

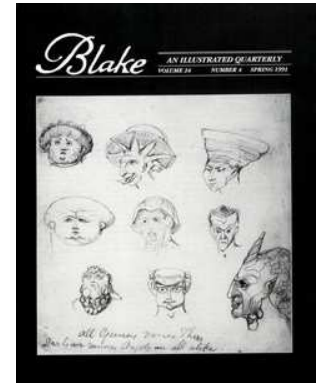
# AN ILLUSTRATED QUARTERLY BLAKE

R E V I E W

Sydney McMillen Conger, ed., *Sensibility in Transformation: Creative Resistance to Sentiment from the Augustans to the Romantics*

Wallace Jackson

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*Sensibility in Transformation: Creative Resistance to Sentiment from the Augustans to the Romantics.* Essays in Honor of Jean H. Hagstrum, edited by Syndy McMillen Conger. Associated University Presses, Inc.: Cranbury, NJ, 1990. \$36.50

Reviewed by  
Wallace Jackson

Not long ago Samuel Johnson was the hero of the age of sensibility. In 1984 Fredric Bogel published a book on English literature in the later years of the eighteenth century, diagnosed the malady from which its writers suffered as ontological insecurity and from this historical context brought forth Samuel Johnson as "a center of presence," an example of "ontological plenitude" in the midst of an age suffering the debilities of selfhood. In the years between then and now nothing much has changed except that in the essays comprising this volume little is said of Johnson and much of Mary Wollstonecraft, the new heroine of sensibility whose brief career reveals the journey from being "an early ideologue of sensibility . . . to its antagonist."

The nine essays, plus introduction, here enlisted under the title, *Sensibility in Transformation*, have been gathered to honor Jean Hagstrum and find in his work their inception. Syndy Conger, editor, proposes that the essays reveal

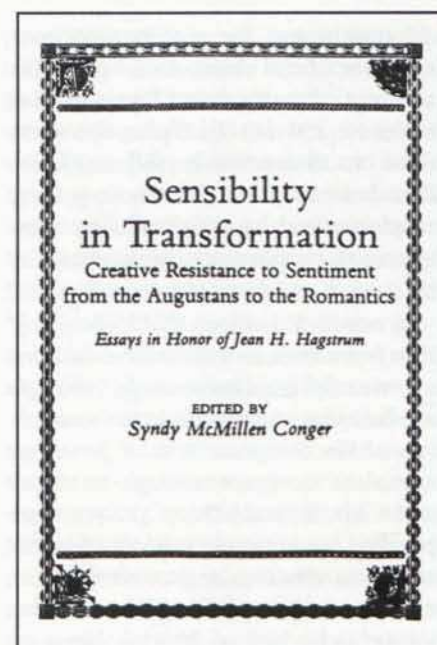
connections between sensibility and other key preoccupations of the age—conversation (Leland E. Warren), the self (Mark S. Madoff), the rhetoric of rights (Stephen Cox), the irrational (John Dussinger), the feminine ideal (Catherine N. Parke and Mitzi Meyers), marriage and romance (James Thompson), the poetic imagination

(Lore Metzger), and the sublime (Robert Platzner).

It is highly interesting that Wollstonecraft should emerge in this volume in the way that she does and that she should virtually dominate it. Jane Austen is present, but no later eighteenth-century novels are discussed except Wollstonecraft's (Madoff's text is Sterne's *Journal to Eliza*); no post-Augustan poets are considered and nothing much in the way of critical prose enters these essays with the exception of Metzger's reconsideration of Schiller's *Über naive und sentimentalische Dichtung* (1795) and Wordsworth's Preface to the *Lyrical Ballads* (1800). Meyers reports on Wollstonecraft's literary reviews, most of which, it would seem, scold female novelists for their romantic vapidness. In this context Platzner's inquiry into De Quincey and the sublime seems as alien as its subject, the imagined cosmos.

We should all be pleased that Wollstonecraft is getting her due; we may be somewhat skeptical about the overpayments registered in this collection, for the literary politics of the redressed balance are vividly on display. Wollstonecraft's life was difficult and cruel. Her failed love affair with Gilbert Imlay, her two suicide attempts, her death in childbirth, and with it all her commitment to writing sensibly about women's rights and education make her a clearly memorable figure, even perhaps the archetypal feminist from whom many of the contributors to this volume derive inspiration. This is as it should be.

