thee?

Presumptuous man! the reason wouldst thou find,
Why form'd so weak, so little, and so blind?
First, if thou canst, the harder reason guess,
Why form'd no weaker, blinder, and no less!
Ask of thy mother earth, why oaks are made
Taller or stronger than the weeds they shade?
Or ask of yonder argent fields above,
Why Jove's satellites are less than Jove?
Of systems possible, if 'tis confest
That Wisdom infinite must form the best,
Where all must full or not coherent be,
And all that rises, rise in due degree;
Then, in the scale of reas'ning life, 'tis plain
There must be somewhere, such a rank as man:
And all the question (wrangle e'er so long)
Is only this, if God has plac'd him wrong?

Respecting man, whatever wrong we call,
May, must be right, as relative to all.
In human works, though labour'd on with pain,
A thousand movements scarce one purpose gain;
In God's, one single can its end produce;
Yet serves to second too some other use.
So man, who here seems principal alone,
Perhaps acts second to some sphere unknown,
Touches some wheel, or verges to some goal;
'Tis but a part we see, and not a whole.

...

Then say not man's imperfect, Heav'n in fault;
Say rather, man's as perfect as he ought:
His knowledge measur'd to his state and place,
His time a moment, and a point his space.

...

Cease then, nor ORDER imperfection name:
Our proper bliss depends on what we blame.
Know thy own point: this kind, this due degree
Of blindness, weakness, Heaven bestows on thee.
Submit—In this, as in any other sphere,

Secure to be as blest as thou canst bear:
Safe in the hand of one disposing Power,
Or in the natal, or the mortal hour.
All Nature is but art, unknown to thee;
All chance, direction, which thou canst not see;
All discord, harmony not understood;
All partial evil, universal good:
And, spite of pride, in erring reason's spite,
One truth is clear: Whatever IS, is RIGHT.

Jonathan Swift (1667-1745)

If Pope was well known as a satirist, he was by far not the only one. Jonathan Swift, Pope's contemporary and close friend, was perhaps the chief and deepest satirical voice of the 18th century, one who would not hesitate to go well beyond humor into cynicism, so much that he was considered a misanthrope. But the misanthropic aspect was just the fierceness of his criticism, for he serves as an important counterpoint to the Enlightenment optimism and belief in man's fundamental goodness. Swift was not convinced of this.

He was an Englishman born in Dublin, an orphan who was brought up by his uncle. After the Glorious Revolution the deposed King James II invaded Ireland and tried to establish himself there; many Anglo-Irish then fled to England, including Swift. He received his education in England and reluctantly agreed to become a clergyman. He returned to Ireland when he was 32, unwillingly, as he had hoped to receive a more prestigious position in England. By then he was already an established satirist, and he abandoned the Whig party and aligned with the Tories. He was a firm supporter of the Church of England against Roman Catholics and Dissenters, but, living in Ireland and witnessing the dire conditions of the Irish people, their poverty and the ruthless behavior of the English landlords, he became a leader of Irish resistance to English oppression. In 1724 he published a series of public letters under the pseudonym of Drapier, the *Drapier Letters*, in which he argued against English financial exploitation of the Irish and even argued for Irish independence. His defense of the Irish continued in his *Modest Proposal* (1729), a satirical proposal to the English landlords to solve the poverty and scarcity in Ireland by eating Irish children. With cool logic Swift presents his proposal as a fully rational and acceptable solution, enumerating its various advantages:

I do therefore humbly offer it to public consideration that of the hundred and twenty thousand children, already computed, twenty thousand may be reserved for breed, whereof only one fourth part to be males, which is more than we allow to sheep, black cattle, or swine (...) therefore one male will be sufficient to serve four females. That the remaining hundred thousand may at a year old be offered in sale to the persons of quality and fortune through the kingdom, always advising the mother to let them suck plentifully in the last month, so as to render them plump and fat for a good table. A child will make two dishes at an entertainment for friends; and when the family dines alone, the fore or hind quarter will make a reasonable dish, and seasoned with a little pepper or salt will be very good boiled on the fourth day, especially in winter. (...)

