

Inventing and Regulating: The Eighteenth Century between Experiment and System. Preface

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One of the hallmarks of the long eighteenth century is its extreme ambivalence about the value of intellectual systems. The same period that produced Ralph Cudworth's monumental *True Intellectual System of the Universe* (1678) also gave rise to satires of systematic knowledge such as the *Dunciad* (1728) and Swift's ironic *Argument Against the Abolishing of Christianity in England* (1708) whose speaker is full of vacuous talk about the "System of Christianity" and the "System of the Gospel." The contrariety of opinion about systems is so deeply ingrained in the century that the opposing sides often appear in the same writer. In *Rasselas* Johnson derides a philosopher who speaks vacantly about "the general disposition and tendency of the present system of things," but he himself praises Shakespeare for understanding "those general passions and principles by which all minds are agitated, and the whole system of life is continued in motion." In his most important work Johnson hoped at first to systemize and fix the English language. In 1747 in his *Plan of an English Dictionary* he said the "one great end of this undertaking" was "to fix the English Language." By the time he finished his great work, however, he knew this was impossible, and his Preface to the *Dictionary* (1755) is largely the lamentation of "a poet doomed to awake a lexicographer." What intervened was the experiment of trying to fix language, and the result of the experiment was knowledge too irregular and anomalous to systemize. A poet may dream of systems; a lexicographer – a kind of scientist – knows they do not fit the facts.

The story of intellectual history in the eighteenth century is very often a tale in which experience defeats attempts to regulate and systematize knowledge or, for that matter, any other aspect of

life. As Johnson failed to fix language, Hogarth failed to fix taste in his treatise, *The Analysis of Beauty. Written with a view of fixing the fluctuating ideas of taste* (1751). Ephraim Chambers failed to fix knowledge in his *Cyclopaedia* (1728) and, to switch from intellectual to social history, the union of Scotland and England (1707) failed to fix the nation under a single national system. Likewise, one might say the foundation of the Bank of England (1694) failed fully to regulate finance, and the institution of street numbers by proclamation in 1762 and 1763 failed to organize the map of London. It is likewise true, however, that all these attempts had force even if there was an equal and opposite reaction from the dismantling power of experience.

The literature of the time certainly reflected in very numerous ways the collision of these equal and opposite forces. Periodical writing injected a steady stream of experience into the intellectual life of the period. The *Tatler* and the *Spectator* reported on daily life in the metropolis and reflected the pulse of life in the coffee shops, but they also tried to make points and put that life together in a way that made sense. They campaigned for the establishment of mores and, even more trenchantly, for socially accepted attitudes in love and commerce as well as in the arts. These mores are, in effect, fictions or nascent systems. To promulgate these fictions Addison and Steele invented characters such as Isaac Bickerstaff and Roger de Coverley who could systemize experience in various ways. The great literary innovation of the period, the novel, can be seen as a direct development of Addison and Steele's attempts both to present and to regulate daily life in the pages of their journals. Such attempts at regulating are innovations, however, and innovations inevitably lead to disruptions in the intellectual and social systems out of which they arise. Not surprisingly these particular aspects of eighteenth-century British literature – the periodical and the novel – are the subjects of most of the chapters in this collection of essays on inventing and regulating in the eighteenth century. In brief, this collection shows that the lexical specificity and regulating tendencies of novels and essays helped build up the ideological experience of modernity at the same time that they undercut such regulation by being perpetually innovative.

The essays have been grouped under different headings in an effort to point out a series of junctions or knots of theories and practices

that are still at the core of a fruitful critical debate. Thus, the first lot of essays, labelled as “Essays on literary genres”, is in itself evidence of the variety of problems any categorization of genres continues to pose for the critical reader of eighteenth-century literature. Paolo Bugliani’s *Regulating the Eighteenth-Century Periodical Essay: A Poetics from The Tatler, The Spectator, and The Rambler* aptly turns up as introductory since its focus is on the generic characteristics of the essay whose protean quality has accompanied its existence since Montaigne, and become enriched through the examples of Bacon, Browne, and Locke with a large production reflecting every aspect of human life. It is exactly the openness of the essay that constitutes a primary menace to its consistency, making it the field of all and any experimentation. The goal of Bugliani’s essay is thus to retrace the contours of “a concealed manifesto of essay-writing” in Addison’s, Steele’s and Johnson’s meta-discursive passages interspersed in their papers in an utterly unsystematic pattern, in order to fully account for Johnson’s definition of the essay in the 1755 *Dictionary* as “a loose sally of the mind”. As the essay managed to gain pride of place within the literary prose genres, the emergence of the novel also called for the identification of the proper pigeonhole where the new model of writing could fit. Through a survey of the debate that led to the emergence of the aesthetic category of the novel, Riccardo Capoferro’s essay discusses already available critical terms the eighteenth century authors largely deployed, sometimes forcing new meaning into the conventional lexicon. At the same time, the necessity to commit the novel to facticity and empirical knowledge was being constantly emphasized. *The Rise of “the Novel”: Naming (and Disciplining) New Fiction in Eighteenth-Century Britain* can be praised for conciseness and clarity of intent, which is an extremely difficult achievement with such diverse material, and for succeeding in controlling a large corpus of primary sources in an effort to produce a coherent hermeneutics. The essay argues that the stable adoption of the word “novel” was mainly due to the need to discipline the new genre: the growth of a new type of aesthetic consumption called for a new critical language, which, besides regulating, was necessary in order to sketch the contours of novels and their consumers. Both authors and critics worked to stress distinctions between good and bad novels and to work in the direction of defining the genre in historical perspective.

