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R E V I E W

R. D. Stock, *The Holy and the Daemonic from Sir Thomas Browne to William Blake*

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REVIEWS

The Holy and the Daemonic from Sir Thomas Browne to William Blake

R. D. STOCK



R. D. Stock. *The Holy and the Daemonic from Sir Thomas Browne to William Blake*. Princeton: Princeton Univ. Press, 1982. 395 pp., illustrated. \$27.50.

Reviewed by Christopher Fox

Stock's argument is partly negative. Simply put, the nonrational, religious element in late seventeenth- and eighteenth-century literature has been ignored. It has been ignored by those who follow the old, Marjorie Nicolson analysis of the impact of science on seventeenth-century thought and by students of the later period who, like Peter Gay, see Voltaire and Hume (rather than Samuel Johnson) as the true heroes of the time.

Stock thus assails those modern critics who look at an older text like Donne's *First Anniversary* and read their own doubts into it. In announcing that the "new philosophy calls all in doubt," Donne is not some "Jacobean Yeats," proclaiming the death of an old era and the birth of a new; he is instead giving us yet another example of human degeneration, resulting from the Fall. The fear and trembling we find there is our own. Similarly, our modern skeptical tendencies have led us to downplay or even dismiss the religious strain in the later period and "lay stress to the rationalist side of the eighteenth century." (These points, it should be said, are largely true, though not new. They have already been made in a number of recent studies, many of which here, for some reason, go unnoted or ignored.) Stock's positive argument entails an exploration of some selected writers from Browne to Blake, using Rudolf Otto's *Idea of the Holy* (1923) as a paradigm. Otto's study attempts to account for the development of moral conceptions of the holy; and one questions how his conclusions, detailing a process presumably completed long before the seventeenth-century, can be applied to a more modern age, without theoretical difficulties. This criticism might be sidestepped by recalling that Otto's book is phenomenological rather than strictly historical in scope; this approach, then, might apply equally to any age. I do not find a similar escape for other problems in Stock's study which make it—frankly—a poor job. That is sad to say. But this is a sad book.

The author here often tells us that he is "reluctant to impose highly theoretical paradigms on the age." He also rightly questions "the value of terms . . . such as 'the age of this' or 'the spirit of that'" (pp. 381, 203). Despite such claims, the work itself, riddled with catchwords and time-worn tags, is a veritable cookbook for label-soup. Terms like "Rationalism," "Deism," "Fideism," "Pelagianism," "Benevolism," "Jesuitism," "Empiricism," "Skepticism," "Materialism," "Pantheism," "Vitalism," "Hobbism," "Whiggism," "Cartesianism" (or variants like "implicit Cartesianism" or "furtive Cartesianism") are stamped, often with little or no definition, throughout nearly two centuries of literature and thought. At one point, for example, we are told that in Joseph Glanvill's attack on Descartes, "Cartesianism" manages to become a "skulking Hobbism"—though we are never really told how. Descartes and Hobbes had fundamental differences in thought; here as elsewhere, "isms" replace specific persons and precise ideas. A favorite phrase is "rationalist"-ism-istic, which recurs, annoyingly, throughout. Another is "orthodox," which produces such judgments as: Thomson "was more than a Deist; indeed, he was probably more orthodox than Pope"; or in the poetry of Smart, there is nothing "technically unorthodox." Often two labels are mixed together, as in "Akenside is the most rationalistic, Young

the most orthodox." Aside from telling us little about individual authors, such labels also produce confusion. On one page, for example, we hear that Thomas Woolston was an "eccentric Deist" (p. 99); on the next, that "one wonders if he can be properly pigeon-holed—as he commonly is in standard texts—a Deist" (p. 100). Which is it?

If labels don't work, try epithets and namecalling. Compare David Hume to Swift's modest proposer (pp. 212, 215). Or, tell the reader about Hume's "puerile diatribes" or about Pope's "smug scorn" or that Shaftesbury is "gauzy and insufferably genteel." If one doesn't call names, one can get the names wrong, as in a sentence mentioning those eminent eighteenth-century theologians "Joseph Clarke" and "Samuel Butler" (p. 222). If names can be imposed on the past, they can also be applied to the present. The late Ernst Cassirer might be surprised to learn that he is accused, here, of "Whiggery." Other contemporary scholars become "Modern, secular humanists" or "nimble-witted critics" or simply "critics and mere readers." The author continually complains about the "misreadings of older works perpetrated by modern critics" and attests that this study will not judge writers by standards alien to their time. At one point, he congratulates himself for reading an entire book—Scot's *Discoverie of Witchcraft* (1584)—which "I daresay few scholars have more than glanced at" (p. 68).

