

Cambridge University Press

978-1-107-04240-7 - Poetics of Character: Transatlantic Encounters 1700–1900

Susan Manning

Excerpt

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PART I

*Transatlantic literary history and the poetics  
of character*

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## CHAPTER I

*‘But is analogy argument?’*

Literary texts are *historical* products organized according to *rhetorical* criteria. The main problem of a literary criticism that aims to be in all respects a *historical discipline* is to do justice to both aspects of its objects: to work out a system of concepts which are both *historiographic* and *rhetorical*. Franco Moretti, ‘The Soul and the Harpy’

[A]ll judgment is comparative. Imlac, in Samuel Johnson, *Rasselas*

I never regarded literature merely as a collection of exquisite products, but rather as a means of mutual interpretation. Margaret Fuller, *Letters*

‘Comparisons are odorous’, Dogberry retorts to Verges’ complacent assumption of personal integrity. But Verges’ self-justification – ‘I am as honest as any man living that is an old man, and no honester than I’ – points to how difficult it is to dispense with comparison, odious or otherwise.<sup>1</sup> Throughout the Anglophone eighteenth century, indeed, it was the dominant mode of reason in all spheres of inquiry. In Samuel Johnson’s oriental fable about the choice of life, Imlac’s declaration to his young protégé Rasselas regarding the acquisition of knowledge offers both the basis for this study and the largest problem it confronts. Maxims readily descend to truisms and lack purchase, and *Rasselas* as a whole seems to indicate that for Johnson the practical benefits of such knowledge were limited. Imlac’s confidence that ‘[t]he present state of things is the consequence of the former’ commits him to believe in ‘the progress of the human mind, the gradual improvement of reason’ – an inference scarcely borne out by the findings of the travellers from the Happy Valley as they wander across the globe in search of the good life.<sup>2</sup> In this sombre fable of personal growth, teacher and pupil learn that the past cannot teach the present to be good, or wise, or even resigned; the sum total of all their experience is a determination to return to Abyssinia. Perhaps the most that can be said of their venture into comparative judgment is that they learn that progress may offer

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change but cannot deliver contentment. Somewhere in the course of their wanderings, though, the flat figures of oriental fable become characters.

Recent scholarship by Deidre Lynch, Alex Woloch, David A. Brewer, Nicola Lacey and Blakey Vermeule collectively offers rich insight into the history of character in eighteenth- and nineteenth-century literature and other forms of cultural practice. Without these works, and inquiries into changing concepts of identity and selfhood by philosophers and cultural historians such as Jerrold Seigel, Charles Taylor, E. J. Hundert and Dror Wahrman, the present study would not have been possible; I draw on them gratefully throughout. However, this is not a history of literary character, a history or sociology or psychology of reading practice, or an investigation into the construction of the modern self. Nor is it an anti-academic tract about the disengagement of the Ivory Tower from how readers experience texts. Character *matters*, in other words. It is the business of this book to suggest how and why, in poetic as well as historical terms.

'Character' rather than identity is the lens of analysis: firstly, because this is a study of representations rather than of essences, that is, a literary rather than a philosophical inquiry (although I shall show their concerns frequently folding into one another); secondly, because both in terms of inscription and legibility character is such a pervasive index of representation, relationship and analysis across a broad generic spectrum throughout the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries; and thirdly, because at the dawn of modern literary history, and its corollary Comparative Literature, personal and national character so readily, potently and treacherously substitute for one another. The implications are of more than academic interest: both historically and today the literary figuration of personhood in the form of character seems an inescapable ingredient of literature's ability to make readers attentive. Character was and remains, that is, one of the most effective figures of rhetoric. The popularity of biographies and the terms of discussion in book clubs remind academics (sometimes to their chagrin) that discussions about the textual marks we call characters 'as though' they were 'real people' continue to draw readers to literature. Their enjoyment and concerns as readers and the activities of literary historians sometimes seem barely to connect. The experience of reading and the practice of analysis are mutually alienated when criticism fails to take seriously the persuasive power of character. I argue that character was at the nexus of Enlightenment epistemology, ethics, pedagogy and understanding of social relations; recovering the range of its continuing allegorical implication with writing (the 'character' as letter or textual mark) and the comparative force of its rhetorical assumptions, literary history may re-engage analysis and affect.

