

Zeitschrift: Colloquium Helveticum : cahiers suisses de littérature générale et comparée = Schweizer Hefte für allgemeine und vergleichende Literaturwissenschaft = quaderni svizzeri di letteratura generale e comparata

Herausgeber: Association suisse de littérature générale et comparée

Band: - (1995)

Heft: 22: Mélanges offerts à Manfred Gsteiger pour son soixante-cinquième anniversaire = Festschrift für Manfred Gsteiger zu seinem 65. Geburtstag

Artikel: Periodization and the theory of literary history

Autor: Rehder, Robert

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.5169/seals-1006576>

Nutzungsbedingungen

Die ETH-Bibliothek ist die Anbieterin der digitalisierten Zeitschriften auf E-Periodica. Sie besitzt keine Urheberrechte an den Zeitschriften und ist nicht verantwortlich für deren Inhalte. Die Rechte liegen in der Regel bei den Herausgebern beziehungsweise den externen Rechteinhabern. Das Veröffentlichen von Bildern in Print- und Online-Publikationen sowie auf Social Media-Kanälen oder Webseiten ist nur mit vorheriger Genehmigung der Rechteinhaber erlaubt. [Mehr erfahren](#)

Conditions d'utilisation

L'ETH Library est le fournisseur des revues numérisées. Elle ne détient aucun droit d'auteur sur les revues et n'est pas responsable de leur contenu. En règle générale, les droits sont détenus par les éditeurs ou les détenteurs de droits externes. La reproduction d'images dans des publications imprimées ou en ligne ainsi que sur des canaux de médias sociaux ou des sites web n'est autorisée qu'avec l'accord préalable des détenteurs des droits. [En savoir plus](#)

Terms of use

The ETH Library is the provider of the digitised journals. It does not own any copyrights to the journals and is not responsible for their content. The rights usually lie with the publishers or the external rights holders. Publishing images in print and online publications, as well as on social media channels or websites, is only permitted with the prior consent of the rights holders. [Find out more](#)

Download PDF: 07.03.2026

ETH-Bibliothek Zürich, E-Periodica, <https://www.e-periodica.ch>

PERIODIZATION AND THE THEORY OF LITERARY HISTORY

This is, according to Stephen Greenblatt, “a moment of paradigms lost”¹. However, despite the many and rapid changes in literary criticism that have occurred in the last thirty years or so, especially in the United States, there is one group of paradigms that has survived virtually unaltered: the set of literary periods. A good example is Foucault’s *Les Mots et les choses* (1966) in which he attempts a radical reinterpretation of European culture, nonetheless, all his new ideas are expressed in terms of the old periodization, which he accepts unthinkingly. This sentence is typical: “Les dernières années du XVIII^e siècle sont rompues par une discontinuité symétrique de celle qui avait brisé, au début du XVII^e, la pensée de la Renaissance....”².

Further proof is offered by the recent authoritative summary volume of the Modern Language Association of America, *Redrawing the Boundaries, The Transformation of English and American Studies*, edited by Greenblatt and Giles Gunn (1992). “Literary studies in English”, the editors declare, “are in a period of rapid and disorienting change”³. These “disorienting” changes are summarized in terms of the traditional periods. There are chapters on “Medieval”, “Renaissance / Early Modern”, “Seventeenth-Century”, “Eighteenth-Century”, “Romantic”, “Victorian”, “Modernist” and “Postmodernist Studies”, and nine different kinds of criticism: “Feminist”, “Gender”, “African American”, “Marxist”, “Psychoanalytic”, “Deconstruction”, “New Historicisms”, “Cultural”, and “Postcolonial Criticism”. That these are treated in separate chapters is indicative of the self-absorption of recent criticism and the degree to

1 Karen Winkler, “Scholars Mark the Beginning of the Age of Post-Theory”, *The Chronicle of Higher Education*, October 13, 1993, p. A8.

2 Michel Foucault, *Les Mots et les choses*, Paris, Gallimard, 1966, p. 229.

3 Stephen Greenblatt and Giles Gunn, ed., *Redrawing the Boundaries*, New York, Modern Language Association of America, 1992, p. 1.

which it is out of touch with the reality of history. The whole scheme resembles a geologic formation in which older metamorphosed strata have been covered by a succession of sedimentary layers. The “transformation” of literary studies has not affected the way that we think about literary history. *Redrawing the Boundaries* employs almost exactly the same divisions as *The Norton Anthology of English Literature* (Fifth Edition, 1962).

Indeed, there is no better place to look at current notions of periodization than *The Norton Anthology of English Literature*, the most popular textbook of its kind⁴. (Analogous thinking can be found in the textbooks of any European country, in French, for example, in manuals such as A. Chassang and C. Senninger, *La Dissertation littéraire générale* [1955] or in the introductions to Les Petits Classiques Larousse and Bordas.) The Norton editors divide their subject into the following periods:

- The Middle Ages (to ca. 1485)
- The Sixteenth Century (1485-1603)
- The Early Seventeenth Century (1603-1660)
- The Restoration and the Eighteenth Century (1660-1798)
- The Romantic Period (1798-1832)
- The Victorian Age (1832-1901)
- The Twentieth Century

These and other similar period terms are a major obstacle to thinking clearly and accurately about literary history. For English, they can be divided into three groups: Classical, Medieval and Renaissance, then a series of centuries, starting usually with the Sixteenth or Seventeenth and continuing to the Twentieth, with later variations and interpolations, of which the most common are: Early Modern (borrowed from the historians), Romantic, Victorian, Modern and Post-Modern. The first group of three terms seems to derive from Petrarch’s distinction between ancient and modern history in his letter to Giovanni Colonna (30 November 1341). Petrarch apparently is the first to refer to the whole of the Greek and Roman past as *antiquity* and one of the first to see himself as living in a new dawn after a period of darkness – a metaphor that he uses at the

4 M. H. Abrams, General Editor, *The Norton Anthology of English Literature*, New York, W.W. Norton, Fifth Edition, 1966, 2 vol. Volume and page references are given in the text in parentheses.

end of his long poem, *Africa* (IX.455-7)⁵. Thinking in terms of centuries appears to have become established in the sixteen-hundreds⁶. *Romantic*, applied to English literature only became current between 1871 and 1893. “The poets themselves never applied the term to themselves, nor did their enemies apply it to them”⁷.

