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# The Poetics of Sensibility: A Revolution in Poetic Style, by Jerome McGann

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*The Poetics of Sensibility: A Revolution in Poetic Style* by Jerome McGann. Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1998. Pp. 228. \$19.95 paperback.

In 1956, Northrop Frye called for a new approach to the poetry composed between Pope and Wordsworth. Dubbing this era an Age of Sensibility, he sought to appreciate the liveliest poets of the late eighteenth century—his chief examples were Ossian, Smart, and Blake—according to their own poetics and not as laggard Augustans or precocious Romantics. This meant, for Frye, a valuing of sound over sense, of artificiality over naturalness, of free association over narrative. The Augustan and Romantic eras were, for all their differences, emphatically fixed on the poem as finished product. Not so the interregnum. “Hypnotically repetitive, oracular, incantatory, dreamlike and in the original sense of the word charming,” the poetics of sensibility were decisively processual.<sup>1</sup>

Frye’s essay was enormously influential in all but one respect: his unfeigned affection for the poets in question was not contagious. Apart from Blake—who is now more than ever read as a pre-Romantic—Frye’s pantheon has all but disappeared from the shelves of our bookstores. Notwithstanding an ongoing project of archival recovery and several revisionist anthologies, the visibility of this work has hardly been greater within the academy. A handful of notable exceptions aside, the current surge in eighteenth-century studies has focused almost entirely on prose.

Enter Jerome McGann, whose own revisionist anthology (*The New Oxford Book of Romantic Period Verse* [1993]) remaps the half century from 1785 to 1832, taking special aim at the notion of a *sui generis* Romantic genius. In practical terms, this has meant two things: first, an assault on “the extreme domination of an author-centred perception” of the age; second, an erosion of the artificial barrier dividing eighteenth- and nineteenth-century poetics. Thus, where Frye gives a definite end to the Age of Sensibility with the publication of *Lyrical Ballads*, McGann argues for a further evolution, with Romantic poetry growing out of the earlier style, then prospering in active opposition to sensibility’s truer and more popular inheritors—the myriad forgotten authors of sentimental verse. In *The Poetics of Sensibility*, these arguments are carried forward and explored anew, largely through close readings of a wide range of little- and well-known works, extending the purview of McGann’s Oxford anthology by another seventy-five years. The gain of this renewed assault is felt most acutely when McGann takes up the interplay between little- and well-known works. Giving ample space to so-called “minor” figures (especially women), he ends up corroborating, on grounds peculiar to his own interests, the feminist program of scholars such as Anne Mellor, who in *Romanticism and Gender* (1993) argues that the “major” figures of the period (all men) “effectively stole from women their primary cultural authority as the experts in delicate, tender feelings.”

Given this fascination with the darker corners of literary history, it's not surprising that McGann's research should reveal a very different eighteenth century than the one described by Frye. Despite a fascinating chapter on Ossian—James Macpherson's fraudulent epic of ancient Britain—McGann pays little heed to the luminaries of the age as Frye proclaimed them. Gray remains—and there are passing allusions to Chatterton, Cowper, and Burns—but Smart is gone entirely. In his place we find two often overlooked oddballs, William Jones and Erasmus Darwin, the former a translator of Vedic hymns, the latter an author of botanical studies in verse. Blake, to be sure, is also present, but McGann treats him as a figure of independent illumination, even less indebted to prior models and ideas than Coleridge (whose "Eolian Harp" McGann reads, after George Dekker in *Coleridge and the Literature of Sensibility* [1978], as an example and critique of eighteenth-century aesthetics).

But by far the most significant difference between McGann's itinerary and Frye's—between the present state of literary study and the 1950s—is the wealth and centrality of poetry written by women. Frances Greville, Ann Yearsley, Mary Robinson, Ann Batten Cristall, Laetitia Elizabeth Landon, and Felicia Hemans are all given extended treatment, while several other poets earn brief but provocative mention. This is not simply a matter of what Charles Altieri calls "enlarging the temple": the very ground on which the temple stands has undergone a seismic shift. Surveying the Age of Sensibility as newly revealed, McGann declares, "The nightwood of lost or forgotten writing . . . what we have *not* made of it—passes a clear judgement on our visions of judgement" (4, 195). McGann's stance is thus explicitly anti-Arnoldian. "We custodians of culture," he writes, "are continually, professionally inclined to imagine that art ought to deliver the best that has been known and thought in the world, and—what is worse—to think of this 'best' as a moral category. The tendency produces grotesque results for anyone interested in promoting the practice of art and imagination" (5).