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This chapter explores how language use engages the emotions of a reader, and in particular how character as personification, as allegory and as metaphor – intrinsically *relational* forms of ethical representation – may shape literary comparison in a transatlantic context. History, rhetoric, poetics and nationhood were mutually implicated in post-Enlightenment Anglophone literary history; I argue for the critical and comparative value of recovering underlying structures of analogy in character and correspondence in relation to ethos and practice, in particular how tropes of analogy and their narrative extension in allegory contribute to an aesthetic of 'correspondence' between texts that enables comparison in contexts not driven by models of influence. Current modes of scholarly argument are typically sequential and temporal in structure, and tend to institute or at least imply relations of cause and effect. This kind of historical narrative would traduce both the complexity and the transverse logic of simultaneous connections. The following sections unapologetically pursue a dynamic strategy of embodiment and reflection analogous to the multi-layered system of allegory, metaphor and metonymy at work in the poetics of character. In a historical frame stretched between the Enlightenment and current literary theory the sections test the critical purchase of a cluster of associated terms which are rhetorically cognate but have different ideational contexts and significations in relation to character and nationality: these include analogy, comparison, correspondence as fitness, correspondence as sympathy, correspondence as exemplum or allegory. This is a study of literary character, in a comparative context. It is a form of literary history that is also therefore necessarily a study of rhetoric, of how language works to evoke persons and to involve readers in their fictional business.

Character and nation (and their permutations) were formulated within a poetics of performance and comparison; the history of literary history since the mid-eighteenth century has obscured and subsequently neglected the centrality of style and persuasion to the 'New Rhetoric' of the Enlightenment from which modern literary studies emerged. Suggesting that these offer particular exegetical and aesthetic possibilities in a comparative transatlantic context, I reconnect 'sequential' literary history (the 'history of literature') with the ethical and epistemological imperatives of eighteenth-century rhetoric. The intention is not to slight the value of historical readings of literature, but to supplement these with a poetics of imaginative writing and reading in which the category of the 'literary' rediscovers itself as the rhetorically dense, complex medium through which the comparative underpinning of historical reading might itself be apprehended. Shifting the balance of attention from contextualism and

sequence towards the terms of representation establishes the basis for a transatlantic *literary* history of character. This kind of comparative literary history offers a way to circumvent the conceptual and ideological problems associated with national literary history without succumbing to radical presentism, and it is seriously concerned with how written words engage the emotional responses of readers. Putting ‘literary’ and ‘history’ back into critical apposition will re-enliven a compound of mutually transformative elements in which ‘the transatlantic’ may become something more like a set of conditions or possibilities of relationship than – like the ‘literary’ in ‘literary history’ – a qualifier or particular case of a substantive.

Rhetorical tropes manage ambivalences and the conjunction of opposites, across what Thomas de Quincey called the ‘immense range’ of human experience where ‘the affirmative and the negative are both true’.<sup>3</sup> Mutual liability does not necessarily imply harmony or agreement; relationship is just as likely to assert itself in antagonism. Independent ‘America’ declared itself different, in writing whose very medium enforced similarity to and comparison with the ‘English’ it was like and did not want to be. Reciprocally, post-Revolutionary British writing reconfigured in an era intensely attuned to national stories within a comparative imaginary that acknowledged (and denied) its shared linguistic identity and literary inheritance with the erstwhile colony which from being an extension of itself had now to be thought of as its transatlantic other. As, ideologically, they separated, each literature became national, and liable to the newly constituted other. Pursuing the question of how readers imagine resemblance, this chapter outlines some parameters for a comparative criticism that supplements sequential historical narrative (with its implied linearity and progressive or regressive trajectory), with rhetorical structures able to hold competing or antithetical ‘truths’ in tense simultaneity. Recognising the verbal density of trope and its narrative extension in character enables a ‘thick’ form of transatlantic comparison in which literary considerations take equal place with the historical, and national intentions are supplemented by transnational effects.

## I: Transatlantic

If *all* judgment is comparative, a particular comparison may only be justifiable (perhaps even identifiable) in terms of its specialness: the features that mark it as unique or different. But ‘special relationships’ of all kinds have taken on a suspect air of political pleading. We have had good reason to question the rhetoric of uniqueness, ‘chosenness’ or ‘manifest destiny’. The

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documented connectedness of the eighteenth- and nineteenth-century Atlantic world is substantial and significant across intellectual, religious, educational, commercial and medical contexts; the texture of 'likeness' in its literature is less amenable to teleological narrative sequences. Equally, similarity is never identity; it also comprehends unlikeness, and acknowledges the uniqueness of the particular in context. Time and sequence in literary history are essential parameters in productive tension with the kinds of comparative poetics proposed here on the argument from analogy as a mode of rhetoric (understood as the study of the art of language use), and the special senses in which in literature analogy may become a form of argument.