“The Middle Ages” for the Norton editors is a period with an end but without a beginning. The *circa* is entirely gratuitous, an attempt to give an illusion of wise judiciousness to a variegated and illogical set of terms. The date, 1485, is a defensible one and not at all problematic, as it marks Caxton’s printing of Malory’s *Morte Darthur*. It is one of only two dates that refer to books or authors. The other is 1798, the date of the publication of *Lyrical Ballads*. All the other dates refer to political not literary events, most to the accession or death of kings and queens, although no argument has ever been made for them as major agents of change in English literature. This division in terms of reigning monarchs goes back to the beginnings of political history.

Confusingly, the second 1485 does not refer to Caxton’s *Morte Darthur* but to the accession of Henry VII. As 1603 is the death of Elizabeth, the so called “Sixteenth Century” is actually the reigns of the Tudors. 1660 is the restoration of Charles II. “The Victorian Age” is not the reign of Victoria; instead it is dated from the first Reform bill in 1832, because, according to the “Introduction”, “the principle of peaceful adjustment of conflicting interests by parliamentary majority had been firmly established” (II, 4), despite the fact that this principle was established more dramatically in 1688 and no case has ever been made for the Reform Bill having had a decisive effect on English literature. The “Introduction” sees the Bill as marking the end of revolutionary fervor (II, 4-5), although as far as the major writers are concerned this happened much earlier and as a consequence of their disillusionment with the *French Revolution*.

This very heterogeneous set of periods seems to have been used as a matter of “convenience”, because they are “traditional”, “conventional”,

5 Theodor E. Mommsen, “Petrarch’s Conception of ‘The Dark Ages’”, *Speculum*, XVIII, 1942, pp. 226-242.

6 V. V. Barthold, *Mussulman Culture*, trans. S. Suhrawardy, Calcutta, University of Calcutta, 1934, p. xxiii.

7 George Whalley, “England / Romantic-Romanticism”, “*Romantic*” and Its Cognates, *The European History of a Word*, ed. Hans Eichner, Manchester, Manchester University Press, 1972, pp. 160, 253-4, 159.

“simple”. There is, however, no attempt by the editors to justify these divisions as a whole or to consider the development of English literature. Each is concerned with his or her own section. The impression is of terms that have been accepted unthinkingly. There is, nevertheless, some awareness of the complexity of the problem. No one seriously believes that centuries have any validity as historical units and yet no one is prepared to do without them. As a result there is an effort at mock precision by using dates other than those that mark the century, such as “1485-1603” instead of 1501-1600 (or the less correct 1500-1600) for “The Sixteenth Century”. That “the Early Seventeenth Century” and “the Restoration and the Eighteenth Century” are periods is due more to the exigencies of bookmaking than any theory of English literature (an anthology needs to be divided into parts, but not too many). The former, the editors feel, is too short. “Those years are historically meaningful”, they write, “if seen in a pattern extending from 1588 to 1688” (I, 1049), introducing two more non-literary dates into their equations, the defeat of the Spanish Armada and “the Glorious Revolution”. The latter is felt to be too long and therefore is divided into: “Restoration Literature 1660-1700” (I, 1717), “Eighteenth-Century Literature 1700-45” (I, 1779) and “the Emergence of New Literary Themes and Modes, 1740-85” (I, 1781), discarding without explanation the final thirteen years. For a change these subperiods actually take some of their dates from literary events: Dryden dies in 1700, Swift, in 1745, 1740 is the publication of *Pamela* and 1785, of Cowper’s *The Task*. This multiplication of subperiods, including the reduction of the “Eighteenth-Century” to a mere forty-six years, is clearly an attempt to manage and define the changes that are felt to be taking place at this time. The attempt, however, fails because a single abstract category no matter how carefully considered cannot do justice to the complexity of human life and culture. The half-inherited, half-improvised divisions of the Norton Anthology are, like all period schemes, an unsystematic, jerrybuilt makeshift, put together without any coherent theory of the events that they are supposed to describe.

Period terms do our thinking for us. This ought to be in itself a sufficient reason for never using them again. What is most remarkable is that we continue to employ and defend a classification that is without any intellectual justification and whose assumptions have never been examined. The strangeness of this should compel our attention. For any system so illogical, unreasonable and untrue – perhaps it would be better to say imaginary – to be maintained in spite of all the effort of the last thirty

years to re-examine the assumptions of criticism, it must satisfy a profound need. That need is, I believe, to defend ourselves against the fear of change and death. Time is a human invention, an attempt to manage change, devised so as to have something definite to which to cling. Rapid change of all kinds, as Greenblatt and Gunn suggest, is disorienting. If the world is different at each moment, where are we? If we are different at each moment, who are we? The end of all our changing is death, the disintegration of the body and its reabsorption by the natural world. We do not want to think about this definitive destruction of what we are, we do not want to die. Consequently, to steady and organize our changing selves in our changing world, we imagine time as an entity and, to maximize the illusion of control, divide it into parts: past, present, future, seconds, minutes, hours, days, weeks, months, years, decades, centuries, millenniums, work days and holidays, geological and historical periods, light years – we divide and conquer.

