

The Written Self in the Age of Reason

Krisztina Kaló

Baker, John, Marion Leclair, and Allan Ingram, eds. *Writing and Constructing the Self in Great Britain in the Long Eighteenth Century*. Manchester: Manchester UP, 2019. xiii + 288 pages. ISBN 978-1-5261-2336-7. Hb. £80.00.

The one-time inscription in the forecourt of the Temple of Apollo at Delphi, γνῶθι σεαυτὸν (*nosce te ipsum*, that is, “know thyself”) has become a maxim for the heirs of Ancient Greek culture and has known a variety of interpretation in the arts and literature of all centuries up to our modern age. The long eighteenth century in Great Britain—the period, roughly, running from 1688 to 1815 (or to 1830)—was not an exception to the interest in the self and in its relations with nature and society.

The Glorious Revolution of 1688, Whiggism, the Hanoverian Regime, patriotism, the Empire, the challenges of institutionalized religion, the conflicts between the State and the Church, the revolutionary ideas sweeping across Europe, the Napoleonic wars all contribute to the historical background of great political, economic, and social changes, and, accordingly, British philosophers, writers, poets, and artists echo the vicissitudes of their age in their works.

Writing and Constructing the Self is a collective volume of academic essays, mainly revised versions of papers delivered at an international conference at the Institut du Monde Anglophone in Paris on 10 December 2013, focusing on the place, roles, features, and connections of the written self in the period defined above. The essays unmistakably demonstrate the preponderant theoretical influence of Locke, Hume, Hartley, Mandeville, and Shaftesbury on contemporary literature and art. John Baker and Marion Leclair present the main goals of the volume in a very thorough and inspiring introductory study, in which the authors consider the roots of modern self-promotion, commitment to individual freedom, obsession with the self, and narcissistic incarnations of personal identity. *Writing and Constructing the Self* does not undertake to offer a complete picture of eighteenth-century manifestations of its central theme but sets the more realistic objective to present some of the distinctive voices of the self—as “a patchwork chronicle, a multilogue that will illustrate the diversity, resilience, and unity of the notion of the self” (3).

The fourteen contributors are either established scholars at prestigious universities of Europe and North America or talented Ph.D. students. The volume divides into twelve chapters, which make up three distinct sections. Part 1 is dedicated to the early modern selves and the Reason versus Passion debate. Laura Alexander's exhaustive analysis of the Restoration poet and painter Anne Killigrew, an excellent representative of visual and poetic spirituality, puts Killigrew in the perspective of both her contemporaries and the most recent studies on the "spiritual wit." Regina Maria Dal Santo, a researcher of sermon writing, discusses the image of Man that appears in late-seventeenth-century sermons. With Dal Santo's prominent examples of John Tillotson and Isaac Borrow the imperative *nosce te ipsum* clearly emerges as "the only means which generates a proper, hopefully objective, perception of one's evil inclinations and virtues" (48). Investigating the subject of self-love from a different angle, Jeffrey Hopes analyzes the disagreement between Francis Hutcheson and Bernard Mandeville and concludes that Hutcheson's interrogation of the notion of self-love constitutes "a crucial step in the construction of a conception of human nature in which the self's search for happiness is allied to, indeed inseparable from, the same self's intrinsic sociability, benevolence and altruism" (70).

Orla Smyth's essay focuses on the influence of the French amatory literature on the language of the self in the works of women writers. Smyth highlights three major thematic motifs of French provenance that can be detected in British literature: "the self of self-interest" (75) (*amour-propre*), "its inquiry into love as passion" (76), and "the presence of passions in the soul or ideas that escape the subject's mental perception" (77). With an outstandingly processed French and English theoretical background and with the example of *Love in Excess* (1719) by Eliza Haywood, the interaction of the major themes in the narrative exploration of interpersonal problems of the characters gains elucidation. William Flesch's study explores a fascinating connection between eighteenth-century economic discourse and literature to understand altruism, that is, "preferring not to follow our own preferences" (104). Cross-references to Hopes's essay on Mandeville (chapter 3) reflects the refined structuring of the volume that the readers shall appreciate when twelve different angles are adopted to discover one single theme.

