

## Forum

Members of the Association are invited to submit letters, typed and double-spaced, commenting on articles published in *PMLA* or on matters of general scholarly or critical interest. Footnotes are discouraged, and letters of more than one thousand words will not be considered. Decision to publish and the right to edit are reserved to the Editor, and the authors of the articles discussed will be invited to reply.

### Eighteenth-Century Poetry

To the Editor:

It is disheartening to find *PMLA* printing such a piece as Hans Eichner's "The Rise of Modern Science and the Genesis of Romanticism" (*PMLA*, 97[1982]:8–30). One had thought the view of the eighteenth century it contains had been rendered obsolete in the 1920s by Ronald Crane's trenchant reviews, in *Philological Quarterly's* annual bibliography of eighteenth-century studies, of similar examples of what Crane called "the new German *Geistesgeschichte*." And, as far as eighteenth-century English poetry is concerned, by T. S. Eliot's seminal essay on Samuel Johnson (1930), which effectively demolished the Arnoldian attitude toward that poetry which Eichner still seems to think unassailable.

"[I]f the language of poetry prides itself primarily on its clarity and good sense," he writes, "it can hardly hope to achieve anything that prose cannot do as well. . . . But then why write poetry at all—except as an idle pastime?" (18). Not that Alexander Pope, say, wrote poetry as an idle pastime or did not pride himself on its including qualities besides clarity and good sense. But does Eichner really think that any good poet of any time, including the present, believes that poetry should distinguish itself from prose by *lack of* clarity and good sense—that "not to write prose is certainly to write poetry," as Samuel Johnson sarcastically put it? That the qualities the poet should strive to attain are obfuscation and poor sense?

Heaven knows mediocre poets of every period—certainly, perhaps preeminently, including the Romantic—have succeeded in attaining just those qualities. But, as Eliot wrote,

Certain qualities are to be expected of any type of good verse at any time; we may say the qualities which good verse shares with good prose. . . . Hardly any good poet in English has written *bad* prose; and some English poets have been among the greatest English prose writers. . . . This is a sign not of versatility but of unity. . . . We may say positively with Mr. Ezra

Pound that verse must be at least as well written as prose.

One would like to hear Eichner's rebuttal of Eliot and Pound—or of a contemporary poet and critic such as Donald Davie—on this point. Or what Eichner makes of the comments of that great "Romantic" William Wordsworth to much the same effect. Or his assessment of the following lines, with which I like to test my students' ability to respond to poetry of any period:

Think where man's glory most begins and ends,  
And say my glory was I had such friends—

a perfect Popean couplet, crystal clear and making excellent sense, pure "poetry of statement"—poetry of "an age of prose and reason," as Matthew Arnold would have called it. It happens to be the magnificent conclusion of Yeats's "The Municipal Gallery Revisited," written in 1937 after Yeats had profited from Eliot's and Pound's rejection of decadent Romantic poetic theory and practice.

"Inevitably, as French classicism increasingly spread its influence throughout Europe during the first half of the eighteenth century," Eichner writes—ignoring the attacks made on "French classicism" by Johnson and others during that time—"poetry went into a decline" (18). Anyone who thinks that poetry "went into a decline" with Pope, Johnson, Swift, Thomson, Young, and Smart, to mention some, has no business setting himself up as a judge of poetic worth. After quoting some passages from Johnson's longest poem, Eliot continues, "The precision of such verse gives, I think, an immense satisfaction to the readers: he has said what he wanted to say, with that urbanity which contemporary verse would do well to study. . . . If lines 189–220 of *The Vanity of Human Wishes* are not poetry, I do not know what is." One suspects that Eliot is better qualified to know what is poetry than Eichner is.

When one reads such pronouncements of Eichner's as that about "the radically new and coherent attitude toward poetry that is the most enduring achievement of the Romantics" (18) and such

statements as “The realization that poetry is individual and local rather than universal necessarily went hand in hand with a radical change in literary criticism: history and interpretation, the approaches that still dominate our discipline, replaced rhetoric and poetics” (19), one can only wonder helplessly where Eichner has been for the last fifty years. I have sometimes been criticized by colleagues in eighteenth-century studies for continuing to polemicize against the Arnoldian view of the literature of the period and been told that I am beating a dead horse. It was still alive and kicking in *PMLA* in January 1982.