The increasing specialization of most university teachers and programs is powered by these and other analogous fears. The same old, haphazard, ad hoc period terms are reassuring because they *are* the same old terms (it is always less painful to accept something old than to think of something new), and because, in a sense, they take us out of time. Like the dikes of Holland, they establish a limited and protected area in which to work. Otherwise, we are overwhelmed by too many events, too many authors and too many texts. The great advantage of period terms turns out to be that we do not have to think. They offer a ready-made theory. The relations between texts and authors are as if given.

Although it is difficult to argue with anything that contributes to our peace of mind, in this case, I suggest, the price is too high: the possibility of a viable literary history. Period terms shift attention from the specifics of authors and texts to abstractions which tend to become hypostatized and personified, endowed with a life of their own. We write about “the Eighteenth Century” as if it were an author. We do not ask: what kind of a writer is Chateaubriand, rather we argue about the ways in which his works exemplify (or do not exemplify) “Romanticism”, and the terms of the argument are usually predetermined, given by the period: *sensibility, nature, melancholy, primitive, sublime, picturesque*. Even before recent developments, it appears that the function of most criticism is to convert individual works into abstractions, but period terms especially are the enemies of uniqueness. Instead of seeing that Wordsworth, Scott, Coleridge and Hazlitt have very different ideas of the imagination, the period term

exerts a pressure to conflate them (in this case, most often in terms of Coleridge's ideas), and we write about a non-existent "Romantic Imagination"⁸.

Perhaps the greatest disadvantage of period terms is that they block any serious consideration of change and development. Everything is interpreted in terms of pre-established, superimposed schema which ignore or gloss over the many complex relations between authors and their cultures. Van Tieghem speaks of "Le préromantisme" and the Norton editors of "The Continuity of the Augustan Tradition" (I.1786)⁹. Periods are a more or less static unit and change is seen more as something occurring at the beginning and end of a period or as marking the *transition* from one period to the next than as happening at every moment. The idea of many things changing at different rates over varying periods of time, which is necessary to any accurate history, cannot be accommodated by current schemes of periodization.

Any problem examined in detail demonstrates the inaccuracy and falsity of the idea of *period*. The assumption that two dates can measure or demarcate any kind of change within a culture is not merely a radical oversimplification, but a methodological error.

Problems of dynamics and development can only be seen if much longer durations are considered than are included in any period – and probably it is necessary to look at the whole history of a culture. The ideas in Young's *Conjectures on Original Composition* (1759) and the example of *The Life and Opinions of Tristram Shandy* (1760-67) introduce notions of originality that help to explain the variety and idiosyncrasy of individual styles after Wordsworth and which are related to Pound's imperative, "Make it new"¹⁰. The differences between Tennyson, Browning, Whitman, Dickinson, Baudelaire, Rimbaud, Mallarmé and Hopkins, to name only a few examples, derive from this new conception of self and of genius that caused them to try to distinguish themselves from other writers and express what they felt was their own uniqueness. This continuity is lost if the time is divided into "Eighteenth Century", "Romanticism", "Victorian" and "Modern". Division into periods makes it

8 See Robert Rehder, "Wordsworth's Imagination", *The Wordsworth Circle* (forthcoming).

9 Paul van Tieghem, *Le Romantisme dans la littérature européenne*, Paris, Albin Michel, 1949 and 1969, pp. 25-109.

10 *Make It New* is the title of a collection of Pound's literary criticism published by Faber and Faber, London, 1934.

extremely difficult to see these kinds of relationships. Even a relatively obvious subject such as the development of the novel is obscure if only one or two periods are considered, it is necessary to look at its whole history. Similarly, Scott cannot be understood if he is separated from Cervantes to whom he refers so often, Defoe whom he edited or Fielding whom he regarded as the author of "the first English novel"¹¹.

That there is obviously a relation between Young's and Pound's notion of selfhood and Durer's first painted self-portraits (1493 and 1498), cheaper and better mirrors (after 1500), Luther's theology, the installation of confessionals in churches (after 1565) and the proliferation of autobiographies (after 1789) extends the network of interconnections even further, as it reveals another shortcoming in our current literary history: the difficulty of establishing the context of a text, and particularly of finding a language to discuss the relationships between texts and the other objects of a culture¹².

The whole way of period thinking removes the problem from the nitty-gritty of actual events. The true unit of literary history, as of all history, is the individual. If change and development are to be understood, it is in terms of the psychology of individuals, allowing for whatever elements of culture and behaviour turn out to be part of our biological program. There is a simple and easy alternative to the old literary history of periods which is to make all historical statements in terms of particular authors and texts, to talk about poetry from Milton to Wordsworth or the novel from *Waverley* (1814) to *Ulysses* (1922), choosing authors, texts and dates to fit the hypothesis and without establishing any pair of terms definitively as a *period*, so that the assumptions and evidence for each statement would need to be examined when it was made. Literary history could then be expressed in literary terms and subsequently related to the dynamics of other subjects, and hypotheses formulated that would allow for different rates of change and for development over periods of time determined by the object described.

Two simple examples will show more clearly the difficulties of classificatory thinking. During the winter semester of 1993-94 I taught a

11 *The Novels of Daniel Defoe* edited by Scott was published in twelve volumes in Edinburgh, 1810. On Fielding, see Walter Scott, *The Lives of the Novelists*, London, J. M. Dent, n.d., p. 63.