Let's take the challenge and look at some books. The author tells us, for example, that Richard Burthogge's *Essay Upon Reason and the Nature of Spirits* (1694) is "a curious fiasco: an arid and abstruse exposition of Locke" (p. 91). If the critic or mere reader would, however, glance at this work, he would find not an exposition of Locke but a carefully argued tract that reflects key differences from Locke's position. (In Burthogge's own age, the March 1694 issue of the *Compleat Library* characterized it as an "extraordinary Book," a "fine and Compleat System of thoughts and the product of a long time and great experience in the World"). The author's link with Locke, however, is instructive at least; for as John Yolton has shown in *Locke and the Way of Ideas* (1956), Burthogge in fact anticipated Locke's psychology and his rejection of innate ideas, in an earlier work titled *Organum Vetus & Novum. Or, A Discourse of Reason and Truth* (1678).

If he does not wish to glance at Burthogge, the reader can pick up a copy, say, of Blake, Johnson, or Pope. The author's discussion of Blake's three major prophecies is at some points naive and at others, simply embarrassing. Though it is true that *The Four Zoas* contains the clearest exposition of Blake's mythology, it is silly to say that "Blake's two later prophetic works, *Milton* and *Jerusalem*, are but supplementary" (p. 370)—especially since Blake abandoned *The Four Zoas* without completing it, and engraved and published the other

two. The author does not appear to have noticed that Blake's myth evolved and changed in the 1790s, or to have a clear idea of the nature of the zoas and their emanations. At one point, he even says (p. 367) that "Vala . . . in her purified state is called Luvah" (!) Though not as weak, the book's treatment of *The Songs of Innocence and of Experience* is equally undistinguished; the analysis of "The Tyger," for example, shows no awareness of the critical consensus that the line "When the stars threw down their spears" refers to the creation of the fallen world and alludes to *Paradise Lost*. Blake, we are told, "remains one of the ablest poets in delineating spiritual dread and awe" (p. 349). Accordingly, the Blake section ends with a series of passages, most taken out of context, showing horror and fear. This is a distortion. Blake consistently asserted the ultimate triumph of hope and joy. His frequent pictures of darkness, horror, and suffering are all of the nightmare of the fallen world, which he always believed could be transcended by the imagination.

Similar problems occur in other analyses. The author informs us, for instance, that the characters in *Rasselas* "return at the end to the Happy Valley whence they fled to see the world" (p. 250). The text tells us that the group returned not necessarily to the Happy Valley but to the country, Abissinia—a point that makes Johnson's "Conclusion, In Which Nothing Is Concluded" richly open-ended and ambiguous, "modern" if you will. In considering Pope, the author likes to speak of "the tone" of *An Essay On Man*, a poem that, for all its faults, shows an incredible tonal range—from the formal to the familiar. The treatment of this work also gets stuck in labels, as when we hear that Pope "would scorn the rationalist without actually disowning the very rationalism often imputed to *An Essay On Man*" (p. 141). The text, however, shows that reason comes out in the *Essay* as far less forceful than the passions in affecting human conduct, that it is a "weak Queen" attempting to master an unruly kingdom or a mere "card" (a compass indicator or navigational device) that may somehow serve to guide us through a "gale." Indeed, as Donald Greene and others have recently pointed out, Pope here, far from supporting the so-called "rationalist" position, is actually closer to Hume's pronouncement a few years later that "Reason is, and ought to be the slave of the passions, and can never pretend to any other office than to serve and obey them." (See Greene's "Study of Eighteenth-Century Literature: Past, Present, and Future," in *New Approaches to Eighteenth-Century Literature*, edited by Phillip Harth). To judge by Steven Shankman's new book, *Pope's Illiad: Homer in the Age of Passion* (1983), other Pope scholars have taken such statements to heart. In his delimiting of reason, Pope was not alone. Swift, who had a healthy sense of the irrational, loves to show how we can be brutalized as well by our rational faculties

