

**James Noggle, *The Temporality of Taste in Eighteenth-Century British Writing*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012. Pp. 248. £68. ISBN 9780199642434.**

**Ashley Chantler, Michael Davies and Philip Shaw, eds., *Literature and Authenticity, 1780-1900*. Liverpool: Liverpool University Press, 2011. Pp. 238. £68. ISBN 9780754665991.**

Proust's narrator, bitching about the musical soirées of the insufferably bourgeois Mme Verdurin, falls upon a problem that lies at the heart of modern aesthetics: 'All that the public knows of the charm, the grace, the forms of nature, it has absorbed from the clichés of an art slowly assimilated, and yet an original artist begins by rejecting these clichés' (my trans.). Originality, as the authentic expression of the individual artist, is the highest criterion of post-Romantic aesthetic excellence and yet it naturally plays havoc with the act of judgement. For if there are no assimilated clichés to reassure about the thing before us, what have we to rely on besides the vagaries of either obscure critical instinct or socially cultivated taste? That last word is freighted with ideological baggage, as Eagleton, De Man and Bourdieu were keen to insist over a quarter of a century ago, but alongside the political there is another fundamental issue at stake in its operation. Taste must surely be in some sense developed over time, but there is a persistent and lurking inclination in many post-Enlightenment writers that to be authentic it should be unforced, intense and immediate.

Indeed, the very relationship between taste and judgement is rather vexed. This problem is most acute in the aftermath of the Romantic period. Coleridge uses the word 'aesthetic' periodically in his unpublished writings but the *OED* dates it as an English word only from 1832, two years before his death. The reason for this is fairly obvious – the term is a borrowing from Kant, whose work is itself slowly assimilated – but the chief repercussion of its emergence is that Romantic aesthetic judgement, to which Proust surely appeals, marks a substantial break from earlier accounts of taste by appearing to come at the matter from a different angle. Apart from circumstance and habit, a sense built up over time, post-Romantic judgement purports to be universal exactly because it is not a social sense like taste, 'inseparable from the concrete moment in which the object appears [before us]' (Gadamer), but is instead innate and private; a product of a particular way of looking at that object.

In *The Temporality of Taste in Eighteenth-Century British Writing*, James Noggle discovers much of interest in muddying the division between the two periods to demonstrate that eighteenth-century writers were much more productively confused about the workings of taste than many commentators have noticed. In particular, he argues that the practical matter that gives rise to the tension between immediacy and cultivation finds its origin at the outset of the tradition of British aesthetics, and that it is worked out in the writings of that century amid a rhetoric which is itself rich in class markers that inform debates about national, social and gendered identities. Noggle wrote a distinguished book with OUP about the sublime in eighteenth-century thought, *The Skeptical Sublime*, and his new one is an equally fine contribution to our understanding of eighteenth-century aesthetic theory *tout court*. One implication of it is that Romantic aesthetic judgement does not mark quite so substantial a break with the eighteenth-century discourse about taste as has been widely accepted.

Many expected figures are present here – Pope, Hume, Gilpin, Walpole, Smith, More, Reynolds and Beckford – but the contexts are unusual, rich and learned. There is, for example, a fascinating discussion of writings about the gardens of Stowe, which demonstrates the centrality of landscape design to the larger matter of thinking about nation building amid an emerging discourse of patriotism. Noggle's two final chapters are,

respectively, on fashion, in which he incorporates an analysis of Adam Smith alongside a reassessment of Reynolds's *Discourses*, and on the art of collection, in which the focus is Beckford and his idiosyncrasies. These alone ensure that the book is required reading for anyone with an interest in the wider development of the arts in the period. The opening chapter on Pope is a subtle and characteristically intelligent reading of the *Epistle to Burlington*, which presents the poet's self-conscious playing with aesthetic failure as a poised political act.

A highly suggestive introduction describes the tension outlined above by paying attention to the mistakes of earlier commentators such as Bourdieu, who denies the social awareness of eighteenth-century writers on taste, while the conclusion draws Noggle towards New Formalism. Key to that introduction is the idea that there is a division within thinking about taste in the period between philosophers, who see it as a sudden formation, and historians, who find taste to be a product of gradual social development. This intriguing distinction is put to work throughout the study in a very persuasive art of analysis in which Noggle himself – in a nod towards New Formalism – employs a subtle manner of close reading that itself mediates between a sense of the immediacy that follows from the glow of literary language and a knowledge that proceeds from deep literary historical understanding. In this regard, he waltzes just as well as he foxtrots.

A rather different but related set of aesthetic tensions emerges in *Literature and Authenticity, 1780-1900*, an edited collection of essays written to honour Vincent Newey. This engages with a central idea in the aesthetics of Romanticism, one that should be of interest to any reader concerned with the relationship between philosophical and literary thinking over the long nineteenth century. Romantic writers were interested in what we can describe retrospectively as the idea of authenticity for two separate but related reasons. First, the term works to cover a widespread obsession in the writing and thought of the period with recording the reality of what actually happened to individuals within specific contexts. That is to say with the recovery of that which is 'real' in the sense of being original, honest, unaffected and of a specific time, place, and set of circumstances, especially as such phenomena ground themselves in a sense of rooted history. A second quality of authenticity emerges as a hallmark of much of the thought of the period in an innovation of post-Enlightenment and, in particular, post-Kantian thought. This is best described as a commitment to an authenticity of the self – a truth of the real nature of the individual and a suspicion of inauthentic emotion.

The latter idea is the one most at play in this collection, and yet the concept of reality, and 'the real' more generally, is never far from view. Romantic ideas of reality are fundamental to our own modern account of them and they help us to understand why the tricky concept of 'the real' is often so bound up with its rival, 'the ideal'. Ideas about reality are often apparent to Wordsworth or Shelley, for example, as the most real things about experience. Indeed, it may be said that this tension (partly a Kantian inheritance) lies at the heart of the bequest of Romantic thought to future generations, and is why it remains of such interest to students of the period, as is clear from this collection's suggestive and intelligent introduction. Michael O'Neill brilliantly draws out the connection between Wordsworth and Shelley (and also Goethe and Rousseau) in his own rich contribution, while Nicholas Roe's fascinating, self-conscious essay on Keats plays with the idea that there are so many ambiguities about the life of that poet that he cannot be caught definitively by the biographer as a single, authentic essence.

There are two very stimulating contributions at the start of the collection. Linda Pratt uncovers the literary relationship between Anna Seward and Robert Southey to demonstrate the influence of the former on the younger poet and suggests that this helps us better to envisage the scope of Southey's career. Ashley Chantler, meanwhile, engages with Lionel

Trilling's wonderful essay *Sincerity and Authenticity* to investigate William Cowper's peculiar religious turmoil. The first half of the book will be of especial interest to scholars of Romanticism and it is rounded off with two delightful essays on Byron, who certainly merits a considerable place in any reflection on authenticity. Bernard Beatty writes with a moving sensitivity upon Byron's relationship with Pope, while Philip W. Martin illuminates the poet's foxing sense of 'truth' in the fluid art of self-revelation in an essay that is consistently alive to his trickery. These are masterly essays but they are matched by the quality of the whole. Later contributions on post-Romantics are ignored unwisely. I took a great deal from Keith Handley and Philip Davis on Ruskin and Arnold respectively, but all are very good. Geoff Ward's contribution on Thoreau and Creeley, for example, with its revisiting of Cavell and its attention to that most obviously insistent presence in the idea of the authentic, 'the thing', is – to borrow a little cheekily from Byron – the thing. The book ends with a valuable summary of Newey's remarkable career.

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