The key words in this passage are not, as one might suspect, "best" and "moral," but "known" and "thought." McGann is far less averse to aesthetic judgment than his rhetoric suggests, and his rhetoric is itself in the service of a kind of morality—an acute sense of injustice in the renderings of posthumous fame, a conscientious rejection of absolutism in all things pertaining to art, an ethics of reading. What makes McGann's position anti-Arnoldian is not his rejection of judgment *per se* but, rather, his rejection of the bases on which such judgments are usually rendered. "The problem that concerns me," he writes in his introduction, "is not change or stasis in the canon of what we read. It is the tendency to approach all art, canonical or non-canonical, in rational—in theoretical and philosophical—terms" (5). For McGann, the intellect's status as ultimate arbiter in matters of art and morality is the real issue raised by sensibility's canonical status, something that becomes espe-

cially clear in his reading of "On Being Charged with Writing Incorrectly," a 1734 poem attributed to an author known only as "The Amorous Lady." One of several works from the period concerned with "effective emotional expression"—with finding a language proper to the heart—its ultimate point, hinted at in the title, is that "learning and a 'knowledge of letters' are obstacles to be overcome rather than aids to reflection," a proposition McGann himself takes to heart (45, 43).

That a deep immersion in sensibility should lead a critic of McGann's abilities to adopt this anti-intellectual stance is hardly accidental. Nor is it accidental that McGann should draw so conclusively for support on despised poetry written by women. As Janet Todd succinctly notes in *Sensibility: An Introduction* (1986), sensibility was characterized by its critics as "female, un strenuous, anti-social and self-indulgent, a physical manipulation and a sensation of the body"—a sensation "felt by men and women alike, but . . . especially associated with the selfish, effeminate side of the personality which, in men, needed proper and manly curbs." Whether this misogynist response to sensibility defines the movement *ipso facto* as a feminist project is a matter of critical debate—Mary Wollstonecraft and Jane Austen were two who had their doubts—but there's no question that McGann's embrace of the movement contributes to a feminist literary history.

Until now, only a few of the poets taken up in this book have received serious attention, none of it as resolutely focused on artistry—or as unguardedly admiring—as here. Donna Landry, for example, turns the milkmaid Ann Yearsley into an object lesson for materialist feminists in her *Muses of Resistance: Laboring-Class Women's Poetry in England, 1739–1796* (1990). McGann's concern instead is the problem of form. Drawn into the coils of Yearsley's "splendidly convoluted lines," he discovers a structural model for the poet's "spiritual agon, which readers must re-experience to understand" (57, 59). In *Cato's Tears and the Making of Anglo-American Emotion* (1999) Julie Ellison finds Anna Laetitia Barbauld's writing an allegorical description of sensibility as philosophical "system." McGann's focus is instead on how "the act of writing substantiates its subject" (66). This persistent emphasis on form, structure, writing, beauty, imagination, creativity, poetics, and such-like matters of aesthetic performance is decidedly out of fashion, but McGann, whose ebullient historicism helped prepare the way for cultural studies, draws acute lessons throughout. Thus, of Laetitia Landon he writes: "Her poetry recreates a factitious world and she is shrewd enough (and cursed enough) to see that her own perceptions are part of that world, as is the language in which she can speak of it" (146). Of Ann Batten Cristall: "Her single volume of work, and the single surviving copy known to us, are alike emblems of her mortalized and unworldly aesthetics. For her poetry should not be defined by measures of fame and endurance. A thing of beauty is not a joy forever, it is a joy for now" (204-5).

The heart of this book, and by far McGann's most audacious chapter, is his rehabilitation of the Della Cruscans, a short-lived *fin de siècle* movement entombed in literary history by its contemporary critics as "a knot of fantastic coxcombs . . . perfectly unintelligible, and therefore much read."<sup>2</sup> The group first came to notice with the publication of the *Florence Miscellany* in 1785, a collection of seventy-nine poems in English, Italian, French, and Latin whose most notable characteristic was the "direct expression of personal emotions and impressions."<sup>3</sup> (It is probably not a coincidence that the twentieth-century American poet Robert Duncan once edited a journal with the echoing title of *Berkeley Miscellany*. For Duncan, "even embarrassing sentiments" were proper material for poetry—a stance that eventually drew the ire of critic M. L. Rosenthal.)<sup>4</sup> But by far the group's greatest sensation came a few years later, when Robert Merry published his "Adieu and Recall to Love" under the signature of "Della Crusca." These amatory lines were soon answered in kind by "Anna Matilda" (Hannah Crowley), inspiring an ongoing poetic correspondence quickly joined by a number of other writers, all of them adopting pseudonyms.<sup>5</sup> The poems were ultimately gathered together in a volume called *The British Album*, and they were deemed disturbing enough to call down several satirical attacks. The most notable were those of William Gifford (*The Baviad* and *Maeviad* of 1791 and 1795, respectively) and Richard Polwhele (*The Unsex'd Females*, 1798), but as late as 1809 no less a figure than Byron was joining his voice to the chorus of satirists, declaring in his "English Bards and Scotch Reviewers":