The essays in part 2 revolve around self-exploration in the Age of Reason. Clark Lawlor probes Alexander Pope's artistic way to define himself by taking advantage of his own deformity and inventing "grotesquely feminised male selves" (131), for example, through the satirical portrait of

Colley Cibber in *The Dunciad* (1727). Allan Ingram, one of the editors of the volume, dedicates a chapter to Samuel Johnson and James Boswell—both known for being interested in their own thought processes—and focuses on the most recent theories of self-awareness. The two minds had a lot in common but Johnson was more radical, says Ingram, whereas “Boswell was far more completely a creature of his own time” (148), so towards the end of the century Boswell considered Johnson to be a “self of a past age” (148). Barbara Puschmann-Nalenz considers the female selfhood in the main character’s letters and journal in Samuel Richardson’s *Pamela, or, Virtue Rewarded* (1740) with the focus on (indoor and outdoor) spaces. Her specific approach provides a valuable point of view of the widely analyzed epistolary novel. The last essay in part 2 studies another masterpiece of the period, *The Life and Opinions of Tristram Shandy, Gentleman* (1759–67) by Laurence Sterne, from the perspective of Locke’s theory on personal identity and Shaftesburian philosophy, taking into account especially Shaftesbury’s recommendation of self-examination to achieve self-knowledge. The inward journey that each person should take into the self, as Gioiella Bruni Roccia paraphrases Shaftesbury’s core idea, is “an essential preliminary to any other moral questions” (173). The rereading of Sterne’s first-person narrative as a passionate search for identity completes what we have formerly read and thought of this particular comic novel.

Part 3 evokes the last phase of the long eighteenth century, when the Age of Reason was giving way to (pre)romantic wanderings; that is, when the self was again in search of its place at the end of the 1700s. Laura Quinney’s comparative study of Blake’s and Wordsworth’s poetry reveals the “inner estrangement” of the self, which leads to anxiety and to a sort of exile. Quinney introduces the distinction between existential and social alienation claiming that existential alienation is “the highest level of self-consciousness” (194) and concludes that both Wordsworth and Blake contributed with their poetic self-division to the Gnostic myth of the soul’s exile, loneliness, and sense of guilt. The sublime, another prominent theme, is treated by Éva Antal in an excellent essay, which combines theory and analysis in the right proportion to make her point clear. Starting from Kant’s theorization we are led to understand the philosophical, literary, aesthetic, and art-critical aspects of the “sublime quality” (211). Antal overviews the diverse definitions of the sublime in British aesthetics from John Dennis to Jonathan Richardson to found the analysis of Edmund Burke’s reading John Milton. Rachel Roger’s historical study closes the volume as an endnote to the period. She investigates the issue of the self and the community in the French

revolutionary era through an analysis of Sampson Perry's *Oppression!!! The Appeal of Captain Perry to the People of England* (1795), which summarizes the legacy of the period handed over to the up-coming era and thus represents a necessary link to the nineteenth century.

The easy-to-follow structure of the volume gives readers the idea of the progress of thoughts in their continuity and helps understand both congruous and controversial ideas. The selection of authors and thinkers represents a kaleidoscope of the self as perceived by contemporaries and reread by twenty-first-century scholars. *Writing and Constructing the Self* is a must-read for academics and university students who are concerned with the philosophical, literary, historical aspects of selfhood—along with the related notions of self-awareness, subjectivity, the first-person perspective in narratives, self-articulation, and individuality.

Eszterházy Károly University, Eger, Hungary

Note

The writing of the review was supported by the EFOP-3.6.1-16-2016-00001 grant “Complex Improvement of Research Capacities and Services at Eszterházy Károly University.”