as by our passions. (Think of the Houyhnhnms' rational plan to exterminate the Yahoos, which gives us a taste of what was to come, in Hitler's death camps). It may even be said that it is precisely Gulliver's desire to be a purely rational being that leads him into the madness of that stable, in which he enjoys the fumes of his groom—while unable to tolerate the smell of his own family—and from which he writes a book to turn the rest of us into rational creatures. Earlier in the period, Rochester wrote *A Satyr against Reason and Mankind*. And the most famous book of the greatest philosopher of the time, John Locke, might well have been titled *An Essay on the Lack of Human Understanding*. "What is striking about the *Essay*," Richard Ashcraft noted in an important essay in 1969, "is not the claims it advances on behalf of human reason, but rather, its assertion of the meagreness of human knowledge." This statement, in *John Locke: Problems and Perspectives* (1969), would not shock those following recent scholarship. Nor would George Rosen's comment, in Harold Pagliaro's *Irrationalism In The Eighteenth Century* (1972), that the period "was as much the critic of reason as its apostle" (p. 255). For a number of major writers in the late seventeenth- and early eighteenth-centuries, reason was held in little repute.

This leads to a last point. At the beginning of the book, Stock tells us that "Basil Willey's opinion of the [eighteenth] century remains the model"—"a period," Willey argued, "in which the dry light of reason was free to penetrate the furthest limits of the universe" (p. 5). For whom, we might ask, does this remain "the model"? Certainly not to informed students of the century. Indeed, ever since Butterfield's *The Whig Interpretation of History* (1931), one of the central tasks of contemporary scholarship has been to extricate the age from such linsey-woolsey tags, many invented by later periods. (The term "neo-classical," for instance, also employed in Stock's book, has been traced back to William Rushton's *Afternoon Lectures on English Literature* in 1863. No earlier occurrences are known.) The author seems vaguely aware that these old tags have been recently challenged and that "Whig theories of progressivism have come increasingly under attack" (p. 21). From his comments, one would expect this study of religious yearnings and fears to be part of that larger reassessment. It is therefore disconcerting to be asked early on "when in fact does an age of rationalism begin" (p. 6)?—and then to later find a chapter with the words "Rationalism . . . in Pope and Swift" or hear about the "rise of rationalism" (p. 70). The book, in short, assumes the very teleology it attacks. It also shows little awareness of recent work. It is remarkable to discover that it "is now customary" to value Thomson's *Seasons* "for his descriptions of nature, of which his actual ideas are merely the dispensable underpinnings" (p. 178). (Ralph Cohen's *The Unfolding of the Seasons*, cited by the author on the

very same page, buried that view back in 1970). The author likes to speak of the "leading authority" on this or that writer; but these authorities—Havens on Young in 1922 or Tompkins on Monk Lewis in 1927—often turn out to be long dead and usually superseded. Equally surprising are the omissions. Richard Westfall's *Science and Religion in Seventeenth-Century England* (1958) would have helped the author, particularly in his chapter discussing the debate over miracles in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. Here and elsewhere, however, one searches the notes in vain for a reference to Westfall's book, or to David Morris's major study, *The Religious Sublime* (1972), or to Jacob Viner's *Role of Providence in the Social Order* (1972), or to Martin Battestin's *The Providence of Wit* (1974), or to Horton Davies's superb books on *Worship and Theology in England* (1961-1975), to name a few. Blake scholarship has blossomed in the last twenty years, when most of the important work has been done; yet Stock cites only one book—Altizer's—published since 1963.

There may be a place for an overarching survey of religious yearnings in seventeenth- and eighteenth-century literature. For the time being, however, other studies will have to suffice. This, I suspect, isn't it.

James King and Charles Ryskamp, eds.
The Letters and Prose Writings of William Cowper. Vol. III: Letters, 1787-1791. Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1982. xxiv + 630 pp. \$79.00.

Reviewed by Donald H. Reiman

When I received this third volume of William Cowper's *Letters* for review, I hoped to be able to relate the ideals of Cowper to those of the Romantics by centering my essay on how Cowper confronted the French Revolution. I soon discovered, however, that he successfully avoided confronting it. Although the letters contain a handful of remarks on events in France (so few that I shall be able to quote the bulk of them in this review), his persistent concerns were more local and parochial. In