I grant this food to be somewhat dear, and therefore very proper for landlords, who, as they have already devoured most of the parents, seem to have the best title to the children.

Swift's most famous works are *Gulliver's Travels* (1726), a story of four voyages of Captain Lemuel Gulliver to unknown lands. Swift is connecting to the long tradition of travel narratives and tales of unknown lands with fantastic inhabitants, utopias, bestiaries and animal tales, creating an allegorical depiction of the vices of English society and human vice in general. Gulliver is first shipwrecked at the island of Lilliput, inhabited by little people, whose physical smallness reflects their

petty concerns and arguments, parodying the rivalries of English politics and society. In the second voyage Gulliver comes to the land of giants called Brobdingnag, where the giant king is horrified when Gulliver boasts to him about the state of English civilization; instead, the giant king says that the English political order is completely corrupted. The third voyage takes Gulliver to the flying island of Laputa and their “colony,” the island of Balnibarbi which Laputa exploits and, in effect, continually destroys, while at the same time fearing their uprising (allegory for the English oppression of Ireland). The people of Laputa engage in useless scientific experiments and are completely indifferent to the extreme poverty of the people of Balnibarbi, or indeed to any practical matters. The fourth and bleakest experience takes place when Gulliver arrives to the land of Houyhnhnms, intelligent and virtuous horses. Apart from the horses the island is inhabited by Yahoos, people, who are filthy, brutal, selfish, continually fighting over everything. Gulliver is very impressed with the noble, wise, and virtuous horses, and horrified by the Yahoos. When Gulliver tells the horses about his civilized society in England, the horses conclude that the English are the same as Yahoos, and make Gulliver leave. When Gulliver returns home, his view of mankind is so transformed by his encounter with the noble horses and the vile Yahoos that he can't tolerate human company. He now sees the odious Yahoos in every human being.

My wife and family received me with great surprise and joy, because they concluded me certainly dead; but I must freely confess, the sight of them filled me only with hatred, disgust, and contempt; and the more, by reflecting on the near alliance I had to them. For although since my unfortunate exile from the Houyhnhnm country, I had compelled myself to tolerate the sight of Yahoos (...) yet my memory and imaginations were perpetually filled with the virtues and ideas of those exalted Houyhnhnms. And when I began to consider that by copulating with one of the Yahoo species, I had become a parent of more, it struck me with the utmost shame, confusion, and horror.

As soon as I entered the house, my wife took me into her arms, and kissed me; at which, having not been used to the touch of that odious animal for so many years, I fell in a swoon for almost an hour. (...) The first money I laid out was to buy two young stone-horses, which I keep in a good stable (...) My horses understand me tolerably well; I converse with them at least four hours every day. They are strangers to bridle or saddle; they live in great amity with me, and friendship to each other.

swoon – faint; stone-horses - stallions

Daniel Defoe (1660-1725)

Defoe was born in London to a family of a Dissenting butcher; because he was a Dissenter, he wasn't allowed to study at a university. Defoe earned his living a businessman; he went bankrupt many times and was often in great difficulty to stay safe from creditors and to support his family. He also traveled a lot, around Britain and on Continental Europe, partly on business and partly on secret missions for the government (both Tory and Whig), reporting for example of Scottish responses to the Act of Union. Besides these activities he also wrote many pamphlets and published a successful newspaper called *The Review*. He was a prolific writer; most of his texts were essays, pamphlets and satires on political and religious themes, like for example the provocative satirical text called *The Shortest Way with the Dissenters* (1702) in which Defoe, a Dissenter himself, assumes the voice of a member of the Church of England and argues that the best solution to end the schism among English Protestants would be to simply exterminate the Dissenters. Published during the rule of Queen Anne, the pamphlet was banned and publicly burned and Defoe himself was sentenced to the pillory and imprisoned.