The distinctive field of the 'transatlantic' is historically, etymologically and semantically rooted in rhetorical trope. The earliest dictionary reference to the term comes from political history: *The Oxford English Dictionary* cites Thomas Jefferson in 1782, doubting 'whether nature has enlisted herself as a cis- or trans-Atlantic partisan', at a time when the Revolutionary war which would establish the separate existence of colonial America from metropolitan Britain was as yet undecided. In this early example, the definition is inseparable from rhetorical figuration. 'Nature' does not yet carry the full Wordsworthian freight of unchanging value; 'she' is a transitive force, whose endorsement will make history. Process, not state, is at issue. Jefferson's 'doubt' embeds the political and moral questions surrounding the patriot case within much older rhetorical formulae: personification or *prosopopoeia*, and the classical trope of *translatio studii et imperii*, the rhetorical rationale for temporal or spatial translation of cultural and political legitimacy which assumed that virtues flee a decadent civilisation for a simpler, regenerate one. Norman kings invoked the trope of *translatio imperii* to explain and justify the transfer of power from the classical civilisations to the French, and thence to England. They devised the foundational myth of King Brutus of Troy, who instituted the kingdom of 'Britain' (Jefferson drew on this story when he sought an appropriate name and official seal for the new nation which embraced its destiny to inherit British imperial grandeur). The trope proclaimed the virtue of the new in transferring ethical authority from received to 'natural' or uncorrupted usage; it encompassed linguistic translation, too, understood as skillful weaving of recognised patterns and elements into a new web of relationships.<sup>4</sup>

In classical rhetoric the figure of metaphor traditionally embodied the handing across or over of meaning. The Latin trope of *translatio* is, in Greek, *metaphora* (*meta*: over, *phereia*: to carry). According to George

Puttenham's *Arte of English Poesie* (1589), poets employ 'the figure of *transport*' either through need – a poverty in descriptive vocabulary – or for pleasure, the 'transport of delight'; he regarded it as a particularly treacherous trope, an insinuator of covert implication, whose fulfilment is achieved in the compact between formal constraint and semantic possibility.<sup>5</sup> James Fenimore Cooper deprecated Walter Scott's 'feudal' style as a pernicious model for an American writer, as an influence which 'pervades his writings, not in professions, but in the deep insinuating current of feeling, and in a way, silently and stealthily, to carry with it the sympathies of the reader'.<sup>6</sup> This is a metaphor – in Puttenham's sense – of hierarchical principles carried like a Trojan horse into the fabric of democratic American prose. Metaphor's peculiar double status is an expression, and an embodiment, of transitivity: it is a form of connection which moves away from the centrifugal or hierarchical towards the relational. Mapping the temporal axis of historical destiny (the verticality of influence) onto spatial form, the transference that metaphors accomplished (the *translatio*) was available for national self-articulation. For Dugald Stewart, a Scottish Enlightenment professor whose work Ralph Waldo Emerson studied at Harvard, metaphors were 'necessarily . . . *transitive* expression[s]'; they embodied contingency and latitude of connection in their very articulation.<sup>7</sup> 'Transference' was Stewart's term for the 'perception of relations' that metaphor embodied; his philosophical distinction between 'responsible' and 'capricious' transference addressed the problem of scepticism: the spectre of random relatedness raised by the absence of demonstrable causation.<sup>8</sup> Stewart's notion of the 'transitive' allowed for contingency of connection, not organic or intrinsic relationship – a distinction between the hierarchical form of linking preferred by what I provisionally term an English ('Wordsworthian') Romanticism and a transatlantic version embodied in Transcendentalism: the 'going beyond', over, which transformed as it translated. The immense impress of Wordsworth's poetry notwithstanding, 'America' itself was ideologically construed in the nineteenth century as an emigrant, polyglot nation founded on transitivity and transference.

