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Poetry and the Idea of Progress, 1760-1790

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Rev. of John Regan, *Poetry and the Idea of Progress, 1760-1790*. London: Anthem Press, 2018.

At the end of John Regan's *Poetry and the Idea of Progress, 1760-1790*, he explains that he undertook his study because he wanted to contemplate "why poetry was so potent a tool for thinking through progress" (p. 165). All observers of eighteenth-century culture in general and of poetry in particular should be grateful that he did so; indeed, they should be intrigued and excited by both the aims and the outcomes of this contemplation. Any study which attempts to show how eighteenth-century thinkers conceptualised and integrated poetry's functions, influences, and impacts into a more comprehensive understanding of the dynamics of cultural life should attract positive attention. Regan's basic thesis develops from a seemingly anodyne historical observation familiar to any reader of the period: observers in the eighteenth century recognised that they were living during an age of unprecedented progress in all of the arts, sciences, and social arrangements. This observation, regardless of its orthodoxy as a historical marker, points in fact to a large field of often intense debate about the varied implications of this "progress" experience on social and cultural identity. To understand the complicated and often subtle shades of argument which relate to this historical experience, Regan turns to a seemingly irrelevant area of poetic debate: prosody. He does not, thankfully, offer pages and pages of scansion; rather, his argument shows that debates about progress were mediated through discussions about the elements of prosody: elocution, rhythm, measure, numbers, and so forth. In what might at first appear to most readers as seemingly arcane debates about quite specialist areas of poetic form (at times focused at the level of phonemes and syllables), Regan maps contemporary concerns with how progress might impact on the development of language, going from speech acts to the resources of poetry, and hence to the expression and representation of social values (morality). In five densely argued chapters, Regan displays the fruits of a contemplation which often yields compelling insights into eighteenth-century thinking about the pressures of historical process on cultural developments. As he carefully unpacks the philosophical, religious, and critical issues embedded in debates about prosody, it becomes clear that the innovative, serious, and emotionally subtle ways in which eighteenth-century thinkers conceived of their historical situation deserve our attention--and our respect.

In his Introduction, Regan provides a narrative account which sets the historical parameters for his study. In and of itself this account serves its purpose as a quick overview meant to qualify his choice of 1760 as a starting date for his study. Many eighteenth-century specialists might want to disagree with or at least to express doubts about the critical value of setting this arbitrary date: arguably, a 1760 starting and focal point for a study on the evolution of debates about the issue of progress seen through the lens of discussions about prosody cannot easily be defended. Indeed, Regan ignores the long and extensive history of ancient versus moderns debate which logically laid the ground for a good deal of the later theorising and argument about progress throughout the century, as John D. Scheffer's "The Idea of Decline in Literature and the Fine Arts in Eighteenth-Century England" (published in 1936-37 and not cited by Regan) makes clear. Since Scheffer's article cites a number of important eighteenth-century texts on this issue published prior to and after Regan's 1760 date, ignoring his article does not give an accurate view of critical work on this issue. Nor should William Levine's important "Collins, Thomson, and the Whig Progress of Liberty" (1994) be ignored, particularly considering that

Regan rightly makes it a key argument of his thesis that critics need to pay more careful attention to the textual representation of progress found in a text such as Thomson's poem. Regan also does not offer much wide choice of evidence from debates later in the century which engaged in debate about progress, the arts, and prosody--precisely those areas of cultural debate of interest to him--choosing to focus on a relatively small (if important) set of recognisable writers: Thomas Sheridan, James Burnett, Lord Monboddo, Thomas Percy, Hugh Blair, and Henry Home, Lord Kames. To make his argument more convincing he could, for example, have considered Thomas Barnes's "On the Nature and essential Characters of Poetry, as distinguished from Prose" (read to The Literary and Philosophical Society of Manchester in 1781 and published in its proceedings in 1785), William Belshaw's essays on Style and on Versification in his *Essays, Philosophical, Historical, and Literary* (published in 1789 and valuable given Belshaw's criticisms of Kames, a central figure for Regan's argument), Richard Sharp's "On the Nature and Utility of Eloquence" (read at The Literary and Philosophical Society of Manchester in 1787 and published in the 1790 proceedings). This essay is especially valuable in terms of Regan's study because Sharp engages in dispute with other writers on eloquence--Drs. Browne and Leland, in particular--which shows the intensity of discussion about eloquence in the latter decades of the century. As well, of value would be George Richards's *An Essay on the Characteristic Differences Between Ancient and Modern Poetry, and the several causes from which they result*, an important work published in 1789 which pursues issues relevant to Regan's thesis. Regan's important Afterword on the significance of Byron's poetry would have benefited from exploration of these late eighteenth-century arguments about poetry and prose. Thus, more extensive research both prior to and post Regan's 1760 date would have strengthened and sharpened the historical picture which he constructs to support his thesis.

