

AN ILLUSTRATED QUARTERLY BLAKE

R E V I E W

Fredric V. Bogel, *Literature and Insubstantiality in
Later Eighteenth-Century England*

Wallace Jackson

Blake/An Illustrated Quarterly, Volume 20, Issue 2, Fall 1986, pp. 57-60



Fredric V. Bogel. *Literature and Insubstantiality in Later Eighteenth-Century England*. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1984. ix + 226 pp. \$22.50.

Reviewed by Wallace Jackson

At the beginning of his study Fredric Bogel offers the view that "English writers in the Age of Sensibility were, to a surprising degree, united by a perception of the impoverishment or insubstantiality of their experience and by their effort to register and resist that insubstantiality." He more or less concludes with the observation that, for the later eighteenth century, "There is only one major order of being, that of common natural and human reality." Many positions often congruent with Bogel's have been suggested in the past, and what comes directly to mind are such recent works as Stephen Cox's *The Stranger Within Thee: Concepts of the Self in Late-Eighteenth-Century Literature* and John Sitter's *Literary Loneliness in Mid-Eighteenth-Century England*. Bogel's book is specifically grounded on the perception and definition of the last half of the century as "an ontological field in which questions of being . . . take precedence over other kinds of question." He posits "two centers of gravity that organize eighteenth-century works," here identified as the "epistemological" (Augustan) and the "ontological" (later eighteenth century). In general it seems advisable to accept Bogel's notion of epistemological skepticism as a function of Pope's or Swift's conception of man, though such a view is not consistent with, say, Shaftesbury's or those of other moral sense philosophers who contribute to the definition of a secure and stable self. My caveat shrinks Bogel's domain of the "Augustan" to the more manageable territory inhabited by the satirists, but that in effect is pretty much what he means by Augustan. The major issue is the adequacy of the self, and Sitter has noted the way in which Locke had based the self on memory, whereas "in Hume personal identity is a construct of the imagination." Yet even with Locke the self is not a securely grounded entity, having perhaps, as Sitter argues, more of a "forensic" status than otherwise. The point may be, however, that an assumed ontological adequacy in the earlier years of the century has much to do with eighteenth-century theodicy and such governing values as those that arise from uniformitarianism and related concepts.

It might also be worth noting in passing that Bogel's counters (early vs. late) do not organize distinctions between humanists and non-humanists, the kind, for example, that Paul Fussell provided in *The Rhetorical*

World of Augustan Humanism. In addition there are formidable omissions. We nowhere hear of Defoe or Addison, or Akenside, Young, or Thomson, and their absence must complicate a thesis that is, after all, predicated rather broadly on the differences between the two halves of the century.

In any event, Bogel bases his abiding notion of ontological insecurity, an "insubstantiality" uniting the perception of the world and the self, on the central issue of personal discontinuity, the impression that identity is dislocatedly composed of incongruent experiential episodes. For this malady, then, the age seeks its cure. To some large extent Bogel is writing to a Humean thesis, organizing the age in response to the diagnosis provided as early as 1739-40: one "may, perhaps, perceive something simple and continu'd, which he calls *himself*; tho' I am certain there is no such principle in me" (*Treatise of Human Nature*). Patently, British philosophy at mid-century had much to do with breaking down the concept of substance, but the breakdown did not affect everyone in quite the same way (and Bogel does not say it did). Cox, who deals with a similar subject in his study, remarks that "Both [Thomas] Reid and [James] Beattie are alarmed at scepticism concerning the existence of a continuous, responsible self or the self's ability to perceive the external world objectively." It is true also that the re-emergence of "benevolence" as eighteenth-century "sensibility" and "sympathy" served to oppose the consequences that Reid and Beattie feared, and helped, as Cox puts it, "to provide eighteenth-century philosophers with a means of describing the self, evaluating its significance, and conceptualizing its relations with the outside world."

Yet in various ways Bogel works effectively within patterns that elucidate the ontological insecurity of which he speaks. Thus Boswell's "simultaneous doubleness of self and role" is brought forth to illustrate his "real goal," which is "an unattainable consciousness of depth, complexity, and substantiality of identity." While this is undoubtedly true of Boswell, it is not characteristic of such other memoirists as Franklin and Gibbon, and may tend to render Boswell a special case. It may also indicate oddly and even paradoxically that Boswell's particular disabilities have "Augustan" origins implicit in Fussell's summation: "In his interesting psychic career we find projected with almost unique poignancy this confrontation of Ancient and Modern in the eighteenth century."