12 For a discussion of these interconnections, see Robert Rehder, *Wordsworth and the Beginnings of Modern Poetry* [WBMP], London, Croom Helm; Totowa, New Jersey, Barnes and Noble, 1981, pp. 17-43, 74-80.

seminar on *Pride and Prejudice*, *Waverley* and *The Last of the Mohicans*. When I mentioned this to a colleague from another university, he said: “What an odd choice. How can you do that?” his tone indicating that I ought not to do it. I mumbled something about the texts being contemporary and let the matter drop, although I continued to ponder the fact that for him it was an unthinkable combination. That the texts were all published within fourteen years of each other: *Pride and Prejudice* (1813), *Waverley* (1814), *The Last of the Mohicans* (1826), was, I considered, an irresistible argument – a necessary combination, not to be able to think of them together was not only a failure of imagination, but a conceptual mistake. For my colleague, the differences between the three novels were so great as to negate the fact of their historical relationship, a good example of how very limiting most of our theoretical constructions are, and of the way in which period and analogous terms radically oversimplify the reality. Surprisingly perhaps, such terms are the enemy of thinking historically.

This is the thinking that has made it difficult to relate Blake to Wordsworth, Coleridge, Shelley and Keats and that continues to interfere with establishing their relation to Baudelaire and to Tennyson and Browning. Although *In Memoriam* and *The Prelude* were both published in 1850, no one teaches Wordsworth and Tennyson together or thinks of comparing Keats and Baudelaire or Baudelaire and Whitman – or Wordsworth and Whitman¹³. As these various examples show, not only do periods separate contemporaries and disrupt the continuity of cultural processes, but *within periods* there are established conventions, subtle barriers and unconscious categories, compartments within compartments. Period terms effect a kind of averaging of authors such that authors who do not conform to the theoretical norm are ignored or treated as sports or exceptions, in advance of or behind their times rather than of them. If a major author does not fit into the norm, the presumption ought to be that there is something wrong with the theory.

Saint-Simon is a case in point. In 1749 he completed his *Mémoires*, on which he had been working obsessively and insatiably since 1739, remembering and recreating a time fifty to twenty five years earlier, the years 1691-1723. He prepared the table of contents and wrote the subtitles the next year, 1750, the same year in which the prospectus for the

13 Paul Zweig's *Walt Whitman, The Making of a Poet* makes a number of references to Baudelaire. For Wordsworth and Whitman, see the index, WBMP.

Encyclopédie was published and the Academy of Dijon awarded its prize to Rousseau's *Discours sur les sciences et les arts*¹⁴. Saint-Simon was 76, Rousseau, 38. The contrast, like that between *Pride and Prejudice* and *Waverley*, demonstrates the changes that were taking place.

The temptation is to see Saint-Simon as an anachronism or as out of step with his time, if he is considered at all. Usually he is passed over because he is difficult to categorize. He is not the author of established genre (poetry, drama or fiction) and his *Mémoires* are not an autobiography in the ordinary sense. Auerbach struggles with the difficulty in the wonderful pages on Saint-Simon in *Mimesis*:

Chronologically, then, the work undoubtedly belongs to the eighteenth century. It is more difficult to determine the Duke's position in terms of the history of ideas and his inner affinities. For he is not really to be compared with anyone else, and one thing that is obvious upon even the most superficial acquaintance is that, in any case, neither his manner of writing, nor his views place him in the age of Louis XIV. His manner of writing shows no trace of the well-balanced *bienséance*, of the classical striving for harmony, of the exalted aloofness from things, which characterized the great decades. It suggests, if it can be compared with anything at all, the pre-classical prose of the beginning of the seventeenth century¹⁵.

Very few people have read as widely, as carefully or as intelligently as Auerbach, or know as much or approximate his skill at textual analysis, yet every time he attempts to sum up and place Saint-Simon, he entangles himself in the received ideas of period thinking.

The Duke's behaviour like his work does not fit. Auerbach shifts from psychological description to historical categorization: "Apparently he was no statesman; he was too arrogant, too honorable, too temperamental, and too nervous for that; perhaps his life at court and his secret literary activity had spoiled him for practical political work. And here again he did not fit into his age, whose easy and elegant nonchalance was something he could neither share nor master" (416). (This feeling that Saint-Simon was somehow out of place does not appear to have been shared by readers of the next generation. Excerpts from his *Mémoires*, often very freely edited and adapted, were published in 1781, 1786,

14 George Poisson, *Album Saint-Simon*, Paris, Gallimard, 1969, pp. 307, 309. The early excerpted editions are given by Gonzague Truc in his edition of Saint-Simon, *Mémoires*, Paris, Gallimard, 1953, I, pp. xxix-xxx.

15 Erich Auerbach, *Mimesis*, trans. Willard Trask, Princeton, Princeton University Press, 1971, pp. 414-45. Subsequent references are given in parentheses in the text.

1788, 1789, 1818 and 1820.) According to Auerbach, it was, “during the decades from about 1694 to 1732” (note the unnecessary use of *decades*) “that his personality reached full development” (416):

these decades form the subject of the most important portions of his memoirs, which he edited during subsequent decades. In view of all this, I believe that he can be best classed as a man of the early eighteenth century, as a special and idiosyncratic case of the anti-absolutistic, aristocratic, estate-conscious, and liberalizing reformist attitude which immediately preceded the beginnings of the Enlightenment. (416)

Auerbach is trying to be very precise, but employs a vocabulary so abstract as to exclude any possibility of precision. His instruments are blunt. His summary teeters on the edge of jargon. Saint-Simon becomes a man of only part of his time.

The problem is clear: what is the relationship between a person and his time. This can be restated as: what is the relation between an individual and his culture, recognizing that both change; or, what is the relation between a text and its context. For Auerbach the difficulty is that Saint-Simon “is not really to be compared with anyone else”, but then every person is unique, and that a person is not a part of his time and his culture appears an impossibility. Auerbach’s historical categories are “eighteenth century”, “age of Louis XIV”, “classical”, “decades”, “pre-classical”, “seventeenth century”, “early eighteenth century”, “Enlightenment” and, in an attempt to get closer to the Duke’s “ideas and his inner affinities”: “*bienséance*”, “harmony”, “exalted aloofness”, “easy and elegant nonchalance”, and “anti-absolutistic, aristocratic, estate-conscious, and liberalizing reformist attitude”.

