

# Review



Giuliana Di Biase, review of Joachim Möller and Bernd Krysmanski (eds.), *Creative Reception. John Locke's Impact on Literature and Pictorial Art*, Krysmanski Press, Latvia 2024, 384 pp.

Hans Aarsleff stated that Locke was “the most influential philosopher of modern times [...]. His influence in the history of thought, on the way we think about ourselves and our relation to the world we live in, to God, nature and society, has been immense”.<sup>1</sup> The essays included in this volume support this claim by demonstrating the significant role that Locke’s ideas played in English and German literature, as well as in the visual arts of Great Britain during the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. The interdisciplinary approach of the volume, as well as the diverse range of authors discussed, sheds light on important aspects of Locke’s reception that are often overlooked or unknown.

The structure of the volume may not be immediately evident, as the essays are not divided into sections. There are two main groups of essays: the first group explores Locke’s reception in the visual arts, while the second focuses on his impact on literature. The first group includes a contribution by John Dixon Hunt, who examines how Locke’s ideas on the mind influenced the evolution of landscape architecture in eighteenth-century England. This is followed by two essays by Ekaterini Kepetzi and Bernd Krysmanski, which discuss Locke’s influence (or lack thereof) on the paintings of William Hogarth. Additionally, there are two more essays: one by Stuart Sillars, which interprets the aesthetics of the English Romantic landscape through the lens of Locke’s concept of ‘idea’, and another by Iris Wien, who explores the influence of Locke’s epistemology on the new form of art criticism advanced by John Ruskin.

<sup>1</sup> Aarsleff, “Locke’s Influence”, p. 252.

These contributions provide critical insights into the “creative” reception of Locke’s ideas. The first essay illustrates how Thomas Whately’s concept of an “expressive landscape” was inspired by Laurence Sterne’s eulogy of Locke in his novel, *Tristram Shandy*. Sterne interpreted Locke’s description of how ideas are formed through “strange combinations” as a confirmation that no narrative can be purely straightforward or prescriptive. He used the metaphor of a garden with no “plain and smooth” paths to illustrate this point, which then inspired Whately’s innovative views on garden design. This case exemplifies the power of novels in enhancing the diffusion of Locke’s ideas, both within and beyond England. Another essay in the volume, written by Walter T. Rix, shows how Sterne’s novels played a pivotal role in facilitating the influence of Lockean thought in Germany during the Enlightenment.

The essays in this first group also highlight the significance of Locke’s rejection of innate ideas in fostering innovation in the visual arts. Sillars’ essay draws a parallel between the absence of innate principles and the rejection of theoretical considerations at the basis of Romantic aesthetics, which favoured individual re-creation over imitation.

Kepezis’s essay highlights the early dissemination of Locke’s ideas in England. It shows that his empiricism and views on the foundation of human knowledge had become an integral part of English culture by the time William Hogarth developed his innovative aesthetics, which he supported through Locke’s theory of perception. Conversely, Krysmanski raises questions about the influence of Locke’s educational ideas on Hogarth. The latter’s tendency to depict ill-mannered, naughty children from the lower social classes seems to highlight the limits of an education along Lockean lines rather than its potential. Krysmanski further emphasises that Hogarth’s paintings showcase his interest in the mischievous behaviour in wayward children rather than instructing or demonstrating, through moral pictures, what decent and well-mannered conduct should be. This perspective diverges from that of Locke’s writings on education, where the primary focus is on moral instruction.

In addition to Rix’s contribution, the second group of essays includes one by Hubertus Fischer, who focuses on Lessing’s reception of Locke. Another essay by Roland Weidle examines how Locke’s theory of personal identity influenced the development of eighteenth-century tragedy. The final two essays in the volume, one by Joachim Möller and the other by Hans-Jürgen Stöppler, address Daniel Defoe’s and Oliver Goldsmith’s interpretations of the ideas Locke expressed in his *Second Treatise of Government*.

Like the first part of the volume, this section offers valuable insights that illuminate Locke's reception. Weidle's essay challenges the prevailing belief that the novel was the primary medium for exploring new concepts of selfhood and interiority. He demonstrates that sentimental plays were, in fact, the main platform for these explorations. Unlike previous centuries, which presented audiences with a compensatory, utopian view of a homogeneous and stable self, these plays showcased the issues arising from the understanding that the self is not a fixed entity but rather a product of a concerned consciousness.

Weidle also argues that Locke's views on personal identity laid the groundwork for a new kind of tragedy, where the tragic impetus arises from the protagonists' awareness of the fragile nature of their identities. This perspective confirms that the *litterati* of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries saw Locke as a radical innovator. Similar to his ideas about the mind, his non-substantialist account of personal identity was viewed as a catalyst for innovation, even though this interpretation strayed from the philosopher's original intentions. This understanding, coupled with the innovative potential attributed to Locke's ideas, seems to be the most significant aspect of their "creative" reception.

While the volume as a whole provides illuminating insights into this topic, readers would have greatly benefited from a deeper exploration of Locke's ideas, which, unfortunately, is lacking in some chapters. This could have added depth to the discussion surrounding their reception.

### *Bibliography*

Aarsleff, Hans, "Locke's Influence", in Vere Chappell (ed.), *The Cambridge Companion to Locke*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press 1994.









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