Though Crusca's bards no more our journals fill,  
Some stragglers skirmish round the columns still,  
Last of the howling host which once was Bell's,  
Matilda snivels yet, and Hafiz yells,  
And Merry's metaphors appear anew,  
Chained to the signature of O. P. Q.<sup>6</sup>

According to the movement's principal historian, W. N. Hargreaves-Mawdsley, the Della Cruscans were "literary scapegoats in a political witch-hunt," victims of a backlash against the French Revolution (*The English Della Cruscans and Their Time, 1783–1828* [1967]). McGann agrees with this conclusion, but sees the anti-Jacobinism as one element in larger pattern of response to sensibility's wider claims. Focusing on Mary Robinson, and especially Robinson's *Sappho and Phaon*, he argues for the Della Cruscan movement as an essential if forgotten episode in sensibility's war against patriarchal authority. More pointedly, McGann views the "excision" of this movement from the history of English poetry as a loss of poetic possibility tantamount to "cultural disaster" (96), a perverse but wonderful claim which measures more precisely than any cockpit instrument the height of our ascent from the ordered world of

Cambridge dons, who in the 1914 edition of the *Cambridge History of English Literature* decreed Della Cruscan verse “inconceivable balderdash,” “the nadir of the art”—without quoting a single line!

In celebrating this work, McGann draws particular attention to those qualities of eighteenth-century writing which register most forcefully as elements of postmodernism: self-conscious artificiality, an acute sense of the limits of agency, the privileging of affect over sense. These are not accidental emphases. With strategic allusions to experimental writers Lyn Hejinian, Kathy Acker, Veronica Forrest-Thomson, John Ashbery, James Merrill, Laura Riding, and especially Gertrude Stein, McGann suggests something like an interrupted, recommencing history. Indeed, like the Todd Haynes of *Velvet Goldmine* (who posited an otherworldly link between Oscar Wilde and David Bowie), McGann offers Stein as a latter-day Della Cruscan. I only wish he had seen fit to argue the point in detail. Quoting from an obnoxious, uncollected review by T. S. Eliot, McGann shows just how consistent the terms of condescension remain from century to century. But just because two writers are attacked in similar terms doesn't mean that their enterprises are in fact the same. Nor are the terms of approval any more specific in their indications of lineage. When McGann upholds the poetry of sensibility as the first to treat “the physique of language” as “in itself a cognitive field,” he might just as well be describing Charles Olson's “Projective Verse” as Stein's *Tender Buttons* (23). The disparity between these two projects—between the Olsonian and Steinian approaches to language—only underscores the difficulty of claiming a literary heritage for writers who never expressed any interest in the estate.

And yet, for all the distance and invisibility of eighteenth-century poetry, for all the difficulties which beset its reassimilation, the poets of sensibility have again begun to speak to us. The young Canadian poet Lisa Robertson relies on Lady Mary Wortley Montague in her reinventions of the pastoral (*XEclogue* [1993]); Susan Howe mentions Sir William Jones in her long poem “Melville's Marginalia” (in *The Nonconformist's Memorial* [1993]); Gerrit Lansing, an associate of Robert Duncan and Charles Olson, has written one of his finest recent works (*Heavenly Tree/Soluble Forest* [1995]) in homage to Erasmus Darwin. Particular claims aside, McGann is surely correct in supposing that some strains of postmodern writing have roots that sink down into eighteenth-century soil. This shows most powerfully, to my mind, in the sheer suggestiveness of his descriptions. Reading McGann's account of Mary Robinson, I was forcefully reminded of Leslie Scalapino. Likewise, McGann's chapter on Ossian made me think in surprising new ways of Nathaniel Mackey (another writer who “erodes the sharp divisions of matter and spirit . . . at every textual level,” 37). Casual as these associations may be—other readers will surely draw their own, perhaps antithetically—they make a compelling case for the critical relevance of a lost body of writing whose aesthetic interest isn't always apparent.