Most of the difficulties come from the first set. The second set has its problems, but the terms can be related to particular persons and texts. What needs to be seen is that the first set of terms is unnecessary. They can be dispensed with. If ultimately Auerbach is successful, it is because he is, at least, half-aware of the inadequacy of these abstractions and honest enough to say so, and because he sticks very closely to particulars, of the text and of history. There is no lesson more important. The strength of Auerbach’s book (and it is one of the best books of criticism to be published since Henry James’ death) is his analysis of representative passages. The twenty pages (414-433) he devotes to Saint-Simon include the examination of seven passages of a paragraph or more, as well as a number of shorter citations. He is sensitive to every nuance of

vocabulary, grammar and syntax, as well as to the ideas, explicit and implicit, that organize a passage. He has a knack for identifying significant detail, such as the reference to the dowager Duchess of Orléans' dress (418), the comparison of Madame de Maintenon to a Swiss guard (421), Saint-Simon asking Père Tellier his age (428), the Duke of Orléans slowly turning his head (431) and the emphasis on the speech mannerisms of the Mortemart family (431).

Auerbach's gift is his capacity to move from the smallest details to the largest issues. He uses the interview with Père Tellier, for example, to exhibit the distinguishing characteristics of Saint-Simon as an author:

The scene shows with the greatest clarity how Saint-Simon reacts to phenomena confronting him. He instinctively sees the individual whom he has *bec à bec* before him as an entity comprising body, mind, station in life, and personal history. This gives him a power of penetration which goes through the individual into the political subject matter – so deeply, indeed, that, at times, as in this instance, he loses sight of its pressing aspect of the moment, and much deeper and more general insights are revealed beneath it. As he looks..., he forgets about the present occasion, their disagreement over a specific article of the *Constitutio Unigenitus*, and sees, with the utmost vividness, the essential nature of the Jesuit Order and beyond that, the essential nature of any strictly organized solidaritarian community... At the same time the passage shows that Saint-Simon obtains his most profound insights not by rationally analyzing ideas and problems but by an empiricism applied to whatever sensory phenomenon happens to confront him and pursued to the point of penetrating to the existential. (428)

For Auerbach habits of mind change over time. Saint-Simon's "manner of perception" is, he says, something of which Père Tellier, "for all his acumen, was hardly capable of divining" (428). Auerbach shows us how Saint-Simon's method of thinking, his way of apprehending the world, shapes his prose style and the form of the *Mémoires*. Auerbach's comments demonstrate his acute psychological sensitivity and understanding of human behaviour. He is proof of Eliot's statement that the only prerequisite for being a good critic is to be very intelligent.

Then, there is the precision of his comparisons. Besides using the full range of period terms, Auerbach constantly compares Saint-Simon to other authors: Montesquieu (415), Molière and La Bruyère (423), Pascal (429), the Goncourts and Zola (431), Retz, Shakespeare and Montaigne (432), and Vico (433). Again, as with the analysis of the text, we know exactly where we are. All terms of each equation are specific and definite. This is the real world not an abstraction. The gain in exactitude and

subtlety is enormous. The lesson is an important one and can be used to help resolve the problem of Austen, Scott and Cooper. "The truth", as Renan remarks, "consists of details".

Pride and Prejudice and *Waverley* are very different types of novel. The demand to harmonize them implicit in our idea of *period* is at a certain point a false demand, and presents all the difficulties of Auerbach's efforts to place Saint-Simon as "early eighteenth century". It demonstrates clearly that our notions of period, culture and change are too simple. Our theories are wrong. They do not fit the facts. At every moment there are a variety of individuals doing a variety of different things and thinking in very different ways, like Saint-Simon and Rousseau in 1750, and Austen and Scott in 1814. A more accurate literary history is only possible if conceived in terms of individual authors and texts. Auerbach succeeds in placing Saint-Simon not by using period terms, but by his close and careful reading of the *Mémoires* and his many specific comparisons to other authors.

Putting *Pride and Prejudice* side by side with *Waverley* reminds us of how much of the action in Austen takes place indoors or near the houses in the story, of how little description of the world there is in her novels. What is most real is the conversation. Even so the stories seem to take place in a more or less abstract world of moral values. There is a certain timelessness about them, which they share with *Pamela* (1740), *Evelina* (1778) and *Les Liaisons dangereuses* (1782). The comparison shows the revolutionary nature of *Waverley* and Scott's radical transformation of the novel. Scott's novel is informed by a new awareness of everything as existing in time and of the relation of individuals to their surroundings¹⁶. His long descriptions are an attempt to hold on to this changing world and to trace these relations. For him experience is history – and history at once individualizes and connects.

Looking at *Pride and Prejudice* and *Waverley* together enables us to see that the so-called period of *Romanticism* is divided by a major change in the conception of the novel. As far as fiction is concerned, the period 1785-1835 makes no sense. What this suggests is that we need a series of dates for each genre. The development of the novel is different from that of poetry, for example, where a major change occurs with Coleridge's "The Eolian Harp", "Reflections on having left a Place of Retirement" (1795), "This Lime-tree Bower my Prison" (1797), "Frost at Midnight"

16 On Scott and landscape, see WBMP, p. 221.

(1798) and Wordsworth's first drafts of his autobiographical poem (1798-1799). To attempt to generalize these changes in terms of some more comprehensive abstraction, such as a period, is in the present state of our knowledge, both mistaken and unnecessary. There can be, however, no question that the two novels belong together. If any proof beyond their dates is needed, Scott writes in his journal on 13 March 1826:

Also read again, and for the third time at least, Miss Austen's very finely written novel of *Pride and Prejudice*. That young lady had a talent for describing the involvements and feelings and characters of ordinary life, which is to me the most wonderful I ever met with. The Big Bow-wow strain I can do myself like any other going; but the exquisite touch which renders ordinary commonplace things and characters interesting, from the truth of description and the sentiment, is denied to me. What a pity such a gifted creature died so early!¹⁷

Scott's comments suggest that we need to reread his works more carefully to look for the influence of Jane Austen.