Yet at the same time the volume is not large enough, by which I mean capacious and varied enough in its inquiries, to take us as far into the subject of sensibility as the subject deserves. Most of the essays tend to find their motive power in a distrust of sensibility "as an artificial and unprincipled mode of discourse" (Cox, "Sensibility as Argument"), a kind of entrapment from which men but especially women suffer, and thus a sort of vast illusory web corrupting feelings



and distorting relations between the sexes. Dussinger observes that sensibility's "tendency [is] to equate the woman's social, with her psychological, subservience" ("Madness and Lust in the Age of Sensibility"), and Conger passes on the views of feminist critics who regard sensibility "as part of a reactionary ideology of propriety working to stifle women and keep them subordinate." All this is no doubt true; still we are offered no very enlarged exploration of sensibility as historically inscribed in the arts or the art of politics. Yet the outline of a master narrative is evident in the tale of Wollstonecraft's escape from the illusions and disempowerments to which sensibility subjected women.

So far as it goes this narrative is impressive and even moving, but the subplot is a story of betrayal and complicity, told by Jerome McGann, enlarged upon by Marjorie Levinson, and, like a thrice-told tale, is here served up once more by Metzger. Metzger finds that Wordsworth's Preface reveals "his unacknowledged ideology that promotes a hierarchy of feeling that masks his complicity with a repressive and exploitative socioeconomic system" ("The Poetics of Schiller and Wordsworth"). Wordsworth's evasions and



displacements (the terms originate in contemporary criticism with McGann; see *The Romantic Ideology*, Chicago, 1983), if that is what they are, might well be, but are not, brought into relation with the politics of post-Augustan poets and poetry. Gray's "Elegy" does not sponsor a critique of the British class structure, a fact irritably noted long ago by William Empson, nor does it lament a social condition in which those at the bottom have no hope of self-advancement. The "Eton College Ode" does not regret the absence of the disadvantaged among the matriculants. John Sitter has observed of the mid-century poet that he "characteristically longs to be not only far from the madding crowd, which Pope had wanted as much as Gray, but far from everybody. Accordingly, many of the poems that most reflect the 1740s and 1750s are not epistles—that is, not poems with an explicit audience and implicit social engagement—but soliloquies or lyrics, usually blank verse musings or odes addressed to personifications" (*Literary Loneliness in Mid-Eighteenth-Century England*, Cornell, 1982).

Wordsworth's project is deeply fissured, but it is grounded in the effort to translate the cultural marginality of rural life from the periphery to the center. Metzger states that Wordsworth's aesthetic ideology of the poet "signals the displacement of art anchored in the social relations of a specific time and place by an autonomous art anchored in the individual situated in mental space, in an ideal spot of time." It would be interesting to know what poets she has in mind, for most, if not all, are either leaping out of their skin in the desperate enterprise to be someone else at some other time or writing lamentations inviting resignation and retreat. The figure of the poet makes for an especially interesting subject. Thomas Weiskel noted that the "idealized image of the type is the figure of the virile poet identified with the sun and with Phoe-

bus; in Collins, the 'rich-haired youth of mom'; in Gray, the aged Bard whose 'beard and hoary hair / Streamed, like a meteor, to the troubled air'; in the young Blake, Summer with 'ruddy limbs and flourishing hair,' loved by the Valleys 'in his pride,' and in the mature Blake, the character Orc subsuming the traditional imagery of phallic fire" (*The Romantic Sublime*, Johns Hopkins, 1976). This is the vision of the poet that emphasizes the oracular and ecstatic, and composition as unmediated inspirational discourse.

Wordsworth's recreation of this figure seen against the backdrop specified by Weiskel is one of his most impressive achievements, for it does not capitulate to the desire for an heroicized identity. On the contrary, Wordsworth brings the figure of the poet right out of the emblematic identity of the "virtuous man" Thomson provides in "Summer" (cf. lines 431-68). The opening of "The Ruined Cottage" recreates Thomson's passage with the difference that Wordsworth's narrator comes upon his virtuous man in the person of the Wanderer. Wordsworth's two stories, the account of the Wanderer's education and the tale of Margaret are mutually dependent in that the right understanding of Margaret's tragedy depends upon the right understanding that apprehends and communicates it. One story, Margaret's, moves us by its pathos; the other, the Wanderer's, teaches us to see as the Wanderer would see. Taken together both stories have much to do with "natural feeling" and the education of the heart.