Despite Bogel's use of Trilling's comment, that the age was marked by an "increasing concern with the actual, with the substance of life in all its ordinariness and lack of elevation," it was also one in which the flight from the actual is strongly evidenced in the varieties of sublime experience that exercised their own fascination and also in the encounter with the antique and the marvelous. Something also needs to be added by way

of Sitter's position that a "quest for radical innocence" distinguishes the "plot" . . . most genuinely characteristic of mid-eighteenth-century poetry." Though Bogel is responsive to and, I gather, generally accepting of Frye's formulation of an "age of sensibility," it sometimes seems inconsistent with his own premises. At the center of Frye's definition is a poetry that is "oracular, and the medium of the oracle is often in an ecstatic or trance-like state: autonomous voices seem to speak through him, and as he is concerned to utter rather than to address, he is turned away from his listener, so to speak, in a state of rapt self-communion." Little that Bogel proposes can quite figure here: neither his quasi-representative man, the epitomizing Dr. Johnson (to whom I will return shortly) nor Crabbe or Goldsmith can be adapted to such terms. However, the agility of Bogel's argument often permits him to seize upon radically opposed orientations and to suit them to the requirements that "experience" or "substantiality" (the key terms of his text) demand. Thus the "substantial" is the "quantity of being things seem to possess." It is apparent in "metaphors of fullness or vacancy, or of presence and absence," in "Stoic and Christian commonplace," in "imagery of the obscure and the clear," etc. One might question whether the substantiality of "ontological" character" so described is any more substantial than that of ancient and modern, fancy and imagination, or any other "ontological" character[s] that experience presents to the individual consciousness." But from the very "rhetoric of substantiality" Bogel evokes the notion that the later eighteenth century is, of all things, "an age of experience."

The tensions of ontological insecurity are extended in all directions. Smart's *Jubilate Agno* evidences the "two worlds in which his poetry participates, the natural and the supernatural, [which] are forever straining against the forces that hold them together." Maybe so, but the "supernatural" defines a turning away from the adequacy of the actual, and *A Song to David* moves exultantly and rhapsodically from the glories of earth to those of heaven.

Often, too, the methodology raises problems of affiliation and juxtaposition. Smart and Johnson are introduced at one point for the purpose of exploring "the large role that the substantial dimension of experience played in the literature and thought of the later eighteenth century," but Johnson and Smart are "as different from each other as they are from the majority of their contemporaries." On the other hand, they are not "merely craggy and singular anomalies." What is offered, then, is a principle momentarily linking writers normally quite unlike, yet joined by their participation in "characteristic modes of consciousness." Such modes include equally "the various flourishings of the biographical and autobiographical impulses in Boswell, Franklin, Gibbon, Rousseau, and even Sterne's *Tristram*." From the intro-

duction of such "impulses" it is but a short slide "from the factual to the factual seeming, the effort to render the texture of common experience without regard to literal truth." But other than the kinship of autobiographical impulse linking Boswell to Franklin, there is little else that compels us to think of the one when we reflect on the other. And how, moreover, are such "impulses" to be distinguished from those in Defoe or Richardson or from those in any literary enterprise where the line between fictional and factual representation is blurred?

At the opposite extreme Bogel's schematization projects Gray, Collins, Macpherson, and all those others "whose works either express that perception of insubstantiality or project a vision—bardic, oracular, sublime—of a world more intensely present, more substantial and imposing." Ontological insecurity is manifest in a rich hunger for the particulars of experience or is made apparent in a flight from the adequacy of ordinary life. Some of the familiar topics of pre-romanticism are factored into Bogel's system, but they are disposed along a spectrum of ontological desire and thus sophisticatedly disguised in the conception that renders opposites a function of equivalent appetites. Something called the "sphere of experience" rules in this cosmos: "the sphere of experience itself was invested with new value, new explanatory power, and heightened interest." Alongside the immediately experiencing imagination of a Dryden, a Swift, and a Pope, the curious evasions of the mid-century romancers suggest an encounter with that which is well beyond experience and valued precisely for that reason. Though Bogel opposes such writers to Wordsworth ("it is clear that the value with which he invested it [i.e., experience] did not derive from experience or perception themselves but from their metaphysical foundations") the judgment seems to me both partial and evasive itself. Wordsworth's poetry begins in the fact of witness, of actions that he performed ("Nutting"), or losses that he suffered (the Lucy poems). There is something clearly more sensational about the poetry of Collins and the Wartons, something highly marginal in whatever experiential commitment Gray was able to make. Bogel would have it that the absent powers of the historical past shade into the present, as in Goldsmith or Collins, "and the substantiality of an earlier time informs, for a moment, the sphere of the present." Is it not more accurate to remark that the nostalgic invocation of lost romance is more often than not asked to fill the vacuity of the present? And is it not also true, as Sitter states, that what is feared is not the "loss of history but . . . its crushing presence"? The metamorphic act of many of the mid-century poets is to turn history into legend, and human nature into a theater upon the stage of which are to be seen the spectral objectifications of the passions. Bogel believes that "Gray's chief subject" in "The Bard" is "the human need for

images of the past," but the past is only another stage, like the graveyard, on which the poet may assume an identity that the present cannot give him or that he cannot take from it.