Austen, Scott and Cooper. The greater stumbling block is, perhaps, Austen and Cooper, Mr Darcy and Natty Bumppo, the Bennetts and the Mohicans, the Old World and the New, but they are one world and it is reality that makes the connection. What we need to do is to look closely at the details.

Susan Fenimore Cooper tells the story that early in 1820 her father was reading a novel aloud to her mother when suddenly he stopped and threw the novel aside in exasperation, saying: "I can write you a better book than that myself". His wife is alleged to have replied: "Why don't you?" and he did, and so began his literary career¹⁸. Cooper's first novel, *Precaution* (1820) – *Persuasion* was published in 1818 – is obviously modelled on Jane Austen. *Precaution* begins with the same situation as *Pride and Prejudice*: a family is discussing a new family who have just moved into the neighbourhood and the possibilities of marriage that the newcomers may offer, but there are many more similarities with *Persuasion*. There has been conjecture that the novel Cooper threw down was by Austen. To me this seems unlikely. It is difficult to imagine anyone not appreciating the merits of Jane Austen, more probably Cooper rejected an inferior social comedy and took one of the best as his example. Cooper,

17 Walter Scott, *The Journal of Sir Walter Scott*, London, Nelson, 1890, I, p. 165.

18 The three versions of Susan Fenimore Cooper's story are analyzed by George E. Hastings, "How Cooper Became a Novelist", *American Literature*, XII, 1940, pp. 20-51. He also demonstrates the many similarities with *Persuasion*.

who was a vociferous patriot and democrat, had, nonetheless, unlike my colleague, no feeling that there was or should be any difference between British and American literature. “It is quite obvious”, he stated:

that, so far as tastes and forms alone are concerned, the literature of England and that of America must be fashioned after the same models... The only peculiarity that can, or ought to be expected in their [the Americans’] literature is that which is connected with the promulgation of their distinctive political opinions.

He saw no need for any literary declaration of independence. “We are”, he said, “in a literary sense the offspring of Chaucer, Spenser, and Shakespeare, as much so as the English subject of the present day”¹⁹.

Beside Austen, the other presence during the composition of *Precaution* is Scott. Cooper tells his publisher, Andrew Goodrich on 31 May 1820 that “I am now writing the eighth Chapter of the second volume” and that if the second volume is the same length as the first, “this I compute will make an ordinary volume, such as *Ivanhoe*, which I took for my guide”. (Three editions of *Ivanhoe* were printed in Philadelphia in 1820). Cooper closes his letter with a postscript asking Goodrich if he comes to New York, to “bring the *Monastery* with you”, Scott’s newest novel that had been published in the United States in March. By June Cooper had started on *The Spy* (1821). He writes to Goodrich (28 June 1820): “I send you the first three chapters in order to see your style and type – that of the *Monastery* will do – but I should like a better paper – ...”. Scott’s *The Abbot* was issued in Philadelphia in September 1820 and in mid-October Cooper is writing to Goodrich (19-20? October 1820) about the publication date of *The Spy*: “I would let the *Abbot* blow over a little”, and, as for the price: “I see the ‘*Abbott*’ is advertised at \$1.75 – can I in reason or policy ask more – the book would not sell if I did – ...”²⁰. Cooper’s letters show that Scott was constantly on his mind and his standard of comparison for his own work. He not only was reading Scott’s novels as they appeared but wanted his books to look like Scott’s.

Cooper and Scott met in 1826 in Paris, on the stairs of the Hotel Jumilhac, 12 Rue St. Maur in the Faubourg St. Germain, and their first words were in French. Cooper describes the meeting:

19 Stanley Williams, “James Fenimore Cooper”, *The Literary History of the United States*, ed. Robert Spiller and others, New York, Macmillan, I, p. 257; James Cooper, *The Letters and Journals of James Fenimore Cooper*, ed. James Franklin Beard, Cambridge, Mass., Harvard University Press, 1969, I, pp. 179-80.

20 Cooper, I, pp. 42, 43, 44, 66, 67.

I was descending the stairs...when I met an old man ascending, as I thought, with a good deal of difficulty. There was a carriage in the court, and from something in his countenance as well as from his air and the circumstance of the coach, I thought he was coming to see me. Indeed I fancied I knew the face, though I could not remember the name. We passed each other looking hard and bowing, and I was just going out the door when the stranger suddenly stopped and said in French:

„Est-ce monsieur Cooper que j'ai l'honneur de voir ?“

„Monsieur, je m'appelle Cooper.“

„Je suis Walter Scott.“

They were delighted with each others company, became friends and within a few days Cooper was trying to help Scott with the problems of copy-writing his books in the United States and receiving royalties for them²¹.

As for the novels themselves, even if Natty Bumppo and Chingachgook are governed by a code of manners as nice, however different, as that of Elizabeth Bennett and Mr Darcy, and even if both authors use the device of sisters of very different characters, the drawing rooms of *Pride and Prejudice* still may appear, as they did to my colleague, to belong to another world than the forest of *The Last of the Mohicans*. Insistence on the difference between civilization and wilderness probably has its source in our need to keep our own savagery under the control of what we call our reason. The contrast, however, is one that was repeatedly remarked upon at this time. This is exactly the contradiction that A, the first speaker in Diderot's *Supplément au voyage de Bougainville* (composed 1772, published 1796), finds in Bougainville's voyage:

Une autre bizarrerie apparente, c'est la contradiction du caractère de l'homme et son entreprise. Bougainville a le goût des amusements de la société; il aime les femmes, les spectacles, les repas délicats; il se prête au tourbillon du monde d'aussi bonne grâce qu'aux inconstances de l'élément sur lequel il a été ballotté. Il est aimable et gai: c'est un véritable Français lesté, d'un bord, d'un trait de calcul différentiel et intégral, et de l'autre, d'un voyage autour du globe.