Like Burke's program on which it is to some extent founded, Wordsworth's is conservative and reactionary, but it allows us to historicize sensibility in a useful way. The burden of his enterprise is to shift the discussion of poetry and poets to a new locus of natural feeling and away from the romance of fine fabling and those various illusions of sensibility promoted by the Wartons and other masters of the sublime and pathetic in the second half century.

The case for Wollstonecraft—an impressive one—is that the Revolution extended her horizons and transformed her into a protofeminist. The case against Wordsworth is that he betrayed the Revolution, attempted to disguise his treachery, and advocated a new quietism in the name of personal salvation.

Sensibility is a difficult and even paradoxical concept because its major tendencies run in two opposed and irreconcilable directions. So far as sensibility promoted custom and habit it provided the essential rationale for the continued suppression of women. The female was the guardian of feeling; it was her strength but also the special index to her weakness. So far as custom and habit were the ground of natural feeling, feeling could be regarded, James Chandler says, as the product "of a collective human consciousness and therefore cannot be assessed by an individual's private stock of reason" (*Wordsworth's Second Nature*, Chicago, 1984). Natural feeling, in other words, is a product of traditional modes of thought supported by custom and habit and invested in sustained prejudices which have cultural and historical authority. If we are today Wollstonecraftians and not Burkeans that is not necessarily to the point. Wordsworth's importance in this context is that he provides a major stage in the transformation of sensibility, for the entire issue of natural feeling is related to the genealogy of sensibility, itself a very significant part of Wordsworth's inheritance in the closing years of the century.

Much of what this volume proposes is that feelings mythologized, institutionalized, hierarchicalized, and romanticized constitute the enemy out there; too often the enemy out there becomes the enemy within insofar as sensibility is inscribed in codes of behavior and conduct. Sensibility variously betrays. Dussinger remarks that "As Fuseli reveals in uncompromising detail, sensibility is a 'civilized' disguise



from primal urges toward sexual dominance and surrender, and the reason/madness axis sets the ideal conditions for this struggle." James Thompson, speaking of Austen's novels, tells us that the "nubile female must part with her independence on the open market, taking what the market will bear, thus the marriage market is like all other social institutions in that it has become externalized and objectified, transformed into an institution that always precedes the individual, is external and alienated from her, such that she seems to have no say in its rules or organization, but is merely subject to it" ("Sense and Sensibility: Finance and Romance"). Dussinger's Freudian and Thompson's Marxist analyses are complemented by Madoff's exploration—Susan Sontag is the leading spirit here—of the relation between the etiology of tuberculosis and the cultural idea of strong feeling ("They caught fire at each other": Laurence Sterne's *Journal of the Pulse of Sensibility*").

Out from the terrible darkness of the imperiled heart emerges Mary Wollstonecraft whose "analysis of the mesh between gender and genre inaugurates the feminist critical project" (Meyers, "Sensibility and the 'Walk of Reason'"). Wollstonecraft bears the wound; constituted initially of the burden of sensibility from which she has freed herself, she is the legitimate English female voice of the Revolution renouncing the tyranny of feeling. Sensibility, in sum, is fixed by Wollstonecraft as the thing it is: a "socially conservative force because it replaces truly spontaneous and individual consciousness with externally imposed imitations of feeling" (Cox, "Sensibility as Argument").

Catherine Parke states that the "pivotal term in the *Vindication [of the Rights of Women]* is *justice*, the term that she argues should replace *charity* as our primary category to name what women and men alike truly need" ("What Kind of Heroine is Mary Woll-

stonecraft?"). Justice is a term that has little or no place in the genealogy of feeling, which means that it has no historical identity as a component of sensibility. Sensibility arises historically from an optimistic appraisal of human nature, and the terms commonly employed to designate the disposition of feeling are pity, compassion, sympathy, and even the pleasurable sensations that benevolent actions or emotions engender in the one who performs or feels them. This is the character given to sensibility by R.S. Crane in his genealogy of the man of feeling. By the middle years of the eighteenth century sensibility had lost much of its earlier affiliation with benevolence and gained something of a closer association with melancholy. Gray's elegist, for example, is not an especially good example of the benevolent man, but is a first-rate example of what sensibility had come to mean. Wordsworth, who uses the past far better than Gray, uses also the idea of sensibility in a manner much closer to its original purport. His old Cumberland beggar presents the occasion for benevolent action—charity—and all those who assist him feel better for having done so. The beggar is a peripatetic example of the ecology of benevolence: even the birds benefit from the crumbs that fall from his aged and trembling hands. Parke's notion of Wollstonecraft is, I dare say, accurate; for Wollstonecraft charity is not an enabling or empowering concept. Justice "promises to subvert a social order and arrangement"; charity "confirms and supports the prevailing politics of the relationships between men and women."