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*Mr. Eichner replies:*

I am delighted to see that in these cynical times a colleague can still muster as much righteous indignation as does Donald Greene; the more's the pity that his indignation is misdirected. He somehow seems to have reached the conclusion that, in my view, “Pope, Johnson, Swift, Thomson, Young, and Smart” did not write “poetry,” and he tries to knock down the strawman he has set up by quoting T. S. Eliot's statement, “If lines 189–220 of *The Vanity of Human Wishes* are not poetry, I do not know what is.” Needless to say, I did not make the absurd claim Greene attributes to me. I merely ventured the generalization that “as French classicism increasingly spread its influence throughout Europe during the first half of the eighteenth century, poetry went into a decline.” If this generalization is taken to imply, among other things, that the writers Greene names are not the equals of Shakespeare, Milton, or Donne and that they did not write poetry of the very first rank, I gladly accept this interpretation.

Of course I cannot, within the thousand words I am allowed for my reply, provide a reasoned defense of my assessment of Pope, Johnson, Swift, Thomson, Young, and Smart, but some brief remarks seem appropriate. I wonder how Greene managed not to notice that the quotation from Eliot he adduces is extremely damaging. “If lines 189–220 of *The Vanity of Human Wishes* are not poetry, I do not know what is.” Is this really the way one writes about a major poet? Would a critic as brilliant as Eliot write, for example, “If lines 189–220 of *La divina commedia* are not poetry, I do not know what is”? This is how one writes about a poet who is not of the first magnitude and who needs a defense. And of course Eliot makes it clear how he

ranks Johnson: “He was a secondary poet at the end of a movement which had been initiated by greater poets than he . . .” (“Johnson as a Critic and Poet,” *On Poetry and Poets* [London: Faber and Faber, n.d.], 162). “Being a meditative poet, he did not have the resources for a poem of more ample scope [than *The Vanity of Human Wishes*]” (178). “We do not need to accept all of Johnson's judgements . . . nor do we need to overrate the poetry of that period of which the names of Dryden and Johnson may serve as boundaries” (192). “This type of poetry cannot rise to the highest rank” (181). I most willingly concede to Greene that “Eliot is better qualified to know what is poetry” than I am, but fortunately Eliot and I seem to be in agreement: poetry that *primarily* aims to achieve the virtues of good prose “cannot rise to the highest rank.” I am sure that, on mature reflection, Greene will have to admit that one can hold this view without advocating “obfuscation and poor sense.” But Greene not only misjudges how Eliot ranked Johnson; since he lists Young among the poets I am supposed to have slighted, he must also have misjudged what I said. I limited my criticism to poets who were influenced by French classicism and explicitly exempted poets who rebelled against it; and it so happens that Young's *Conjectures on Original Composition* is one of the most effective protests against classicism that were written in his time. In any case—and now I will give Greene cause for annoyance—I do not know anyone who has read *Night Thoughts* all the way from beginning to end for the sheer pleasure of it.

As for the last paragraph of Greene's letter, in which he protests against my statement about “the radically new and coherent attitude toward poetry that is the most enduring achievement of the Romantics,” all I can say is that, since he does not back up his protest with any arguments, I am not sure what it is that causes him such anguish. As he seems to consider both Romantic theory and practice “decadent,” his objection can hardly be that the poetry the Romantics wrote has proved just as enduring as their theory. I can only surmise that Greene fails to see the extent to which Romantic theory and criticism have laid the foundations for a large part of the criticism that has been written in the last fifty years. The poetics that are being formulated now are totally different from the prescriptive poetics of the eighteenth century. The tradition of writing, buying, and studying voluminous handbooks of rhetoric died out near the end of the Enlightenment, and the recent—and not so recent—interest in figures of speech is directed toward entirely different purposes and imbued by a different spirit. The catchwords of a large part of the