However, Bogel's claims extend far beyond the recovery of the past as a simple fiction and reach toward the proposal that "the new kind of past" envisioned by Walpole and Gray and Hume is "the product of an effort to create a new realm of values." Such a past seems rather to emphasize a temporal disjunctiveness and to take its value from precisely that fact, and thus functions to create illusions of identity and possibility that are inconsistent with Johnsonian or Burkean requirements. Is, for example, Burke's conservatism to be allied with the fabled past imagined by Hurd or Lowth or Thomas Warton?

The space between Walpole and Burke is nevertheless filled through the instrumentation of "prejudice." Burke is quoted to the effect that "Many of our men of speculation . . . employ their sagacity to discover the latent wisdom which prevails in them. If they find what they seek, and they seldom fail, they think it more wise to continue the prejudice. . . ." But, as Fussell reminds us, prejudice is itself founded on the "premise of the historical uniformity of human nature," and the premise is not consistent with experimentations in the realm of identity conducted in the name of ontological insecurity. In no way, to my mind, do Burkean principles justify the counterfeit past of a Chatterton or a Macpherson. Bogel calls such forgeries a "freer expression" of a "controlled impulse." Since he thinks according to the model of a spectrum, such a conception makes sense to him, and he tends to see radical propositions as polarized extremes of a common impulse. If, for him, time past and time present cannot be brought quite into relation by the poets, then the "principal locus of substantiality" is nothing less than "the written text." Writing is thus its own reality; its *real* referents begin and end in itself, and both past and present are vacated for the sake of the greater substantiality of the text. What emerges here is something called "the theater of literature itself." In this case polarities are collapsed inward upon the object that contains them and is greater than them. Not for the first time does one sense in Bogel's work, otherwise so heavily reliant upon such terms as experience and substantiality, the ghostly apparition of a non-thing called "literature itself." What eighteenth-century category could have domiciled this abstraction and what would it have meant to such as Johnson and Burke?

The penultimate chapter, "The Recovery of the Present," is predicated on another dualism: that the recovery of the present and the appeal to the past "are two parts of a single complex movement." Using Burke's *Philosophical Enquiry* he argues that the complexity of aesthetic experience resituates the *immediate* as a primary

attribute of aesthetic response, another way thereby "to bring into being, to establish and authenticate, the sphere of the substantial." We might remember that Addison had much earlier been occupied with the ontological significance of immediate response and had explored the forms best calculated to impress themselves strongly and forcibly upon the perceiver. Here again, ontological insecurity is not addressed as a function of a shrunken identity that history can, so to speak, cure, for the sublime is pre-eminently a realm into which the ego expands. The effort to "win for present experience an adequacy of being" is, I think, a reasonable way of regarding the appeal of the sublime. To associate the sublime, however, with varieties of eighteenth-century autobiography on the ground that present in the latter is the "typically eighteenth-century withdrawal of faith from the idea of decisive and transforming moments" offers a correspondence that I find highly problematic. The sublime is that which does transform, reshaping through the exaltation attendant upon the escape from the confinements of ordinary identity. Yet (and this is Bogel's argument and characteristic of his method) the sublime does touch the need to fill present experience. If in all other ways it is to be dissociated from the ordinary, Bogel's methodology nevertheless permits him to extract from the sublime that particular relevance it bears to the increasingly baggy category of the "substantial."

Thus diminished possibilities of transcendence are said to be consistent with later eighteenth-century autobiography, which is devoid of "genuinely critical moments," moments in which identity is threatened or challenged. Sitter makes quite the opposite point in suggesting that "Salvational conversions are central to . . . *Night Thoughts*, *The Pleasures of the Imagination*, and *The Castle of Indolence*." And if the lesson Bogel learns from the autobiographies is that "there is no second self to spring phoenixlike from the first in a moment of spiritual rebirth, [yet] there is a remarkable range of roles and postures available to us," how do such roles and postures differ significantly from those of Augustan personae, which are surely not predicated on either the desire for or possibility of an emergent second self?