Defoe didn't write his first “novel” until he was about 60 years old: *The Life and Strange Surprising Adventures of Robinson Crusoe, of York, Mariner* (1719). Defoe himself wouldn't have thought of writing in a new “genre.” The story and its form draws on many existing literary genres and sources which are all in the background of the emergence of the novel as a new genre in the 18th century: travel books, memoirs and biographies, religious (auto)biographies and conversion narratives. Defoe's story was

inspired by several real stories of survival, most famously by the true story of Alexander Selkirk, a British sailor who spent four years living all by himself on a remote island in South Pacific Ocean. Defoe wrote the story of Robinson as a first person narrative (“Written by Himself”), creating a fictive autobiography. The story can be understood at many levels. It is an adventure story, and as such it has become a lasting text in children’s literature and the first of countless similar other tales. It is also a story of the triumph of civilization: Robinson Crusoe manages to survive not only by his sheer will power but also by using rational thinking, education and hard work; he cultivates the wild nature of the island, becomes not just a hunter but also a farmer, builder, baker, cheese maker, maker of various utensils and equipment. In a way he creates a little English world on his island.

In contemporary literary studies the story of Robinson is typically understood as a story of British colonization: Robinson inhabits an empty island, establishes his English way of living there as much as he can, and when he meets Friday, the native man whom he saves from the cannibals, he proclaims himself his master, gives him an English name, teaches him English manners, English language and English religion. Appreciation for primitive cultures is not an 18th century concept. Robinson had earlier encounters with people who were not white; in the early part of the story he himself is captured and becomes a slave to a master in North Africa. He escapes together with another slave, a black boy Xury, but Xury never becomes a full partner for Robinson: Robinson still thinks himself naturally superior to Xury, Xury is “loyal” to him when he helps him escape. Once they are picked up by a Portuguese ship, its captain buys Xury from Robinson and Robinson settles in Brazil as a plantation owner. His fatal voyage, which eventually leaves him shipwrecked, is undertaken with the purpose of getting more slaves in West Africa for his plantation. Robinson never thinks of slavery as something wrong, this simply does not occur to him—unless, of course, he himself is enslaved.

To read the story of Robinson in this way, as an image of European imperialism and supposed superiority, is certainly and obviously true to the text. It is a story of white dominance. At the same time Defoe’s main concern in the novel is not the adventure itself but an exploration of the possibilities for survival and even more than that, a focus on the spiritual development of Robinson Crusoe throughout his varied circumstances. First of all, Robinson does not come to the island to colonize it and rule over its possible inhabitants, but is shipwrecked and barely saves his life and fights against almost insurmountable odds to survive alone in wilderness. If he becomes a white lord and master of his island it is only gradually so, certainly not so from the start. Moreover, when he leaves the island, he leaves it in the hands of Spaniards and when he revisits the island years later, he is happy to see that it has become a prosperous settlement. And while it is true that Robinson proclaims himself lord and master of the island and his “subjects,” ie. Friday and later Friday’s father and a Spanish sailor, he comments that he allows a “liberty of conscience” in his “dominion”:

My island was now peopled, and I thought myself very rich in subjects; and it was a merry reflection, which I frequently made, how like a king I looked. First of all, the whole country was my own property, so that I had an undoubted right of dominion. Secondly, my people were perfectly subjected - I was absolutely lord and lawgiver - they all owed their lives to me, and were ready to lay down their lives, if there had been occasion for it, for me. It was remarkable, too, I had but three subjects, and they were of three different religions - my man Friday was a Protestant, his father was a Pagan and a cannibal, and the Spaniard was a Papist. However, I allowed liberty of conscience throughout my dominions.

papist - Roman Catholic

Secondly, Robinson’s story is a spiritual narrative. It was a common practice among believing Christians of the time, and especially among the Dissenters, to keep spiritual diaries and to tell testimonies of their conversion and life of faith, and Defoe is after something similar in this fictive autobiography. Throughout the story Robinson is thinking about his faith in God. He prays and reviews his life: he repents of his original disobedience to his parents when he decided to be a sailor against their

wish, and returns to a faith in God and obedience to God. So the story ends in reassuring its readers of the appropriateness of their morals and religion: Robinson resumes his life as a rich and respectable businessman and a devout Protestant.

