

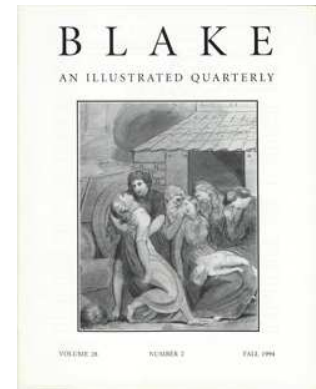
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R E V I E W

Marshall Brown, *Preromanticism*; G. J. Barker-Benfield, *The Culture of Sensibility: Sex and Society in Eighteenth-Century Britain*

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# R E V I E W S

Marshall Brown, *Preromanticism*. Stanford University Press, 1991. xiv + 500 pp. \$45. G. J. Barker-Benfield, *The Culture of Sensibility: Sex and Society in Eighteenth-Century Britain*. University of Chicago Press, 1992. xxxiv + 520 pp., 11 illus. \$49.95.

Reviewed by NELSON HILTON

These two books, each brilliant and deeply rewarding in its own way, make for an enlightening comparison-and-contrast study of that era which Northrop Frye once proposed we label "the Age of Blake" (*Fearful Symmetry* [Princeton 1947] 167). However that may be, Blake in these books remains *hors de concours*, as the historian Barker-Benfield never mentions him, and the literary critic's most sustained comment on the poet trails away in clouds of his preferred writer:

It is worth remembering that one great outsider, William Blake, resolutely continued the vein of sensibility. He rejected exchange and use and struggled to correct and convert the psychic economy of sensibility directly into a blinding vision of universal truth. . . . plainly Blake's "aching joys" and "dizzy raptures" (to borrow some phrases from "Tintern Abbey") were not of their time; they belong to that more adolescent state of universal feeling when "nature . . . / To me was all in all." (103)

As "a history of the origins of literary Romanticism in Britain" (362), Brown's exercise in new formalism focuses on "the factors that promoted literary change and the processes that guided the course of development specifically toward romanticism as we know it" (178)—even as it aims to correct "the pseudoteleology of the old preromanticism" (360). A reading of the materialist Barker-Benfield, though, recalls Blake's argument that "the ratio of all we have already known. is not the same that it shall be when we know more" (E 2). His book never forgets either the ubiquitous interpellative insistence of strengthening British commercial capitalism or the figure of his chosen cultural hero, Mary Wollstonecraft: "It was her *Vindication of the Rights of Woman* that first suggested to me that sensibility was a culture, and a culture of women. . . . Because Wollstonecraft made sex the conscious and central subject of her study, I have woven her analysis through my text" (xxviii). Wollstonecraft, however, is absent entirely from Brown's account. For Brown, Burns is "the original genius of romanticism" (363), but Barker-Benfield mentions him not at all; for Brown, "[i]f sensibility is regarded as the cult of



1. Phillippe Mercier, *Bible Lesson*, 1743.

feelings, then Boswell is its hero" (113), but no reference to his journals appears in the other book. Brown devotes more pages to Goldsmith than to any other, a chapter to Cowper (*The Task*), another to Sheridan (*The School for Scandal*), a long chapter to Wordsworth, and he discourses elegantly on the "urbane sublime" and "transcendental aesthetics" of Gray and Collins—Barker-Benfield mentions Goldsmith twice, Gray once, Collins, Sheridan, Cowper, and Wordsworth never. But other names which recur regularly through *The Culture of Sensibility* are not to be found in *Preromanticism*: Anna Laetitia Barbauld, Maria Edgeworth, Mary Hays, Hannah More, Ann Radcliffe, John Wesley (each with more than 10 citations).

Brown, then, concerns himself with a selection of literary masterpieces or "touchstones" which collectively articulate problems and terms "that shaped discourses in the period: self-consciousness, pure space and time, feeling, closure, the aesthetic, story, synthesis, sign, action, experienced time, and finally, in Wordsworth, the fusion of all such concerns under the rubric of simplicity" (376). Barker-Benfield's more social text is the "continuous struggle" over the meanings and values of a word—"sensibility"—which "signified revolution, promised freedom, threatened subversion, and became convention," which "denoted the receptivity of the senses and referred to the psychoperceptual scheme explained and systematized by Newton and Locke," and which "connoted the operation of the nervous system, the material basis of consciousness" (xvii). The drama of this text is in how, "[s]elected by people in accordance with the changing social circumstances of both sexes, elements of the nerve paradigm, of political thought, the campaign for the reformation of manners, the evangelical challenge to orthodoxy, of literacy and the commercialization of publishing—each integrally connected with the other and all to the establishment of a consumer society—sensibility became a culture" (215).



