Eighteenth-Century Fiction

Volume 23 | Issue 3 Article 6

4-14-2011

Review of: Clement Hawes, The British Eighteenth Century and Global Critique

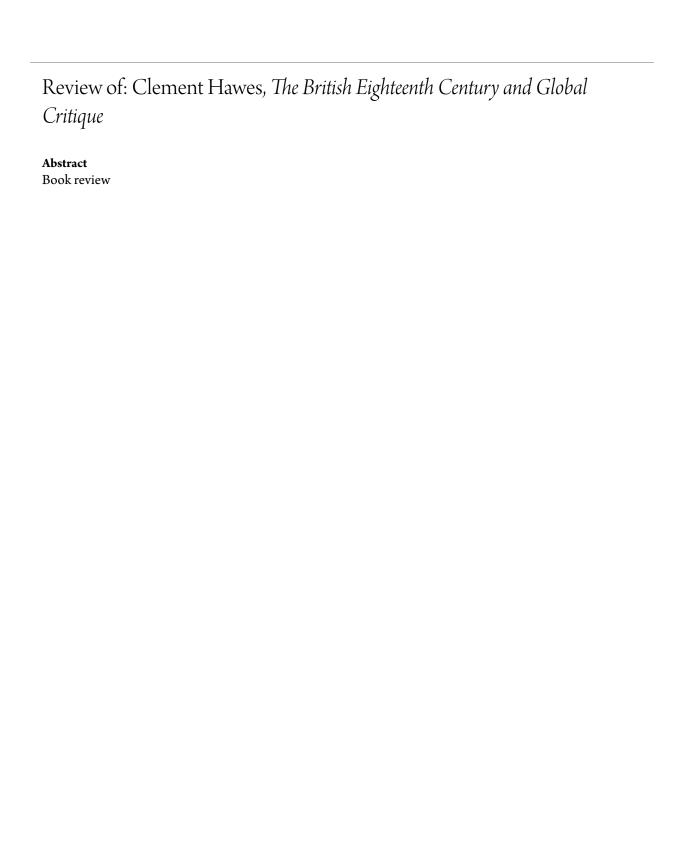
Jason H. Pearl Florida International University

Recommended Citation

Pearl, Jason H. (2011) "Review of: Clement Hawes, The British Eighteenth Century and Global Critique," Eighteenth-Century Fiction: Vol. 23: Iss. 3, Article 6.

 $Available\ at: http://digitalcommons.mcmaster.ca/ecf/vol23/iss3/6$

Copyright ©2013 by Eighteenth-Century Fiction, McMaster University. This Article is brought to you by DigitalCommons@McMaster. It has been accepted for inclusion in Eighteenth-Century Fiction by an authorized administrator of DigitalCommons@McMaster. For more information, please contact scom@mcmaster.ca.



Pearl: Book review

Reviews/Comptes Rendus

Clement Hawes. *The British Eighteenth Century and Global Critique*. New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2005. xix+257pp. US\$85. ISBN 978-1-4039-6816-6.

In this ambitious and provocative book, Clement Hawes attempts to show us a new eighteenth century, or rather an older eighteenth century, one that has been buried under twentieth-century historiography blaming it for phenomena that fully matured only in the nineteenth century: specifically, modern racism, nationalism, and imperialism. The argument turns on two key concepts: "metalepsis," which Hawes lines up with new approaches outlined by Eric Hobsbawm and Terence Ranger's The Invention of Tradition and Greg Clingham's Making History and Questioning History; and "immanent critique," theorized by Adorno in his essay "Sociology and Empirical Research." The first term Hawes defines as the misrepresentation of the past for purposes in the present, for instance the fabrication of racial and national origins in hopes of consolidating Britain identity. The second concept, "immanent critique," denotes the capacity for opposition at the very moment such histories are being written, or in this case the Enlightenment's ability to critique itself, long before Dialectic of Enlightenment. Thus, Hawes wants to peel back the sedimentation of bad faith and unfair historiography and to reveal an eighteenth century when modernity was still very much inchoate, unpredictable, and self-reflective. He concludes, "Alternate modernities were—and still are—possible" (207).

The book's most compelling chapter focuses on James Macpherson and the "Ossian" controversy, which serves as the primary case study on metalepsis (actually, the discussion of Ossian continues in a later chapter about Samuel Johnson, who famously rejected the epic poem as inauthentic). The publication of Fingal is commonly read as an assertion of Celtic nationalism, but Hawes elucidates a more complex political dynamic, demonstrating that the poem's invention of shared roots was meant to close the gap between Scotland and England largely for the sake of Anglo-Scottish elites within the "Second" British Empire—as always, at the expense of the Irish. Indeed, Macpherson was just one of many among the Lowland Scottish intelligentsia who aimed to forge (in both senses) a new British history that would enable Scotland to act as an imperial partner, not merely a de facto internal colony. Ossian, for Hawes, is not a historical aberration but "the catalyst for, and epitome of, a much broader project of eighteenth-century cultural nationalism: the metaleptic fabrication of ethnic, national, and racial

Eighteenth-Century Fiction 23, no. 3 (Spring 2011) © 2011 ECF ISSN 0840-6286 | E-ISSN 1911-0243 | DOI: 10.3138/ecf.23.3.569

570 ECF 23:3

'roots'' (36). These disingenuous roots, it was hoped, would serve as a foundational past on which to build an imperial future.