Arising from the consuming, characterizing rage for substance, for experience, for all the appetitive forms of life, is the champion Johnson, "a center of presence." At such a moment in Bogel's text one feels that the summoning has something of a fictive grandeur about it, and that Johnson fulfills and embodies the most deeply felt urgencies of the age and comes forth in all of his "ontological plenitude." It may be so. It should be so. It is surely a neat invention to define the malady of the age and to offer a hero who both provides the cure and bears the wound. What lies under Johnsonian plenitude, as it underlies and underscores the age, is

"the pervasiveness of the elegiac in the Literature of Sensibility." Some years ago Fussell had noticed that "of all the Augustan humanist images and motifs, it is elegiac action which conducts us into the closest recesses of the humanist experience," and from the perspective of Romantic literature Wordsworth presents himself as one of the greater elegists in the language. What is the distinctly period malady that summons the elegiac mode, rendering it the special possession of writers in the later half century?

These and other objections can be brought against Bogel's work. I most emphatically do not offer them as disqualifying, and I want strongly to resist anything like a conclusive judgment about this book. It is a subtle enterprise that Bogel conducts with skill and learning. For myself, I do not see that his sense of the period can be said to stand more adequately or definitively than others I have cited here. His fascination with ontological insecurity, Sitter's with literary loneliness, Cox's with "eighteenth-century efforts to conceptualize what Young called the 'naked self,'" my own, if I may say so, with the theme of the probable and the marvelous, seem to me to move more or less in unison (though not entirely in agreement) in one generally accepted and common direction. Something of a consensus is in process of shaping a new and large-scale idea of the second half of the century. It has the merit of not suffering, as Frye put it, from the false teleology of "pre-romanticism," but assumes the value and specific presence of a literature complex and vexed. Bogel's contribution will command our respect and attention for quite some time to come. Most importantly, it will be something for us to think with and against.

Peter L. Thorslev, Jr. *Romantic Contraries: Freedom versus Destiny*. New Haven: Yale University Press, 1984. ix + 225 pp. \$21.50.

Reviewed by David Punter

Romantic Contraries: Freedom versus Destiny is a learned and complex book which invites reading on two levels. At the first level is a substantial meditation on freedom and destiny, free will and determinism, that "philosophical morass of 'providence, foreknowledge, will, and fate'" (p. 6), into which Thorslev introduces a considerable degree of clarity. He concentrates several times on the significant differences between romantic discourse

and the Anglo-American philosophical discourse within which similar issues have later been captured, and moves thoughtfully between them. At this level, the book is an argument; consisting broadly of an outlining of problems about human purpose, as they may have appeared to the major romantic writers; and then a depiction of three "universes," three constructs within which attempts were made to tackle those problems—the "organic universe," the "Gothic alternative," and the "open universe," which is intimately associated with the practice of irony.

Interestingly, though, when read at this level the book leaves an unsatisfied feeling; there is no conclusion, and no attempt at the end to "read back" the apparent discoveries. I think this is largely because this central argument is couched in humanist terms. I do not mean anything very polemical by this, only that Thorslev is happy to talk about the romantic poets as being, for instance, "in general too concerned with the loss of destiny to feel it as a burden"; about Shelley as happy to accept "the suffering and sacrifice that go with the role" of poet (p. 19); about Walter Pater as keeping "his true self detached from actuality and history" and feeling "free to treat all philosophy either as the subject of esthetic contemplation, or as a means to an end of further experience" (p. 181). I have no quarrel with any of these judgments, within their own frame of reference; but they do help to reveal a problem endemic to humanist criticism, which has to do with the object of attention. If our focus is squarely upon the writers (or, we might want to say, on the mythically reconstructed figures whom we produce from the texts), then how do we escape from this individualist closure into a wider realm of structured history?

We may well, of course, not want to; and here we come upon an important knot in our cultural attention to romanticism. Part of Thorslev's argument is about the pressure of history; part of our own cultural problem, clearly, is continuous with that. Thus some of the established discourses about romanticism fit neatly into an ideological frame: attempts, for instance, to recapture Shelley as a radical tend to offer only marginal displacements of the myth of soaring individual supremacy which is inscribed on the surface of the poetry itself. Reading has to do with systems of identification; where better to find refuge for the harried self than in the myths of the west wind?

Yet, of course, things are not as simple as that. In speaking of identification (and I mean to allude specifically to the Kleinian concept) we are touching already upon the shadow, upon that which haunts: haunts romanticism with the hovering suggestion that the individual may not have his or her own responsibility within grasp; haunts contemporary philosophy with the prospect that the "I" itself may be that which invites