The different concerns of each book can be seen in their respective discussions of "delicacy." For Brown, the word—as in the title of Hugh Kelly's 1768 play *False Delicacy*—"refers to the negative functioning of language" since "the delicate person refrains from uttering desires" (231). It is "an overrefined moral sense" which "internalizes inherited, partly unspoken social codes" (231). Barker-Benfield begins by noting how "delicacy" was "virtually synonymous with sensibility" and connoted "the nerve structure assumed by the latter term," but he emphasizes its role in sexual politics: "Traditional, patriarchal male control of female sexuality seems to have been basic to shaping the code of delicacy" (299-300). He quotes John Bennett, who wrote in 1789 that "Delicacy was [sic; 'has?'] a very general and comprehensive quality. It extends to everything where woman is concerned. Conversation, books, attitude, gesture, pronunciation should all come under its salutary restraints" (207). "Delicacy" is thus revealed as a cornerstone of sensibility's support of gender distinctions under the commonplace, "man was made to reason, woman to feel" (302). For Wollstonecraft, the code of delicacy "was symptomatic of the danger posed by women's acculturation to the civilizing process" (303).

For Brown, preromanticism concerns the lurching movement toward the separation of consciousness from experience: "when the separation is completed by the joining of the pure forms of space and of time, consciousness becomes generalized"—as "romantic sensibility"—"into an abstracted reverie, disembodied and out of touch with the world of sensation" (58). Cowper's *The Task* is an important staging-ground for this march from Young's *Night Thoughts* and Gray's *Elegy* to *The Prelude*, and Brown offers some fascinating pages relating the changed views of consciousness represented by Cowper and Kant. Those who struggle with the meaning of "polypus," "vortex," and "emanation" might sense a curious sympathy when Brown writes of Kant:

One need only observe the terminological welter—with its "idea" and "ideal," its "transcendent" and "transcendental," its "axioms," "anticipations," "analogies," and "postulates," its "syntheses" of "apperception," "reproduction," and "recognition" (none of these is an ordinary German word), its "amphibole," "paralogisms," and "antinomies," not to speak of its "dialele" or "dialexis" (the text is uncertain), its "subreption of hypostasized consciousness," and its "euthanasia of pure reason"—one need only pass these terms in review to recognize an eighteenth-century trait gone mad. Such extravagances differ from the personified abstractions of the urbane sublime in that they reify states of consciousness rather than emotions and moral sentiments, but their function is comparable. . . . (72)

To support the argument that "self-definition, self-regulation, and closure" (113) were sensibility's central problems, Brown makes Goldsmith a prominent indicator of the period's literary anxieties. His discussion of *The Traveller, or a Prospect of Society*, has Goldsmith seeming to anticipate Blake's mental traveler: "Governed by a visionary consciousness, the poem tends toward making all consciousness visionary (and thus a covert projection of the traveler)"—though "the poem contains signs intimating a covert recognition that its truth is at odds with its manifest content" (120, 123). The chapter on *The Vicar of Wakefield* is quite simply the best discussion I've ever read of that apparently "simplest and most naive" of "influential masterworks," that "paradigm of literary beauty," "carnival text" and "prototype for romantic organic form," that nearly "encyclopedic novel" and "revolutionary book" (166, 174, 175, 176, 177, 178). Brown is clearly taken with "Goldsmith's intense formalism" (179), and gives some insight into the psychodynamics of formalist concerns when he admits to being "fonder of the page that discusses Goldsmith's vowel harmony than of anything else in the present study, for no better reason than that I was unable to enjoy reading his poetry until I chanced to imagine that I could now hear his voice" (21).

From Goldsmith, Brown turns to "the semiotic crisis" in Sheridan's *The School for Scandal*, the scandal being "the nonconformity of sign and significance" (222), and to the further rethinking of the relationship between body and spirit in *Le Mariage de Figaro* of Beaumarchais. That relationship is precisely the focus of *Tristram Shandy*, the "most sensational and influential literary text of the period" (260—Barker-Benfield mentions the novel once), and the subject of *Preromanticism's* chapter on Sterne's trajectory "[b]eyond reason and fact, and toward story" (262). Frye identifies Sterne as the "chief prose writer" of "the Age of Blake," and surely the student of *The Book of Urizen* will see some possible connections through Brown's remarks that "Consciousness in Sterne is . . . the antithesis of reason. Reason is order, logic, logos. Nothing is so irritating as an interruption, for that calls attention to the horizon limiting the power of reason. . . . Sterne regularly turns his ridicule on immortal essences, bodiless minds, idealized emotions. (*If you will turn your eyes inwards upon your mind*, Walter Shandy pontificates in a pseudophilosophical discourse upon time . . .)" (270 [*Tristram Shandy* 3.18], emphasis added). And Blake's comment on the wide and unpassable gulf between simplicity and insipidity (*M* 30) takes new resonance after Brown's subchapter on "Simplicity After Sterne" and the claim that "simplicity was the central literary problem in the last decades of the century" (296)—a problem highlighted as much by the "fragmentation of perspectives" in the epistolary novel with multiple correspondents (296) as by Sterne's "chaotic overlay of incidents and chronologies" (299).