Insofar as the essayists grapple with the morality of sensibility, Parke's distinction may provide terms of opposition and also suggest why Austen and Wordsworth come in for some rough handling in Thompson's essay and Metzger's. Something of the new politicization is evident in the antithesis Parke provides and informs a fair number of the other contributions (by no means

all). As I have suggested, Wordsworth's relation to the complicated tradition of sensibility is involved and difficult; Wollstonecraft's, I believe, is not, though the projects of each were entirely different and incommensurate with each other. The first part of my last sentence I would apply to Austen and Wollstonecraft had not Leland Warren done so: "In Jane Austen we find a near contemporary of Wollstonecraft who speaks with a much more finely tuned voice, who is a much better conversationalist, but whose words nevertheless endorse much of what Wollstonecraft would tell us" ("The Conscious Speakers").

Charity and justice do not of course divide the issue, which I think is more interestingly seen in the uses that a great novelist and a great poet make of the devious and supple idea of sensibility to authenticate the experiential status of their writings at the same proximate time that sensibility was under attack for the inauthentic and artificial modes of feeling it promoted. Here again, we come to a dividing of the ways, a dividing that gathers to itself much of the individual and collective energies determining what was being written, for what purposes, and to what audience in the later and closing years of the century. This is an affecting tale that has no need of villains; as we say in the trade, sensibility is a site of consciousness within the "eighteenth century's extensive and varied program in the education of consciousness" ("Sensibility as Argument"), and as such it is a locale wherein feeling is variously reassigned or repudiated depending upon the particular projects of the actors and agents on the scene. At times the representation of consciousness can take rather peculiar turns, as in the four wholly disparate spokesmen/poets Gray creates in the "Elegy," "A Long Story," "The Progress of Poesy," and "The Bard," poems written one after the other that present in their totality a fragmented self-consciousness and an incoherent idea of



the poet who is assembled and disassembled in a bewildering set of juxtaposed and incompatible identities.

A very brief history of an earlier literary project may help to round off my commentary. Between 1711 and 1715 Pope completed and published *An Essay on Criticism*, *Windsor-Forest*, and *The Temple of Fame*. The revised and enlarged version of *The Rape of the Lock* and *The Messiah* are also products of these years, as is the beginning of the *Iliad* translation. The first three works in particular suggest the scope of the young poet's ambitiously educative program, and all three poems are predicated on well-known preceding discourse. All three poems assess critical, political, and cultural history and thereby initiate an encounter with public and evaluative verse. Pope's en-

terprise is variously underwritten by such concepts as "natural reason" and "natural law." His ability to deploy these concepts as congruent helps locate his discourse within the framework of accepted and recognized cultural and institutional authorities in the early years of the century, and suggests that he is teaching his audience in a manner not resumed again (by a poet; exceptions must be made for Johnson) with the same vigor and ambition until Wordsworth published his early poems and manifestos at the end and turn of the century.

The inability of any English poet to assume Pope's cultural authority in the years directly following his death reinforces the significance of Cox's remark about the education of consciousness in the middle and later years of the

century. One of the reasons sensibility is of such importance to the history of that period is because the values inherent within sensibility were susceptible of complex relations with emergent ideas of the self as personal and social being that a pre-modern culture was bringing into existence. That sensibility lent itself to a politics variously regressive or progressive is part of the give and take and ebb and flow of the greater historical adventure in the making of a modern citizen. It is merely a commonplace irony that one of the most exciting imaginations was also one of the most conservative and that one far less exciting was also among the most progressive.

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## POETRY

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### Mrs. Blake Requests Her Portrait

He keeps putting her off.  
She, in her quiet way, insists.  
Knowing he has a way with women,  
romancing them in paint  
the color of jewels, inventing  
their most flattering features,  
she expects he will exalt  
her wifely figure,  
the serviceable hips,  
hair ripe with oil and smoke.

Over lunch he takes up  
a dull lead stub and sketches  
her profile: one miniature eye  
downcast, half a mouth  
and chin. Still chewing  
the last bite of fish pie,  
he adds a few squiggles for hair.

Pushing it across the table,  
he trusts her to understand  
that when he rendered Beatrice  
crowned, Eve's exquisite neck  
and Bathsheba disrobed,  
his vision was of Catherine.

— Paulette Roeske