Review Article

Beginnings and Endings in Literary Histories

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Liz Bellamy, *Commerce, Morality and the Eighteenth-Century Novel,* Cambridge University Press, 1998, pp. vii + 223, £37.50; **Judith Frank**, *Common Ground: Eighteenth-Century Fiction and the Poor,* Stanford University Press, 1997, pp. ix + 230, £30; **Anne Janowitz**, *Lyric and Labour in the Romantic Tradition,* Cambridge University Press, 1998, pp. xii + 278, £35; **Clifford Siskin**, *The Work of Writing: Literature and Social Change in Britain, 1700–1830,* Johns Hopkins University Press, 1998, pp. x + 285, £30, £13 pb.

Literary criticism's periodizations have always been based on tacit or encoded histories figured by way of watersheds, landmarks or fulminatory events. These are, in a sense, big metaphors announcing new or extinguished literary eras signalled by particular redolent dates, and the catastrophist narrative that emerges is commonly one which maps literary events into a continuous chronological sequence that is a time line of a kind. This, of course, is our way of managing literary history, and even while most historicist or historically minded critics will sceptically regard ideas of literary evolution or whiggish progressivist stories, our new literary histories are rarely so radical as to want to dispose of the idea that what we call seventeenth-century literature gave way to what we call eighteenth-century literature, which then in turn, was succeeded by Romanticism. And this narrative of succession and sequence necessarily carries with it inflections and interests which rationalise these transformations either in terms of the historical periods which produce cultural change (as in the assertion that Restoration literature is necessarily different from that which preceded it) or in terms of the cultural changes

which themselves predicate further change (as in the proposal that Romanticism got sick and died in the 1820s).

The terms we use are of course, significant: '——— – century literature' is a neat, all-inclusive indicator of a kind, whereas an 'ism' is a movement impelled by particular, intrusive tendencies. Making an adjective out of the monarch as with 'Victorian literature' is actually synechdochic, but imperialistically so, the part of this whole imposing itself in a dramatic and flattening fashion to deny difference or create eccentrics by signifying style and conformity to that style. Yet the effects of this are not altogether bad, for while the mixed languages we use for periodization (centenary adjectives, movements, monarchs) suggest a tenuous history and awkward relations between its parts, this mixed language is productive of histories rather than history. The sense here is of periods or movements resettling like constantly moving tectonic plates. These movements are capable of accommodating new insights and modified histories such as the recent idea of 'the long eighteenth century', a term which captures wonderfully the struggle that inheres in the language of literary history.

The source of this language's reproduction, disappointingly, lies not so much in intellectual and academic debate as in institutionalised practice. Intellectually, we ought to be concerned about our confused terminology, whatever the accidental benefits of the polyphony which produces contesting histories rather than a seamless whole. This rich end is not the result of an intellectual means but a product of the organisation of the academy itself. Scholarship means specialism and specialism demands focus. Focus manifests itself conveniently in period. The nature of the doctorate, the undergraduate syllabus and the organisation of its teaching, anthologies, tenure, the RAE – all these are rather obvious mechanisms which combine quite randomly to compartmentalise and slot scholars into very specific intellectual communities with their own orthodoxies, no matter how radical such orthodoxies may be within themselves. This has been a fascinating phenomenon for those watching the academy from a distance, who might have noted at one time, for instance, with curiosity and intrigue, why it was that a Renaissance New Historicist was so different from a Romantic New Historicist, and why there seemed to be very little travelling between the two. We all know that in the main seventeenth century scholars do not speak (much) to eighteenth century scholars, while most Romanticists, alas, have little to do with them either. We also know that here is a simple reason for this: they have nothing to say to each other.

Of course there are exceptions, and notable ones at that, and *Literature & History* is a journal consistently aware of the problems of bridging divides, no matter how resolute certain parts of the academy are in seeking to maintain them – again, most usually by way of the mantra of specialism. Discipline and period are not really distinct; they are both devices to divide knowledge, but periodization works by invoking chronology as the mark of difference.

Literary knowledge is thus created and reproduced in discrete areas bounded by the sign of history, and the relationship between what is known and the province of that knowledge is symbiotic, continually self-confirming. But it can be changed, challenged or, in Janowitz's words 'pressured' by modes of understanding that disrupt these boundaries, either by adducing histories that do not conform to extant maps of literary period, or by the study of genre which, in itself, may be shown to be agnostic to period divides. All of the works under review here have something important to say about period or periodization. Siskin and Janowitz, particularly, mount serious challenges to literary history as we know it.