Brown's book ends, then, with the complex simplicity of Wordsworth, whose mastery of "the multiple modalities of time" correlates with "the unity of his consciousness with respect to the scene" (349). In the author's words, *Preromanticism*

narrates the rites of passage that chasten and subdue sensibility into romantic humanism. The conception of a transcendental time and space and of a transcendental ego, the birth of an aesthetic imagination, the mastery of plot and character development, the assemblage of an order of the organic, the emergence of will and of action as the primary categories of selfhood, the disposition of the multiple temporality of the event. . . (359-60)

All this is finely done, though one can't help agreeing with the author in his conclusion, as he hopes that his book "will affect the way readers think, but knows it will not so affect many, nor much, nor long . . ." (382).

Barker-Benfield's book, on the other hand, should find a wide, receptive, and appreciative audience, not least among Blakeans, who will find themselves already quite at home with *The Culture of Sensibility*. Here we learn how "Newton emphasized that the vibrations of the ether could be 'excited in the brain by the power of the will and propagated from thence' [cf. 'he his Emanations propagated' *FZ* 4.2] through 'the Nerves into the Muscles'" (5; cf. "Come into my hand / . . . descending down the Nerves" *M* 2.5-6); how other writers, like Richardson and Burke, "used 'fibres' and 'nerves' interchangeably" (17); how "'Spirits' was a more specific psychological and physiological referent" (18—cf. "every thing is conducted by Spirits" *J* 3); how "'Vibration' was yet another sign of the nerve paradigm" (20); and, in sum, why and how Albion created "the female will," and how Wollstonecraft resisted. The seemingly self-evident juxtaposition of "the Church" and "the Ale-house" in "The Little Vagabond" assumes new depth as we see how taverns, having assumed recreational activities driven out of the churchyard (57), became the object of a fierce campaign of regulation in the 1770s and 1780s: "Along with the triumph of evangelism, strict 'alehouse regulation became a cornerstone of local administrative policy'" (93).

Bernard Mandeville emerges as a figure worth considering with regard to Blake: he "stated unequivocally and repeatedly that women 'lust' as men do. Sexual appetite is 'innate both in Men and Women'" (128). With the examples Barker-Benfield supplies, we see how Mandeville "rejoiced in physiological directness, puns, and other form [sic] of free and playful sexual speech" (126); for Mandeville, "[w]omen were 'educated' into their 'Weakness of frame and Softness,'" "pity was as much 'a frailty of our nature as Anger, Pride, or Fear,'" and denial a pervasive aspect of human psychology: "we hide even from our selves the vast Extent of Self-Love, and all its different Branches" (127,

125, 121). The discussion of "Sensibility's Method: Conversion" (250-58) enriches the context of *Milton's* concern with what (if anything) changes when Saul becomes Paul, or Milton, Blake—the poem's occasion, in any event, certainly reflects an age in which "[w]riters made the effects of reading a subject for their readers" (259).

*The Culture of Sensibility* includes 11 well-chosen illustrations, including Francesco Bartolozzi's *London Merchants in the Royal Exchange*, which supplies one physical referent for *Jerusalem* 24.42 ("In the Exchanges of London every Nation walkd"). Perhaps the most interesting, however—for its version of the popular "scene of instruction" motif which appears on the title page of *Songs of Innocence*—is the reproduction of Phillippe Mercier's 1743 painting, *Bible Lesson* (fig. 1 ["Collection, Myles Hildyard, Photograph, Courtesy of the Paul Mellon Center for Studies in British Art, London"]). The image aptly illustrates Barker-Benfield's discussion of how the early ideology of sensibility's "culture of reform" centered on "the progenitrix of social affections, a woman and usually a mother, in Richardson's 1740 words, serving the 'cause of Virtue and Religion'" (217). On the other hand, anticipating the "female will" that resisted such positioning and which was to culminate in the anti-Jacobin bogey of the Wollstonecraftian amazon at the end of the century, Barker-Benfield quotes from "Mrs. C's Complaint for the Loss of the Ace of Hearts" in a 1741 number of the *Bath Miscellany*:

Men oft-times sued in vain, with various arts,  
To seduce me from my charming ace of hearts,  
To no effect, I baffled all their skill,  
I scorned their offers, and pursued my will. (199)

"Conflict over the possibilities for women's selfhood in the culture of sensibility and over the directions their wishes should take" (xxvii) is thus a major theme, and the concluding chapter, "Wollstonecraft and the Crisis over Sensibility in the 1790s" takes us straight into Blake's valley of vision with a new and vital appreciation of how, because "the definition of gender was seen to be fundamental both to the Jacobin prospects for reform and to the Anti-Jacobin attempt to maintain the natural order, the debate over sensibility became a key issue in British politics" (360).

While neither book is without human failing, each makes a rewarding contribution to our sense of the literary and cultural context of Blake's work, a context whose daunting complexity they together reiterate.