This contradiction is only apparent. As his interlocutor, B, replies: "Il fait comme tout le monde..."²². To explore the difference between civilization and wilderness is, of course, one of Cooper's purposes. That is why he

21 Cooper, I, pp. 145, 169-70, 170-81. Compare Scott's account, *The Journal*, I, pp. 304, 305, 307, 309.

22 Denis Diderot, *Oeuvres philosophiques*, ed. Paul Vernière, Paris, Garnier, 1961, p. 457.

pairs Hawk-eye and Chingachgook and sends General Munro's two daughters through the forest – but every novel is a simplification of reality.

Many travellers from the drawing rooms of Europe entered this same forest in reality. During the summer of 1791 the Vicomte de Chateaubriand hired a Dutch guide who spoke several Indian languages, bought two horses and left Albany, New York for Niagara Falls. After crossing the Mohawk, he enters the virgin forest and in what he describes as “une sorte d'ivresse d'indépendance”, he goes from tree to tree saying to himself: “Ici plus de chemins, plus de villes, plus de monarchie, plus de république, plus de présidents, plus de rois, plus d'hommes.” He imagines himself completely alone in the wilderness when suddenly he enters a clearing and encounters “les premiers sauvages que j'ai vus de ma vie”:

Ils étaient une vingtaine, tant hommes que femmes, tous barbouillés comme des sorciers, le corps demi-nu, les oreilles découpées, des plumes de corbeau sur la tête et des anneaux passés dans les narines.

They are, however, not alone:

Un petit Français, poudré et frisé, habit vert-pomme, veste de droguet, jabot et manchettes de mousseline, raclait un violon de poche et faisait danser *Madelon Friquet* à ces Iroquois. M. Violet (c'était son nom) était maître de danse chez les sauvages. On lui payait ses leçons en peaux de castors et en jambons d'ours. Il avait été marmiton au service du général Rochambeau, pendant la guerre d'Amérique. Demeuré à New-York après le départ de notre armée il se résolut d'enseigner les beaux-arts aux Américains. Ses vues s'étant agrandies avec le succès, le nouvel Orphée porta la civilisation jusque chez les hordes sauvages du Nouveau-Monde. En me parlant des Indiens, il me disait toujours: “Ces messieurs sauvages et ces dames sauvages”. Il se louait beaucoup de la légèreté de ses écoliers; en effet, je n'ai jamais vu faire de telles gambades. M. Violet, tenant son petit violon entre son menton et sa poitrine, accordait l'instrument fatal; il criait aux Iroquois: *A vos places!* Et toute la troupe sautait comme une bande de démons²³.

Truth is not only stranger than fiction, but also more complicated and more various. M. Violet playing his violin for the Iroquois is one of a series of images that escape from all period terms: Durer admiring the art of the Aztec goldsmiths in Antwerp, Montaigne in 1562 talking to a Brazilian Indian at Rouen, the strange and still unexplained appearance of sculptures of Tupinamba Indians on a monument erected by Edmund

23 René de Chateaubriand, *Mémoires d'outre-tombe*, ed. Maurice Levaillant and Georges Moulinier, Paris, Gallimard, 1948, I, pp. 228, 231-2.

Harman in 1569 in the parish church of Burford in Oxfordshire or Pochantas making her bow at court in 1617 as Mrs John Rolfe²⁴.

Chateaubriand moralizes the episode himself:

N'était-ce pas une chose accablante pour un disciple de Rousseau, que cette introduction à la vie sauvage par un bal que l'ancien marmiton du général Rochambeau donnait à des Iroquois? J'avais grande envie de rire, mais j'étais cruellement humilié²⁵.

Moreover, he defines his own past, the source of his expectations, the form of his phantasies: Chateaubriand, "un disciple de Rousseau". As an autobiographer, he is in the tradition of Rousseau – and as a French nobleman who has had a political career writing his memoirs – Saint-Simon.

Another image of the Old World and the New is afforded by the memoirs of Henriette-Lucy Dillon, Marquise de la Tour du Pin. She was a lady in waiting to Marie Antoinette. To escape the Terror, she and her husband fled to America in 1794. Both their fathers were guillotined a few weeks before they left. Upon reaching the United States, they bought a farm in upstate New York near Troy where they lived from 1794 to 1796. There is a contemporary engraving showing the Marquise and her daughter on their farm offering a bowl of milk to an Indian who has just emerged from the forest. While waiting to move in, they lived temporarily in a small log house nearby. The Marquise hired a young girl to help her, but had to do most of the cooking and house work herself. She writes in her autobiography:

Un jour de la fin septembre, j'étais dans ma cour, avec une hachette à la main, occupée à couper l'os d'un gigot de mouton que je me préparais à mettre à la broche pour notre dîner... Tout à coup, derrière moi, une grosse voix se fait entendre. Elle disait en français: "On ne peut embrocher un gigot avec plus de majesté." Me retournant vivement, j'aperçus M. de Talleyrand....

whom she had known in Paris and who had also decided to avoid the Terror by going to America. Both had common friends in Albany. "Cependant, comme M. de Talleyrand s'amuse fort de la vue de mon gigot,

24 Michel de Montaigne, *Essais*, ed. Maurice Rat, Paris, Garnier, 1962, I, pp. 245, 712; Stuart Piggott, *Ruins in a Landscape*, Edinburgh, Edinburgh University Press, 1976, pp. 25-32; Henry Adams, *The Great Succession Winter of 1860-61*, New York, Sagamore Press, 1958, pp. 53-59.