Janowitz makes the point early on: 'we are always having to negotiate the problems caused by the limits imposed by thinking periodically or those imposed by thinking generically', and she goes on to demonstrate in an authoritative review of a whole range of work how pressurising the boundaries of either category has produced new formations of knowledge, although it is notable that many of her examples, for all that, remain rooted within conventional start and end dates, and make their contributions, new and recuperative though they may be, within established periods. The exceptions come mostly and unsurprisingly from historians such as E. P. Thompson, Iain McCalman and Janet Neeson who are not primarily occupied with literary history of course, but are concerned to trace and mark out shifts or transformations of another kind. It is interesting to note that these shifts are productive of a narrative which often works through a recurrent trope of nostalgia to tell the story of loss rather than gain: Thompson's account of a moral economy's displacement by labour relations governed by capital, or Neeson's account of the undermining of common culture by wage labour. It could be argued that this too results in periodizations, although of course they are far weaker, and less limiting than those embraced by literary history. Janowitz's interest however, is of a different kind, for her concerns with period and genre are focussed on the inhibiting ways in which conventional narratives have set up very particular kinds of exclusion. The introversion of Romanticism, evinced most commonly by reference to the predominance of lyric form, and bounded by stories of post-revolutionary personal crisis and withdrawal, is challenged here by this author's understanding of the romantic lyric as a complex interchange rather than a typical or typological marker. The loss of communitarianism or community (as in Neeson's or Thompson's narrative) is not succeeded by Romantic individualism or the liberal version of identity: it is to be placed in the context of a continuous dialogue between communitarian claims and individual agency which she discovers to be potently present in the genre of the romantic lyric – not bounded by period but extending through into the later nineteenth century. In turn this leads to an important liberation: by not reading the lyric as a symptom of romantic agony, Janowitz dispenses with the shibboleth of the invention of the modern 'subject' in the romantic period, noting that 'literary and cultural

historians can and do claim this for every period which poses the problem as if identity were a precipitate of the world rather than an agent in making it.'

In not making any claim for the legitimacy of Romanticism as a period, Janowitz is able to follow a dominant genre across notions of period that have tended to construct the fictional divides of a proper literary history. Further, her liberation from the obligation to re-trace an historical shift *onto* literature, enables her to move freely across literary boundaries to read literature as a form of human agency.

The result is a book that is assured and certain of its methodology, a book written with a very steady hand. Taking the lyric as a form propagandised by romantic and post-romantic mystics as the incorporation of deep truth apprehended in deep isolation, and casting it instead as a form contested within a history which included working-class and plebeian writers, she traces the lyric's manifestations from Wordsworth and Burns to Linton and Morris, taking in along the way such writers as Clare, Davenport and the Chartist poets. This lyric form has different possibilities. Although it still bears claims for individualism, it simultaneously carries a strong trajectory of communitarian identity. Alienation in the Chartist lyric is not a precondition for the discovery of transcendental truth or meditative wisdom, but a consequence, in part, of exploitation. Its momentum however, in the work of a writer like Ernest Jones, is towards collectivity, hope, agency and internationalism. This is genre history of a kind, but it also incorporates a new definition of the romantic project or impulse as a lyrical dialogue of frustration and intention, communitarianism and voluntarism, that can only be fully recognised by moving well beyond the established canon, and well beyond the embattled boundaries of periodization.

Clifford Siskin's *The Work of Writing* also has much to say about the lyric, demonstrating that this form was much more widely employed (wide here in the sense both of quantity and purpose) in the eighteenth century than conventional accounts allow. The lyric's key place in the making of the body of knowledge known as literature is given prominence in Siskin's account, and his argument is that its strategic position there, underwritten by large claims for the great weight of personal feeling, is always likely to occlude its other functions. Even to isolate the form as a genre may be to construct an illusory division of historical convenience: Siskin's work suggests powerfully that such a rationale is not capable of recognising how what we now consider to be separate genres were in fact evolving in mutually constitutive modes. Our clear divides, so essential to our certainties about periodizations, had much more blurred beginnings.

The Work of Writing is an exciting, provocative and fascinating read. It incorporates a forceful reconsideration of periodization which occupies a long eighteenth century rather than Janowitz's long romanticism. Siskin's key point is that there was *more* writing in the eighteenth century, and the cultural accommodation of this activity was productive of a structure of

categorisation with far reaching effects in social behaviour, disciplinarity and gender exclusions. This is a history of writing (conceptualised *via* Williams as the inclusive activity of writing, print and silent reading) which is not in any way synonymous with a history of literature, or the literary. Indeed, 'literature' is to be inserted into this history. It becomes a cultural category in the eighteenth century when it is also acknowledged as being linked to the profession of writing. At this time then, 'literature' becomes valorised as a category of writing characterised by its depth of imaginative experience, while writing also becomes elevated because of its relation to the project of cultural improvement. The book begins with this important recognition of writing as a technology with transforming effects. In this paradigm of understanding, attitudes towards writing are not the consequences of broader social phenomena or effects, because writing itself is directly productive of such effects: as the eighteenth century gets used to the proliferation and power of writing, so, in Siskin's terms, it seeks ways of accommodating this abundance more comfortably; through disciplinary divides and categories, the taming of writing into a safe tool for literature, through professionalization, and domestication.