Defoe went on to write a number of other books, including two novels about female characters: *Moll Flanders* (1722), the story of a woman's rise from a life as a prostitute and ruthless thief to a respectable life of a repenting Christian; and *Roxana* (1724), a story which develops in the opposite direction and depicts a woman's fall from respectability, caused by her selfishness. One last text to mention is *A Journal of the Plague Year* (1722), a fictive memoir of the Great Plague in London in 1665, inspired perhaps by the memories of Defoe's own uncle.

In contrast to Robinson Crusoe as an ur-story of British colonization we may mention a very different story which preceded it, a romance or an early novel called *Oroonoko, or the History of the Royal Slave* (1688) by **Aphra Behn** (1640-1689), the first professional female writer in England and a successful playwright. Behn was a problematic figure in her society and her reputation as a writer was revived only in the 20th century thanks to Virginia Woolf and feminist critics. Behn was a freethinker, a courtesan, an advocate of women's rights and female sexuality, and also a spy. *Oroonoko* is a story of an African prince Oroonoko, a "noble savage," who is captured as a slave and taken to Surinam, then an English colony, and his tragic love for his beloved Imoinda and their tragic deaths. Behn tells the story as the narrator, in first person as an English lady living in Surinam. What is remarkable is that Behn praises Oroonoko and his beloved as naturally virtuous and depicts the cruelty of slavery and slave trade. This is of course in sharp contrast to the unquestioned acceptance of slavery in, for example, *Robinson Crusoe*.

Besides Defoe and **Samuel Richardson**, the above-mentioned author of *Pamela, or Virtue Rewarded* and his second, perhaps better, novel *Clarissa* (1747-1749) (both immensely popular epistolary novels and stories of a virtuous young woman facing seduction by an immoral rich man), at least two other 18th century novelists must be mentioned: Henry Fielding as a representative of the 18th century at its climax, and Laurence Sterne as an innovator of narrative, whose experiments prefigure many postmodern views on literature.

Henry Fielding (1707-1754)

In the first part of his career as a writer Fielding was a successful dramatist, until 1737, when the corrupt Prime Minister Horace Walpole imposed censorship on theater and Fielding turned to writing fiction. His first venture was a parody on *Pamela* called *Shamela* (suggesting both "sham" and "shame"); when Richardson published *Clarissa*, however, Fielding was genuinely impressed with the story. Then he went on to invent novels of his own: *The Adventures of Joseph Andrews* (1742) is inspired by Richardson but focuses on a virtuous male character, Pamela's brother. Unlike Richardson Fielding gives the book a comic twist, laying foundations for the comic novel in English literature. As he consciously comments in the preface, he is creating a new genre, "a comic epic poem in prose." Fielding's masterpiece is his novel *The History of Tom Jones, a Foundling* (1749), a story of a good-hearted but certainly not saintly central character, Tom Jones, and his growth from irresponsibility to prudence and religion. Tom is an orphan brought up by the kind Mr Allworthy, who also raises his own nephew Blifil. Tom is a good-natured, honest, even if sometimes libertine character who enjoys romantic encounters with a poor girl from the neighborhood. Blifil is a hypocrite, hiding his selfish scheming under the mask of loyalty and reason. Both Tom and Blifil want to marry Sophia Western from a neighboring family. Blifil schemes against Tom so that Tom is expelled from the house of Mr Allworthy and travels through England to London, encountering many different characters on the way and growing in maturity, until in London he is finally able to marry his beloved Sophia. In the end Tom's true identity is discovered as being also

a real nephew of Mr Allworthy. It is a story with a very complex plot and many subplots, featuring hundreds of characters and many settings, divided into 18 books. Tom Jones is justified as a hero despite his moral lapses because he is essentially good hearted, and good nature is, according to Fielding, what truly makes a gentleman. In Richardson, virtue is nearly equated with sexual purity; Fielding appreciates a road to virtue and restraint, a journey through experience, so that the reader sympathizes with Tom and appreciates his good heart despite his mistakes.