Elena Cotta Ramusino's *Irish Gothic: How the Canon Intersects History* provides a survey of the historical, political and generic sources of Irish gothic, and its line of argument calls for the reassessment and canonical redefinition of the genre in order to widen the category to include works written in the second half of the century. Reframing early gothic works previously assigned to other genres, the author identifies a watershed moment that emerges in response to social conditions in the late eighteenth century – the fear of subversion and terror unleashed by the French Revolution and further amplified by the Irish turmoil of 1798. The Irish situation – together with a feeling of decay accompanying the Anglo-Irish Ascendancy – works in a powerful way on the binaries of English Gothic, forcing attention to issues about the liminality of the authors and their locations.

Manuela D'Amore's "*Judicious books enlarge the mind and improve the heart*": *Literature in Women's Pedagogical Writings in Late Enlightenment England* analyzes the topic indicated in the title, from the late Stuart period to the end of the eighteenth century. A new aspect of pedagogical writing in the eighteenth century is the central position assumed by literature in the debates of the time: this of course triggered much critical commentary and helps the contemporary scholar to envision the century as an interesting critical intersection. That literature was a fundamental component of female education in late eighteenth-century England is assured by the figures of eminent intellectual women such as Catharine Macauley, Mary Wollstonecraft, and Maria Edgeworth, who all included canonical literary works in their syllabuses as proper examples of "truth" and "nature".

The central section of this volume, under the heading "Transition. Essays on literary performance", deals in various ways with acting out or performance: Silvia Spera's "*Odi et Amo*": *Shakespearean Supernatural Dimensions on the Eighteenth-Century Stage* investigates the contrasting obsession of the Enlightenment with unseen and invisible powers, capable of eliciting contempt and fascination at the same time. Working on adaptations of *The Tempest*, *Macbeth* and *Hamlet* by Davenant and Garrick, Spera brings to the fore the opposite tendencies that dominate the century – one bound on erasing the supernatural in the name of reason, and the other struggling to aestheticize the supernatural, an attitude

which betrays the hidden fascination it held for certain authors. The plays enlisting the supernatural are therefore those that go through a thorough process of rewriting in the historical direction indicated by the Enlightenment stage (which of course is valid for all eighteenth-century Shakespeares).

The Eighteenth-Century Invention of Literary Suspense by Rosamaria Loretelli interrogates the meanings of the word “suspense” as they evolved in the course of the eighteenth century and its proper relevance to the actual writing of novels. The shift to silent reading that accompanies the birth of the genre of the novel calls for new ways of producing suspense in the readers’ expectations. The Gothic, in the hands of Walpole and Radcliffe, will provide a very useful battlefield for the creation of delays capable of promoting suspense. The perspective is on the reader’s side, and its impact is strongly effective both in the world of the theatre and in gothic narratives, which play on the reader’s (and the character’s) anxieties.

“Science and Society” is the last group. It comprises three essays, mostly involved with social reception. One of these, however, also deals with the discourse of science and literature in the Enlightenment. Silvia Granata’s *Joseph Priestley and the Fate of Eudiometry: Debates on Method, Progress, and the Politics of Science* debates Priestley’s activity and his scientific method in order to connect the latter to social fallout and to the possible benefits systematic research can bring to society. Moving from Priestley’s emphasis on chance and incident in his reports of experiments, the author underlines his use of specific terms denoting casualness in order to prove his honesty in the carrying out of his experiments.

Chiara Rolli’s *Parliamentary Emotions: Edmund Burke’s Experiment against a Monstrous Imperial System* studies Burke’s rhetoric of pathos and performance during Warren Hastings’ trial in the light of the contemporary performative styles of tragic actors such as David Garrick and Sarah Siddons. The overemphasized theatricality of Burke’s speeches, and in particular the opening one, is analyzed and discussed against the theory of emotions that were current in the late years of the century. With her *Resistance and Experimentation: The Ladies of Llangollen’s Engagement with Enlightenment Ideas of Progress and Improvement* Gioia Angeletti closes the collection with an example of an out-of-the-way choice carried out by two outstanding literary women. The Ladies of

Llangollen were a famous pair of Irish spinsters who chose seclusion and domesticity by launching an experimental female community in eighteenth-century Wales which served as a counterpoint to the period's dominant philosophy of progress and improvement. Literary women themselves, and the object of literary description, the Ladies pursued resistance against worldly forces and produced a literature that takes a stance in opposition to received notions of womanhood.

Overall, the present collection of essays discovers variety, diversity, and complication in a period that was once thought of as easily defined in terms of reason, order, decorum, proportion, symmetry, system, and science. If the discovery (or, in most cases, the rediscovery) of women writers was the greatest achievement of twentieth-century studies of the eighteenth century, that of the early twenty-first is to shed light on their participation in a literary environment that was disrupted by all kinds of forces, in addition to changes in the demographics of its writers. The literary world of the eighteenth century was not in fact characterized by stability and order; it was, like most periods, transitional, but the transition was not from one sort of stasis to another; it was, instead, from one failed attempt after another to institute stability in all the unsystematic systems of society and the arts.