
With the same intellectual assurance and breadth of scholarship that characterizes his earlier contributions to eighteenth-century literary studies, Professor Howard Weinbrot has produced another important work, significant both in size and subject. In Britannia's Issue: The Rise of British Literature from Dryden to Ossian, Weinbrot examines that century of change in British letters between 1660 and 1760 in which, he hypothesizes, Britain's emerging national identity and confidence coincided with a movement away from ancient values and achievements and toward a domestic canon that incorporated native aesthetics and the apparently alien voices of Celtic Scots and of Jews.

Britannia's Issue is organized into five parts, each focussing on a particular genre and the historical and intellectual contexts in which individual texts are situated. Each part is preceded by a discrete prologue which functions as a look-out point from which the reader can preview the salient points of the ensuing discussion and as a resting place where the reader can pause to take stock of the path Weinbrot has been and is following. Readers without professional interests may find it reassuring that Weinbrot deliberately eschews any single theoretical agenda or method as he chooses "not to enter the Promised Land of Theory". Instead, he embraces what he describes as an interdisciplinary pluralist approach to accommodate the uncertain and sometimes contradictory impulses of human progress that "those committed to the sanctity of labels will, presumably, call...Muddlism". While his seeming methodological casualness might occasionally invite objection—Weinbrot himself prefaces one particular section of his discussion with the caveat that Marxists with high blood pressure should skip ahead a few pages—the manner of his inquiry, "painful but potentially enriching abandonment rather than happy affirmation" (10), proves a sufficiently flexible tool given the interconnected and wide-ranging nature of the argument he undertakes. In a Burkian fashion, he assembles an impressive number of examples and samples from a variety of sources. Yet, the work persuades not
merely by sheer mass of evidence but by Weinbrot’s sensitive scholarship and his engaging and practical prose.

Part One, which addresses the limits of southern classical aesthetics and the progress of modern English poets towards a new national canon for England, lays the groundwork for the subsequent parts. Marshalling the testimony of a spectrum of eighteenth-century witnesses from minor English schoolmasters and pedagogues to putative Augustan neo-classicists such as Milton, Weinbrot demonstrates the age’s indictment of Greek and Roman culture, especially the destructive *pax Romana*, as an inadequate model for a modern imperial nation.

From here, Weinbrot proceeds in the second part to demonstrate the process of the canon’s naturalization by examining some key texts and renovated forms. Dryden’s *Essay of Dramatick Poesie*, which receives an extended and detailed summary, and Pope’s *The Rape of the Lock* and *Windsor Forest*, both treated considerably more briefly, are shown to be in celebration of Britain’s pacific nationalism and her bringing together of the poles of the globe by commercial colonization. Part Three focusses on the pindaric ode and the manner in which British poets absorbed and transformed Greek forms and conventions and insisted on British subjects and national heroes. The pages on Collin’s glorification of rural Scotland and her folk mythology as sustenance and subject for the poet are notable and raise expectations for the argument of Part Five.

The fourth and fifth parts examine, respectively, growing interest in British letters in the seemingly alien and psychologically remote worlds of Hebraic culture and of Celtic Scotland. In the latter part, he places considerable emphasis on showing parallels between Scots and Jews in Britain in the areas of divine and secular origins, religion, art, language and history of persecution to the end of establishing a kinship that explains why these two alien strains were preferred to other foreign elements. Both traditions were privileged above Greek and Roman models for their artistic pre-eminence and their successful evocation of human passion.

The essays on philosemitism in British letters, fortified by the examples of Handel’s libretto for his oratorio, *Israel in Egypt*, Christopher Smart’s *Song to David*, and Robert Lowth’s *Lectures*
on the Sacred Poetry of the Hebrews (1741-50; 1753, Latin; 1787, English), lack the cogency and force of earlier chapters, but are nonetheless part of a compelling argument for an eighteenth-century affection for Hebraic poetry and its sensuous language as an alternative to the classics. It is here, however, that Weinbrot's neutral inductive method looses some of its flexibility. In pursuit of his theme of an amiable amalgam of foreign voices into one British chorus, he glosses over the issue of the genuine intolerance of and hostility towards Middle Eastern values and culture that was manifested, for instance, in the angry response to Jewish naturalization bills.

Weinbrot's summary of British poets' affection for the mystical and imaginative life of Scotland, "celtomania," proceeds more evenly and more energetically. Acknowledging that James MacPherson was "almost certainly a fabricator, plagiarist and scoundrel," Weinbrot praises him as "one of the great liberating and unifying forces of later eighteenth-century Britain" and the culminating figure in the trend Weinbrot has traced throughout. Weinbrot asserts, regardless of the literary and moral fraud of Ossian, the poems simultaneously created and fed an appetite for the distinguishing flavour of Celtic Scotland that, upon the unification of England and Scotland in 1707 and the after cessation of the Jacobite insurrections, was incorporated into and profoundly influenced British national literature.

Weinbrot's work is a compelling and fresh-thinking study of how nation determines identity in oxymoronic and selective impulses and the author explicitly invites the extension of his hypothesis to other subjects such as architecture, gardening, historiography, music and visual arts. In this respect, Britannia's Issue makes relevant reading not only for those preoccupied with issues of canon and literary influence, but also for those interested in the process of nation building and issues of cultural heritage.

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