Tom Jones does not only have a complicated plot and a great number of characters, it also alludes to a number of contemporary literary conventions and genres, like comedy and the mock-heroic, pastoral and satire. The omniscient narrator takes significant liberties with the story, adding countless digressions, comments and reflections on his own narrative methods, or literary criticism and philosophy etc, often addressing the reader directly and commenting on the story. At the beginning of Book II, for example, the narrator explains the differences which the reader should expect in this story in comparison to other more traditional stories, and asserts that he is in fact creating a whole new genre:

Though we have properly enough entitled this our work, a history, and not a life; nor an apology for a life, as is more in fashion; yet we intend in it rather to pursue the method of those writers, who profess to disclose the revolutions of countries, than to imitate the painful and voluminous historian, who, to preserve the regularity of his series, thinks himself obliged to fill up as much paper with the detail of months and years in which nothing remarkable happened, as he employs upon those notable areas when the greatest scenes have been transacted on the human stage. (...)

Now it is our purpose, in the ensuing pages, to pursue a contrary method. When any extraordinary scene presents itself (as we trust will often be the case), we shall spare no pains nor paper to open it at large to our reader; but if whole years should pass without producing anything worthy his notice, we shall not be afraid of a chasm in our history; but shall hasten on to matters of consequence, and leave such periods of time totally unobserved. (...)

My reader then is not to be surprized, if, in the course of this work, he shall find some chapters very short, and others altogether as long; some that contain only the time of a single day, and others that comprise years; in a word, if my history sometimes seems to stand still, and sometimes to fly. For all which I shall not look on myself as accountable to any court of critical jurisdiction whatever: for as I am, in reality, the founder of a new province of writing, so I am at liberty to make what laws I please therein. And these laws, my readers, whom I consider as my subjects, are bound to believe in and to obey; with which that they may readily and cheerfully comply, I do hereby assure them that I shall principally regard their ease and advantage in all such institutions: for I do not, like a jure divino tyrant, imagine that they are my slaves, or my commodity. I am, indeed, set over them for their own good only, and was created for their use, and not they for mine. Nor do I doubt, while I make their interest the great rule of my writings, they will unanimously concur in supporting my dignity, and in rendering me all the honour I shall deserve or desire.

In the sheer scope and variety of characters in the novel Fielding achieved to create a portrait of the English society of his times; this, rather than a deep psychological introspection, was his emphasis in the novel. His achievement in *Tom Jones* was a great example to, and forerunner of the great nineteenth century novelists like Dickens or Austen.

Laurence Sterne (1713-1768)

Sterne was born in Ireland to poor parents and then was raised in England thanks to rich relatives; he became an Anglican clergyman whose interests were perhaps more secular than religious. He suffered

from an unhappy marriage and from poor health; because of tuberculosis he moved to France, where he hoped to find a better climate. The journey became the inspiration for his last work, *A Sentimental Journey through France and Italy* (1768), which is a sort of parody on travel narrative, omitting all the typical places of interests and focusing on seemingly unimportant details and events, and ending, despite its title, in France, never taking the reader to Italy.

