

**John Regan, *Poetry and the Idea of Progress, 1760-1790*. London and New York: Anthem Press, 2018. Pp. 222. £70, \$115. ISBN 9781783087723.**

John Regan's rich study argues that for some later eighteenth-century thinkers, poetry not only reflected or illustrated ideas about progress, but actually embodied it. As he argues, 'a limited but significant number of theorists did not form ideas of human development *and* or *with* poetry but in a strong sense *in* or *through* it [...] Thinking about progress is not external to poetry: it is poetry's verbal fabric' (161).

The period 1760 to 1790 saw theories about progress proliferate: Christian, humanist, cyclical, stadial, conjectural. Although discussions of verse did feature in these (particularly regarding what a society's poetry can tell us about the extent of its development), Regan wants to draw our attention to 'a more subtle, less copious' body of theoretical writing, in which the 'special verbal characteristics of poetic language' were themselves understood in terms of their relationship to progress (4-5). Regan locates his study within the fairly new field of historical poetics; readers less familiar with this body of scholarship may find it helpful to start by reading the Conclusion, which usefully describes the main debates, and sets out Regan's position that 'a truly historical poetics can only be realized if the technique of metred or rhyming language can be savoured in mouths and ears' (161). The book as a whole is committed to exploring poetry as a sensory experience; eighteenth-century notions of 'taste' and aesthetics provide an important underpinning to Regan's thinking.

Chapter 1 seeks to refresh how we approach eighteenth-century poetic prescriptivism. Unhooking it from political conservatism, Regan argues that the prescriptivism of Samuel Johnson and Henry Home, Lord Kames aimed to promote pleasure, which was for them poetry's principal goal. Chapter 2 turns to Thomas Sheridan's lectures on elocution, which drew on stadial theories of history to examine the state of poetry in modern, commercial society. For Sheridan, the expansion of print had obscured 'poetry's immanent power', which resided in its verbal performance (49). However, Sheridan believed that a proper alertness to poetic 'harmony' could bring human beings closer to God, enabling progress towards the divine. In Chapter 3, Regan considers the dialogue on prosodic theory between Joshua Steele and James Burnett, Lord Monboddo. Informed by Monboddo's theory of linguistic evolution, their debate centred on the correct approach to accent, and explored the relationship between sense perception and poetry.

Chapters 4 and 5 and the Afterword are likely to be of special interest to students of the Romantic period. Chapter 4 reads Thomas Percy's prefatory essays to his *Reliques of Ancient English Poetry* as a 'form of stadial progress writing' (101); like Adam Ferguson, Percy believed that modern verse had lost the rugged energy of older poetry. Yet as Regan demonstrates, Percy's editorial practices in the *Reliques* sometimes ran counter to this view, for he also 'regularize[d]' his source material, rendering the ballad a 'repeatable rhythmic object' with commercial value (123). Chapter 5 develops that idea of 'the redemptive power of the oral primitive' (101), considering the responses of Hugh Blair and Henry Home, Lord Kames to the Ossian scandal. For Blair, Ossian's 'energetic, perspicuous "rudeness" and lack of "polish"' – products of a more primitive social stage – added up to 'a redemptive sublimity' (126-7). To recover this ancient poetic language would be to offset the enervating 'excesses of modern language', Blair believed, and to effect civic and moral improvement (139).

Regan's Afterword brings us to 1814, with Francis Jeffrey's review of Byron's *The Corsair* and *The Bride of Abydos*. The review demonstrates the persistence into the new century of these arguments about progress. It attempts to resolve the tension, ever-present in eighteenth-century stadial history, between a commitment to improvement and a concern that society deteriorates into 'stultifying manners' even as it reaches civilisation (148). For

Jeffrey, Byron presents a solution. By returning to ‘poetic rudeness’, he renews modern verse, reinvigorating the old heroic couplet and forcing a violent prosodic progress – although Regan is alert to the ‘gentrifying’ impulse in Byron’s primitivism and orientalism (150).

One of the strengths of Regan’s book is its deft handling of an impressive range of writers. Readers less used to prosodic analysis may find some passages rather dense, and the thrust of the argument is occasionally hard to follow, but the book repays careful reading. Especially welcome is Regan’s attention to the physicality of spoken poetry, and his sensitivity to the historical nuances of poetic terms: ‘polish’, ‘rudeness’, ‘manners’. He wisely avoids pinning the developments he traces onto ‘the doughty monolith “Romanticism”’ (124), but the book points to some intriguing avenues for Romantic-period scholarship, for instance in its thoughtful commentary on the intersections between oral verse, antiquarianism, historical writing, national identity and the reshaping of folk traditions; Scott and Wordsworth are both mentioned in these contexts. This is a wide-ranging, discriminating book, which moves skilfully between diverse fields and critical approaches.

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