*The Poetics of Sensibility* is a milestone of critical recuperation, but interested readers unfamiliar with the historical terrain will have to overcome several obstacles before they are able to appreciate both the ingenuity and aptness of McGann's readings. Style is not one of these obstacles. Passionate in his advocacy, exuberant in his claims, McGann's writing is a model of seduction and bravado. Though dense, often to the point of opacity, his elastic, allusive language is invariably witty. McGann's erudition is also impressive, but he has a tendency to assume an equal knowledge on the part of his readers—a flattering assumption which becomes a little maddening when the writers under discussion are all but unknown even to experts. An appendix of poems nowhere else in print, or even an annotated bibliography, would have helped this book immeasurably.<sup>1</sup> In this respect, *The Poetics of Sensibility* is like the English translation of Lacoue-Labarthe and Nancy's *The Literary Absolute* (1988), a study of German Romanticism which in its French original accompanied a short anthology of primary materials. In each case, the segregation of text from commentary works to the reader's disadvantage, rendering concrete analysis needlessly abstract.

These difficulties are unfortunately compounded by a haphazard organization. Casual about chronology, McGann sets his chapters in an order that defies a narrative of development and obscures pertinent arguments. Thus, we learn about the reader response to Laetitia Landon's poetry a chapter before we examine Landon's work, and are told that Mary Robinson feminizes "the Schillerian dialectic" a chapter before Schiller's ideas are presented and discussed (100). Presumably, the book was written as a series of separate essays and not as a preconceived whole, but diligent copyediting would have solved the majority of these problems. A second reading also does the trick, especially if one assembles the relevant texts beforehand.

These are, in any case, quibbles. The book is uncommonly rich and lively—one chapter is a vigorous debate between three of McGann's alter egos—and unique in its passionate reinvention of an entire era of forgotten poets. Rarely does a scholar bring so precise an understanding of current issues in poetry and poetics to a study of the past, and never (so far as I can recall) to a past as repudiated as this one. The ultimate impact of McGann's labors is impossible to guess, but the effort alone has significance. No reader of this book will ever again—if he or she ever did—hear the phrase "the judgment of history" without a narrowing of the eyes. And if, by chance, we experience a renaissance of eighteenth-century possibilities, a poetic rebirth akin to the Metaphysical revival of the Modernist era, our debt to McGann will be as great as our earlier debt to Eliot—an irony no less precious than the poetry itself.

#### Notes

1. Northrop Frye, "Towards Defining an Age of Sensibility," in *Fables of Identity* (New York: Harcourt, Brace, 1963), 131, 133.

2. William Gifford, *The Maeviad* (London, 1795), vi.
3. Edward E. Bostetter, "The Original Della Cruscan and the Florence Miscellany," *Huntington Library Quarterly* 19 (1956): 293.
4. Robert Duncan, *Fictive Certainties* (New York: New Directions, 1985), 220. Rosenthal criticized Duncan's 1964 book *Roots and Branches* as "sentimental philosophizing." See Duncan's response in the preface to his own *Caesar's Gate: Poems 1949-50* (Berkeley: Sand Dollar, 1972).
5. The influence of this writing reached even to America, where "Philenia" (Sarah Wentworth Morton) and "Menander" (Robert Treat Paine, Jr.) carried out a poetic correspondence in the pages of the *Massachusetts Magazine*. See chap. 6 of James L. Onderdonk's *History of American Verse* (Chicago: A. C. McClurg & Co., 1901), "Della Cruscan Echoes, 1785-1815."
6. Lord Byron, *The Complete Poetical Works*, vol. 1, ed. Jerome J. McGann (Oxford: The Clarendon Press, 1980), 253.
7. The lack is especially surprising given McGann's own talents as a textual editor and his valuable role in making rare imprints available on the world wide web. See, e.g., *British Poetry 1780-1990: A Hypermedia Archive of Scholarly Editions* at <http://etext.lib.virginia.edu/britpo.html>, as well as McGann's essay "Textual Scholarship, Textual Theory, and the Uses of Electronic Tools: A Brief Report on Current Undertakings," *Victorian Studies* 41.4 (summer 1998): 609-19.

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*Writing the English Republic: Poetry, Rhetoric, and Politics, 1627-1660* by David Norbrook. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999. Pp. xiii + 509. \$64.95.

Long after it was all over, Thomas Hobbes looked back at the civil war to search out the causes for an event he continued to think unnatural. How was it that men abandoned the duty owed their governors and instead followed the guidance of their own wits? Envy and ambition had a great deal to do with it, of course, Hobbes contended in *Behemoth, or The Long Parliament* (ed. Ferdinand Tönnies: 2nd ed. [1967]), but the critical element in promoting insubordination was attendance at the universities, where such men became persuaded that they lacked no "ability requisite for the government of a commonwealth, especially after having read the glorious histories and the sententious politics of the ancient popular governments of the Greeks and Romans, amongst whom kings were hated and branded with the name of tyrants, and popular government . . . passed by the name of liberty" (23). Hobbes hammers