Jefferson's revolutionary 'doubt' as to whether 'Nature' had made the transatlantic crossing, to seal the victory for America and smooth the transport of Empire and cultural authority, retained the etymological and semantic link of the term to geographical adjectives and noun compounds with a spatial sense built in: '*situated* or *lying* beyond or on the other side of', as *The Oxford English Dictionary* has it. 'Transatlantic' and 'Transcendental' are semantically entwined through the common crossing root 'trans-'. A much older tradition of rhetorical analysis acquired new associations:



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because its referent was not primarily subject matter but a manner of rhetorical relation, 'transatlantic' had implications not only for the particular comparison of American and British Romanticism but also – given the post-Romantic cast of all American (as all modern) writing – for a wider stylistics of comparison based in figurative ways of perceiving and expressing relation, 'thinking across'. Although comparative connections may, of course, be made across a rich linguistic range I limit myself here to Anglophone transatlantic writing, where the grounds for comparison are not primarily found in language difference, and verbal resonance can be traced with some exactitude. In their shared historical, genealogical and – above all – linguistic traditions, and in their lateral geographical situations, transatlantic texts in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries were at once distinctive and representative of other relational conditions that offered grounds for comparison. Comparison tends, however, to be an effective discriminatory tool in proportion to the proximity of the terms it brings into alignment; the greater the variables – of time, space, language, cultural reference and so on – the more uncertain must be any conclusions about particular causes and effects. The demonstrable closeness of Anglophone cultural expression and implicative reach on both sides of the Atlantic is, then, the primary rationale for the kind of comparison this book proposes.

The Atlantic is a topographical feature; the term is also a representation of space, crossing, difference. With the addition of the prefix 'trans-' it becomes a trope, a metaphor for metaphor, a way of thinking about cognition through comparison. 'Transatlantic' reading in the senses I develop here may nonetheless take a number of forms. It may describe a literary work whose action takes place on both sides of the Atlantic, or as a consequence of an Atlantic passage (James Fenimore Cooper's *Home as Found*, Herman Melville's *Redburn*, Charles Dickens' *Martin Chuzzlewit*). It may also describe a way of reading: the process of textual comparison or correspondence between British and American writers (George Eliot and Harriet Beecher Stowe; the poems of Robert Burns and his American avatars); or between a 'British' and a 'North American' work (Oliver Goldsmith's 'The Deserted Village' and his Canadian nephew and namesake's 'The Rising Village'). And – most cautiously – I read Jane Austen's *Persuasion* as exemplifying the possibility that at a more figurative level such poetics may be a fruitful form of reading character in a work which has no literal transatlantic content as a component of plot or theme. In all cases the claims of the approach are based not on extrinsic grounds of authorship, geographical placement or recovery of historical readers reading, but in the critical potential of a particular practice of comparison continuous with

eighteenth-century thinking that expressed itself pre-eminently in relational modes of perception and understanding. Foregrounding a shared history in epistemology and rhetoric, this chapter traces the conditions for an ethic and aesthetic of comparison that loosens a 'historical' sense of the inevitable priority of the 'English' or 'British' over the American.

Negotiations between 'literary' and 'historical' forms of understanding look rather different when literary relations are considered not in terms of documentary connections in historical sequence but as practices that perform an idea of character as represented in embedded acts of textual correspondence. Describing defensible relationships between national character (as representation rather than essence) and literary style in transnational contexts will involve, among other things, exploring issues of representation and performance in relation to specific character types, the association of character-building with nation-building, and how representations reach out to readers through character.

## II: History and rhetoric

However qualified by the encounters of his travels, Imlac's faith in 'the progress of the human mind, the gradual improvement of reason' had a firm foundation in contemporary thought. The four-stage or stadialist theory of human society developed by Henry Home (Lord Kames), William Robertson and Adam Smith in the middle decades of the eighteenth century shaped narratives of progression not only in history, but across a spectrum of knowledge. It was committed to understanding conditions for the evolution of society and for the emergence and decline of nations, as part of a 'science of man' – the study of human life in all its aspects – which stimulated a range of new disciplinary frameworks built on an evolutionary model, from developmental psychology to literary history and comparative literature. What Stewart would retrospectively call 'conjectural' or 'philosophical' history posited that knowledge gleaned evidentially from one context might legitimately be transferred as a conjectural truth in relation to another historical situation observed at a similar point of societal development, without implying identity or causal connection between them.<sup>9</sup> So a nation's history might be read either vertically through the succession of 'stages' of development, or transversely in comparison with other societies in different geographical situations. After Adam Ferguson's *An Essay on the History of Civil Society* (1767) had drawn a comparison between American Indians and Scottish highlanders as societies in similar primitive states of development, both would become favourite fantasy figures in Romantic transatlantic