25 Chateaubriand, I, p. 232.

j'insistai pour qu'il revînt le lendemain le manger avec nous. Il y consentit"²⁶. The Old World and the New, another variation: Madame de la Tour du Pin working like any pioneer woman is surprised by Talleyrand, perhaps the most adroit and resourceful European politician of his time whose manners were a byword for elegance and finesse, in the backwoods of New York State.

The two encounters, that of Chateaubriand and M. Violet and of the Marquise de la Tour du Pin and Talleyrand, take place not only in Cooper's life time (he was born in 1789), but in his vicinity. He was a child, two at the time of Chateaubriand's visit, five, at Talleyrand's, playing perhaps near the edge of the forest at his father's house near Cooperstown on Lake Ostego, some seventy-five miles away – in both instances. Moreover, when he chose to set his third novel, *The Pioneers* (1823), in 1793 and to recreate the Cooperstown of his childhood as Templeton, he felt obliged to include a Frenchman, Le Quoi, to represent the phenomenon of these French visitors. He writes in Chapter Eight: "Europe, at the period of our tale, was in the commencement of that commotion which afterwards shook her political institutions to the center ... Thousands of Frenchmen were compelled to seek protection in distant lands. Among the crowds who fled from France and her islands to the United States of America was the gentleman whom we have already mentioned as Monsieur Le Quoi"²⁷. The fictional narrative of this new settlement in the depths of the half-imaginary forest would, he suggests, be incomplete without Le Quoi and a reference to the French Revolution.

Shelley, in his preface to "Laon and Cythna" (1817), declares:

There must be a resemblance, which does not depend upon their own will, between all the writers of any particular age. They cannot escape from subjection to a common influence which arises out of an infinite combination of circumstances belonging to the times in which they live though each is in a degree the author of the very influence by which his being is thus pervaded²⁸.

26 Henriette-Lucy Dillon, *Mémoires de la Marquise de la Tour du Pin*, ed. Christian de Liedekerke Beaufort, Paris, Mercure, 1979, pp. 198-199. The engraving, in the collection of the editor, is reproduced, pp. 208-209.

27 James Fenimore Cooper, *The Pioneers*, New York, Signet, 1964, p. 91. For Cooper's awareness that he was recreating his childhood, see the "Author's Introduction" (1832), pp. v-ix.

28 Percy Shelley, *Shelley's Prose*, ed. David Clark, Albuquerque, University of New Mexico Press, 1966, p. 318.

Shelley does not distinguish between conscious and unconscious influence, but he is very clear that it is not a matter of choice and that the relation is one of mutuality: “each is in a degree the author of the very influence by which his being is thus pervaded.” Each person creates his time as his time creates him. *Being* and *pervaded* indicates the subtle and intimate power of time, it permeates the whole individual but it is individuals who are the actors. Shelley also registers the complexity of this process in the wonderfully economical phrase with which he summarizes its action. Everything happens as a result “of an infinite combination of circumstances belonging to the times in which they live”. The purpose of literary history is to express this abstract and comprehensive action in specific terms.

Shelley’s formulation stops short of the condensation and personification of the German idea of *Zeitgeist*, from which it is probably derived. *Zeitgeist* is period thinking. The complexity of individual relations is changed from a set of discrete, particular encounters – Scott and Cooper reading Austen, reading each other and meeting in Paris – into an impersonal force like gravity, electro-magnetism or fate, or a personal one like the God of Genesis. This is to substitute an abstraction for the reality, to sum up before looking at the evidence. Again a kind of averaging occurs. Shelley’s “infinite combination of circumstances” is more accurate. That they cannot be numbered is not used as an excuse to gloss over their particularity. The plural, *circumstances*, allows for the fact that the times like persons move in several directions at once. Period terms remove us from the world. Austen, Scott and Cooper, Chateaubriand, M. Violet, Madame de la Tour du Pin and Talleyrand show us the way back. The only hope of a rigorous literary history is to work with the details of individual authors and specific texts.

Résumé

Malgré les nombreux et rapides changements que la critique littéraire a subis lors de ces trente dernières années, un ensemble de termes est cependant resté pratiquement inchangé, celui définissant des périodes littéraires. Ces termes représentent un obstacle majeur à l’élaboration d’une histoire littéraire précise et rigoureuse. Ils empêchent la prise en compte de changements et de développements et s’opposent à l’élaboration de toute théorie littéraire véritable. Non seulement les périodes séparent des auteurs contemporains et interrompent la continuité des développements culturels mais à *l’intérieur-même des périodes* se trouvent des conventions établies, de subtiles distinctions et des catégories

inconscientes. Deux exemples sont utilisés pour démontrer la limite du découpage de l'histoire littéraire en périodes: le merveilleux passage d'Auerbach sur Saint-Simon dans *Mimesis* et les problèmes que posent la mise en relation de *Pride and Prejudice*, *Waverley* et *The Last of the Mohicans*. Chaque problème d'inexactitude examiné en détail démontre la fausseté de l'idée de *période*. Pour l'histoire littéraire, comme pour l'histoire en général, la vraie unité est celle de l'individu. Une alternative simple et aisée à l'ancienne séparation de l'histoire en périodes est d'énoncer chaque affirmation historique en fonction d'un auteur ou d'un texte précis, de parler de la poésie de Milton à Wordsworth ou du roman de *Waverley* à *Ulysses*, en choisissant des auteurs, des textes et des dates qui soient conformes à l'hypothèse et sans définir de termes de manière définitive en tant que *période*.