Three middle chapters, in a section entitled "Global Palimpsests: Productive Affiliations," look at writers from the eighteenth and twentieth centuries, asserting that the former—specifically Sterne, Gay, and Equiano—have provided the latter—Salman Rushdie, Wole Soyinka, and Charles Johnson—with source ideas for a variety of sophisticated and powerful critiques of nationalism, imperialism, and racism, respectively. Hawes's bold and compelling point is that today's postcolonial authors are not so much writing against the Enlightenment as writing with it, extending and amplifying seminal critiques that originated before the British Empire came to be undergirded by a more settled ideology. These chapters are truly original and always interesting, and if their close readings are sometimes selective, they at least make an excellent preliminary case for literary connections that rarely get mentioned.

In the book's third and final section, we move back to the eighteenth century and stay there, with chapters on Swift and Johnson. Hawes's analysis of Gulliver's Travels, developed from an earlier article, shows us how Swift inverts the traveller's gaze and colonizing energy back on Gulliver himself, who stands in stark contrast to Robinson Crusoe: "Gulliver, fragmented among incompatible identities, is the deliberate antithesis of the superbly self-sufficient Robinson Crusoe, a hero whose proud individuality is ruthlessly defined over and against a subordinate 'Other" (159). Johnson, meanwhile, is described as a cosmopolitan with a healthy suspicion of nationalist myth-making. His writings on English authors and the English language were nothing if not coolheaded and judicious, and Rasselas espouses "minimalist universalism," distinguished here from the more pernicious variety described as the "false universalism inherent in the rhetoric that subtended imperial expansion" (186). Crucially, these chapters maintain that Swift and Johnson critique modernity from positions that are equally modern, not merely nostalgic, as is commonly supposed.

It could be argued that Hawes, too, engages in metalepsis, that his book only propounds an alternative metalepsis. True enough, he reinterprets the past in such a way as to suggest a more progressive tradition to replace the one we already have. The criticism is a bit unfair, however. At the very beginning of the book, Hawes explains, "In the tracking of a course of events, it makes sense to mark a spectrum that ranges from relative reliability, based on publicly shared and relevant evidence, to tendentious slanting, to outright fakery" (xvi). We need, then, to acknowledge degrees and intentions of metalepsis, as he does, without which all historiography could be dismissed as outright fakery.

Overall, The British Eighteenth Century and Global Critique is an easy book to recommend, especially to those interested in the

Enlightenment and in the literature and history of eighteenth-century Britain. Readers of twentieth-century postcolonial literature should also find it of interest. Still, Hawes's book will appeal most of all to scholars who identify themselves as specialists in the eighteenth century. His vigorous defence of the period doubles as a useful defence of the field—no mean accomplishment in this time of shrinking department budgets and vanishing tenure lines.

Jason H. Pearl is an assistant professor of English at Florida International University. He has published articles on travel writing and natural history and is currently writing a book about travel, Utopianism, and the early novel.

Elizabeth Kraft. Women Novelists and the Ethics of Desire, 1684–1814. Surrey: Ashgate Publishing, 2008. viii+200pp. US\$99.95. ISBN 978-0-7546-6280-8.

Women Novelists and the Ethics of Desire, 1684–1814: In the Voice of Our Biblical Mothers departs from current historicist orthodoxy by organizing its reading of the long eighteenth century around large ethical questions that take female desire, and women's right to articulate that desire, as their starting point. Drawing on the philosophies of Emmanuel Levinas and Luce Irigaray, Elizabeth Kraft advocates desire's relational aspect as an avenue to the divine. The prophet Isaiah's words, "Here I am; send me," underpin a biblical ethics of generosity and response central to the dynamic Kraft traces in her readings. Stories of heterosexual love, in particular, uphold the ideal of reciprocity and responsibility, providing occasions for women to insist on their inclusion in the narratives of desire and the divine that are central to Judeo-Christian culture.

Chapter 1 establishes the theoretical and biblical frame of reference governing the study as a whole. The conversation that has evolved between Levinas, Derrida, and Irigaray on ethics and sexual difference structures Kraft's analysis of the stories of Abraham, Sarah, and Rebekah. The chapter concludes with reflections on the Song of Songs, whose female lover insists on sexual difference as the ground for an ethics of desire. The pastoralism of the Song of Songs then serves as the central motif for a reading of Aphra Behn's *Love-Letters between a Nobleman and His Sister*. In the Edenic grove of Bellfont, Silvia and Philander "come together in one being while preserving their discreteness as individual and sexual beings" (49). Chapter 3 uses the template provided by the stories of Deborah, Jael, and Rachev to explore Behn's and Delarivier Manley's representations