In the ironically titled first chapter, "Progress by Prescription," Regan confronts a central problem for the critic trying to address any issue focused on eighteenth-century poetry: the strong prejudices and uninformed assumptions about attitudes to writing poetry still held by many modern readers. To build his argument about the integral place of debate about prosody in larger discussion about progress, he needs first to counter the common view that eighteenth-century poetry fell far short of our sense of what poetry must do before it can be defined as "true" poetry, an assumption which goes back at least to Francis Jeffrey when he condemned the eighteenth century as an age of prose, not poetry. From the early nineteenth century and down into recent times, a great deal of selective quotation to "prove" that eighteenth-century writers and readers preferred (almost as if they were in the grip of some morbid disease of mind) prescription to innovation and imagination occurs so regularly that the argument now carries the status of fact. In this chapter, then, Regan "seeks to recover prescriptiveness as a more capacious rhetorical mode in eighteenth-century poetics than has hitherto been accepted (p. 28). And, indeed, taking Samuel Johnson as his first case study--a wise choice since Johnson so often functions as the prototype (or, equally, the whipping-boy) of the eighteenth-century conservative literary critic--Regan counters Paul Fussell's reading of Johnson, finding that Fussell "ignores what Johnson understands as the primary purpose and effect of poetry: the provision of pleasure" (p. 32). Drawing upon commentary found in a wide range of Johnson's writings, Regan shows that Johnson's views about versification run along a wide track, his views being "copious and strident" (p. 32) about the importance of pleasure as a primary function of poetry. Johnson cannot be charged with the crime of being dully and mindlessly

prescriptive.

Similarly, Regan defends Edward Bysshe's *The Art of English Poetry*, a critic, he notes, "often traduced for having enshrined prescriptive syllabism as the unassailable primary principle in composing lines of iambic verse" (p. 38). Careful reading of Bysshe's arguments illuminates that Bysshe held views contrary to conventional assessments (Regan rejects A. Dwight Culler's conclusions about Bysshe's final position, for example). Citing from and then carefully contextualising Bysshe's statements reveals that Bysshe understood his subject fully and sensitively and, as with Johnson, should never have been tarred with the brush of prescriptiveness. Oddly, though, Regan never cites one of Bysshe's most unequivocal statements about the point of prescription: "*I am very unwilling it should be laid to my Charge, that I have furnish'd Tools and given a Temptation of Versifying, to such as in spite of Art and Nature undertake to be Poets; and who mistake their Fondness to Rhyme, or Necessity of Writing, for a true Genius of Poetry, and lawful Call from Apollo. Such Debasers of Rhyme and Dablers in Poetry would do well to consider, that a Man would justly deserve a higher Esteem in the World, by being a good Mason or Shoe-Maker, or by excelling in any other Art that his Talent inclines him to, and that is useful to mankind, than by being an indifferent or second-Rate Poet*" (p. a3). Even so, Regan notes that "Bysshe acknowledges that prescriptiveness is meaningless unless 'sense' and rhythmic 'sound' are mutually formative" (p. 42).

After reading (and thinking about) this initial chapter, the reader can look forward to the following chapters, each of which offers its quota of interesting, often sharply and persuasively developed explorations of Regan's main argument. Readers will find instructive his work on Sheridan and debates about eloquence, for example, and will gain insight into the extensive and innovative thinking behind the work of figures such as Kames and Blair; the contextualising and unpacking of Kames's often recondite critical ideas, in fact, sets down a significant marker for the value of Regan's thesis. Indeed, as he identifies and then illustrates his key issues, Regan brings to the fore that we can never overestimate the value of engaging with eighteenth-century writers on their ground. That is, we gain a more comprehensive understanding of this period if we approach its writers with a healthy degree of academic humility and learn to listen to the cadences of their debates. Regan's contemplation teaches us that a seemingly mundane field such as prosody attracted a range of contributors who engaged with knowledge, analytical and conceptual skills, and imaginative vigour. If there are times where Regan needed to show more awareness of critical debates--for example, his section on Ossian does not reference any recent scholarship and therefore limits a reader's engagement with it--and where he might have worked harder to produce clearer, more syntactically sharp writing, his *Poetry and the Idea of Progress, 1760-1790* deserves to be read by any person who wants to extend and deepen their understanding and appreciation for the cultural complexity of eighteenth-century poetry.