So what are the consequences of this history of writing for literary history? The short answer to this is a series of striking questions which, it turns out, cannot be avoided, since they are forced to the surface in a history of writing. Why – for example – do we assume that the rise of the novel in the eighteenth century (a strong feature of conventional periodization) is best charted by reference to those novelists who were *not* part of the massive upsurge of novel-writing in the 1780s and beyond? How do we account for the disciplinary displacement of Scottish philosophy by English Literature? Why have we persisted in recognising the lyric as the mode of personal expression when there is ample evidence of its being used for historical, public and critical purposes, and the experimental *production* of knowledge? The answers to these questions and the many more that this book provokes involve statements about the data we customarily use as a foundation for historical hypotheses, and our manner of using it. *The Work of Writing* points – in part – to data previously ignored or thought unusable in, or irrelevant to, literary history, and alongside this, Siskin shows a consistently sharp eye for lexical history, noting how the use of terminology (such as 'novel', 'labour', 'experiment', 'culture' and 'improvement') shapes the work of writing. At the same time, certain watershed dates are retained, so that this new literary history is one bounded by dates justified by way of the extent of social change which they signify.

The books by Liz Bellamy and Judith Frank work within more conventional periodizations, accepting the eighteenth century as a legitimate descriptive category and as a distinct historical period. In addition, they offer narratives of the eighteenth century that chart its progress in terms of an increasing anxiety. Bellamy's subject is fiction's representation or incorporation of a debate

between private and public morality that is set in a context of growing anxiety about social cohesion. The novel assumes a critical role here in the century's 'anxiety' to locate a 'single genre within which clear and unequivocal moral guidance [could] be sought', and by the end of the century that more general fear had transformed itself, within the novel's more private 'feminised' identity, into further 'anxieties over consumption and expenditure'. For Frank, who concentrates on a history of the novel 'from below', analysing the fictional representation of the poor, it is the increasing centrality of labour in this representation that generates, correspondingly, 'an increasing social anxiety'.

Bellamy's valuable book is a sustained examination of four novels (*Clarissa, Tom Jones, Sir Charles Grandison, The Female Quixote*) in the context of what she defines as a critical and continuing debate in the period: that about the nature of a commercial society and the place of the individual within it. The novel is not only a location for this debate; it is also a subject included within it, as a prime focus for the relation between public and private morality, and as the cultural form whose social effects were so suspiciously regarded. The argument of the book is a compelling one: the eighteenth century witnesses the triumph of commercial morality despite the novel's satirical and affective exposure of it, because finally the novel itself becomes more 'privatised', thereby accepting the split between public and private morality evidenced in the fiction of Fanny Burney and Jane Austen. It was left to the nineteenth century to re-examine the relation between commercial expansion and the public interest through its recognition that the working classes had a claim on such entitlements.

Frank's book makes an earlier claim for the place of the working class in the eighteenth-century novel. Noting that recent scholarship has emphasised the transfer of cultural and ideological power from the aristocracy to the commercial classes, and that this narrative has tended to represent the fictional poor as allegorical surrogates for the aspiring middle classes, she opts to re-read the conservative tendency in the satirical novel and look again at the structural roles played by the underprivileged there. The resulting argument is that the poor in fact have an important function not only in the definition of the dominant culture, but also in providing a complex mirror in which acts of imitation are elaborated. Her book is therefore highly complementary to Bellamy's even while the arguments are so different, for she is deliberately not concerned with the progressive novel's interest in private morality, since it is the conservative novel, predominantly, which demonstrates the powerful presence of the poor in rituals which act out definitions of gentility. Concentrating on Fielding, Sterne, Smollett and Burney, she analyses these rituals in a series of stimulating readings which demonstrate the relation between labour and leisure: as the century proceeds the increasing presence of labour produces a more and more complex fictional machinery to deal with gentility and poverty, and

the concluding reading of Burney's *The Wanderer* is the climactic exemplification of this.

What all of these books have in common is the strong theme of work, in the sense of a working or labouring class (Frank and Janowitz), or the cultural history of work and its value, as in Bellamy's discussion of civic humanism's espousal of labour's role in wealth generation, or Siskin's discovery and account of the invention of mental labour or the labour of writing. This sustained interest in the relation between labour, value and social practice reaches out beyond the tentative provisionality of construction and representation, while simultaneously pressing the formal boundaries of periodization, to cause us to think again about a literary history mapped onto material life, which (to borrow Braudel's terms) is made up of humankind and things. Each of these books can tell us a lot about each of these categories, and most importantly, they instigate discussions about where such categories begin and end.