By that time Sterne was already famous as the author of a long book which you can think of as an anti-novel, called *The Life and Opinions of Tristram Shandy, Gentleman* (1759-1767). It is fascinating to realize that at a time when the novel as a genre was just being established and was enjoying great popularity as an exciting new art form, there appears a writer who is able to parody, analyze and question some of the underlying premises of the genre, creating such a penetrating commentary of the limitations and assumptions of the novel that they can reasonably be linked to postmodern literature and literary theory. In *Tristram Shandy*, Sterne sets out to undermine every possible expectation that a reader of a novel might have. The book's title announces a focus and knowledge of the central character, Tristram Shandy, but what we learn about Tristram are just a few details, no thoroughgoing exploration of his life and opinions, as the title suggests, and Tristram himself disappears from the novel after a while and the story focuses on his uncle Toby Shandy and his friend and helper Trim. Tristram is present throughout the novel as a narrative voice but he offers no sense of security or reliability, which a reader of an 18th century novel told by an omniscient narrator would expect. One of the central literary devices of the narrative is digression. Any attempt to tell a linear development of events is constantly interrupted by Tristram's digressions concerning almost anything: stories of other characters, all kinds of unrelated tales, memories, comments on narrative technique, jokes, pieces of other texts, science and philosophy, sketches of places and journeys, etc. Plots and subplots are left unfinished, instead we get all kinds of puns and jokes, often with erotic overtones. Chapters are of very unequal length; some cover many pages, other chapters are just a paragraph or two. The text is interrupted even typographically, by blanks, long series of dashes, asterisks, various lines, black pages etc.

The book begins with Tristram's conception; the conception of Tristram is the conception of the narrative, and while Tristram doesn't get to be born at all in the first two books of the novel, the decisive events from his life which we learn are all connected to his disempowerment, paralleling the limitations of the novel that Sterne analyzes. The decisive events are: the interruption of the sexual intercourse during which he was conceived, Tristram's receiving a mistaken name, his nose being crushed by the doctor during delivery, and his accidental circumcision by a sash window. Here is the beginning of the novel and part of the episode of Tristram's conception. Tellingly, Tristram's conception is marked by an interruption, as his entire story is marked by constant interruptions:

I wish either my father or my mother, or indeed both of them, as they were in duty both equally bound to it, had minded what they were about when they begot me; had they duly considered how much depended upon what they were then doing;--that not only the production of a rational Being was concerned it, but that possibly the happy formation and temperature of his body, perhaps his genius and the very cast of his mind;--and, for aught they knew to the contrary, even the fortunes of his whole house might take their turn from the humours and dispositions which were then uppermost:--Had they duly weighed and considered all this, and proceeded accordingly,--I am verily persuaded I should have made a quite different figure in the world, from that, in which the reader is likely to see me. (...)

Pray, my dear, quoth my mother, have you not forgot to wind up the clock?-----Good G--! cried my father, making an exclamation, but taking care to moderate his voice at the same time,--*Did ever woman, since the creation of the world, interrupt a man with such a silly question?*

Digression as the main narrative technique is celebrated by Tristram the narrator:

Digressions, incontestably, are the sunshine;--they are the life, the soul of reading;--take them out of this book for instance,--you might as well take the book along with them;--one cold eternal winter would

reign in every page; restore them to the writer; he steps forth like a bridegroom,--bids All hail; brings variety, and forbids the appetite to fail.

All the dexterity is in the good cookery and management of them, so as to be not only for the advantage of the reader, but also of the author, whose distress, in this matter, is truly pitiable: For, if he begins a digression--from that moment, I observe, his whole work stands stock still;--and if he goes on with his main work,--then there is an end of his digression.

One of the philosophical influences behind Sterne's book was John Locke's theory of the free association of ideas and on the relativity of time; precisely these ideas he tried to capture and create in his novel. (There were other literary inspirations, of course, like Rabelais or the satirical writings.) And this is what readers get: free association of ideas, rather than any thoroughgoing exploration of a human mind, which the title, and indeed the novel as a genre, seems to promise. Sterne's narrative is also a forerunner of the modernist technique of the stream of consciousness. There is no conclusion, no ending, neither of the novel as such nor of the various episodes; rather, the book is a series of comic subversals. In this, as well as its constant metatextual allusions, the text anticipates postmodern ways of understanding literature. If the novel as a genre creates a make-belief universe and claims to portray human characters reliably, pretends to make them understandable to the reader, Sterne unmasks these claims as fundamentally impossible, and yet shows that while literature does not provide a definitive interpretation of the world, just like science, philosophy or art forms (which are also referred to in the book), it is nevertheless irreplaceable.

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