Pope and Difference

To the Editor:

Fredric V. Bogel's "Dulness Unbound: Rhetoric and Pope's *Dunciad*" (*PMLA* 97[1982]:844–55) is a wide-ranging, perceptive, and often brilliantly suggestive account of both rhetoric and Pope's poetry. It focuses attention on so many crucial but scanted themes and strategies in *The Dunciad* and effectively combats so many prized but naive notions of both poetry and rhetoric that I may seem ungrateful or churlish to quarrel with it. But I take that risk lest Bogel's revisionist reading be mistaken for what it is not, a rhetorical reading in the tradition of Derrida and de Man, with which it shares certain terms and approaches. The so-called tradition of difference, I contend, offers not simply an alternative to Bogel's deeply humanistic reading but a stronger and—in ways—a less problematical account.

Bogel's argument is, at least in part, that *The Dunciad* "is a poem about relations, especially those relations whose relationship to each other, in *The Dunciad* as in rhetorical structuring, makes meaning possible at all: the relations of sameness and difference" (846). Though I applaud his directing attention to the meaning and significance of relation and difference in *The Dunciad*, a point that should be extended to other Pope poems, I find problematical Bogel's account of the nature of the necessary relationship of difference and sameness. The stakes are high here. Bogel contends that the poet creates that relationship, making a difference that did not previously exist. Before creation, whether God's or its "repetition" by the poet, according to Bogel, there was undifferentiation: "creation, meaningfulness, and order arise from a preexistent chaos" (852); the poet's job, according to this argument, "always an originating act, . . . embodies that primally creative moment before which all is sameness—and therefore nothing—and after which there is also difference—and therefore something" (851). Rather than annihilate sameness, which in *The Dunciad* is represented by Dulness, the poet must bind, transform, and draw strength from the maternal "force of the single, the uniform, the undifferentiated: pure energy of identification" (852). By itself difference produces only disorder and meaninglessness, exactly as sameness does. If order and meaning are to result, Bogel concludes, sameness and difference must be combined; a synthesis will emerge, like salt from the binding of sodium and chlorine.

This argument, which I have all too briefly but I hope not unfairly summarized, raises certain problems. To begin with, in arguing that sameness and difference must somehow be combined and transformed, Bogel appears to repeat the critical error he roundly—and rightly—excoriates, whereby rhetoric is thought of as "item-centered, combinatory, and ultimately unifying" (845) and Pope's poetry, similarly, is said to display "a broad range of local intricacies and textual complexities that it finally subsumes . . . in a larger and harmonious unity" (844). Now it is hardly surprising that, despite Bogel's interest in difference, sameness is always the end result of his analyses. His belief in primal unity and undifferentiation, in fact, grounds his thought. But despite his declaration, an originary sameness, what Bogel calls "the anteriority of Dulness" (852), is impossible, as his own text indicates. If Dulness, like a certain notion of rhetoric, is "unrestrained combinatory energy," which unifies "discrete items" (845), difference obviously precedes it. That difference is always already "present" appears as well in *The Dunciad*, indeed in the passage on which Bogel centers his account of primal sameness. In this passage (1.55–78), in which Dulness is depicted contemplating her own chaos, difference appears as, for example, "Realms shift their place, and Ocean turns to land" and "Tragedy and Comedy embrace," already being separated though clearly related. Contrary to Bogel, the poet does not "divide . . . the uniform and thus unformed into differentiable and therefore relatable elements" (851). The poet's can never be a "first," "an originating act" embodying "that primally creative moment" which brings difference into being and which will, if I correctly understand Bogel's subtle argument, lead eventually to the binding of sameness and difference. Difference, as well as form, always precedes the poet's effort, and being is "itself" differential. That means, among other things, that no synthesis is necessary, for difference and sameness are always already related: they do not and cannot exist in the other's absence, and they have no meaning apart from each other. The structure of sameness is thus inhabited by difference and vice versa. Derrida calls this situation *différance*: entities not only differ from one another but are also self-divided, and the difference within mitigates difference between, making relation possible.

Bogel himself comes close to the insight that a relation always already exists between sameness and difference when he briefly discusses in a footnote Pope's line "O sing, and hush the Nations with thy Song!" (4.626). Bogel writes, in fact, that the poet "turns rather dramatically into his opposite" (854, n. 8), desiring the silence and lack of difference characteristic of Dulness herself. Line 626 shows *The Dunciad*'s difference from itself, and Bogel's acute

analysis reflects a difference in his own text, which has mainly argued for sameness and sought "stability of self" (847). Yet even here Bogel's insight is vitiated by a belief in opposites. Committed to absolute difference and distinct identity, Bogel establishes what Samuel Weber calls in *Glyph 8* "dividing-lines" that allow differences to be arrested as oppositions. If differences were, instead, allowed their play, we would have a different—though not simply opposed—and better understanding of Pope's poetry.

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Reply:

1. "Before creation, . . . according to Bogel, there was undifferentiation."

No, according to *Pope* (see my full sentence, p. 852).

2. "the poet's job, according to this argument, [is] 'always an originating act.' "

No, "a *Dunciad* is always an originating act" (851).

3. "His [Bogel's] belief in primal unity and undifferentiation, in fact, grounds his thought."

No, Pope's dramatized belief, in *The Dunciad*, grounds my approach to that poem.

4. "If Dulness, like a certain notion of rhetoric, is 'unrestrained combinatory energy,' which unifies 'discrete items' (845), difference obviously precedes it."

Unless, as in Pope's scheme, difference at some point does not precede it. In that scheme, there are at two points no "discrete items": the very beginning of things and the very end. If such a condition is hard to imagine (and it is), we might think of it on the analogy of a "singularity" in physics (big bang, final whimper), a point at which the laws of physics—even, perhaps, the speculations of Saussure and Derrida—no longer apply.

In the meantime, for Pope, there are entities that have been won from such undifferentiation and that Dulness continually seeks to reduce to their original nonstate.

5. "Difference, as well as form, always precedes the poet's effort, and being is 'itself' differential. That means, among other things, that no synthesis is necessary, for difference and sameness are always already related."

So everything is fine, and Pope—nervous, short, Catholic—was needlessly worried?

6. "Yet even here [854, n. 8] Bogel's insight is vitiated by a belief in opposites. [He is] committed to absolute difference and distinct identity."

On page 846 I characterize such a belief as "identity disorder," and I spend a good part of the essay trying to combat it. Nor does my mention of "stability of self" imply that such stability is what my essay has mainly sought. I use the phrase to remark that, in Milton's or Pope's chaos, the individual *loses* all such stability. It would be rash to infer from this that I believe we normally possess perfect stability of self.

As for my belief in a final "synthesis," that term implies far more fixity and finality than I would claim. Like a comparable "bound" figure, Spenser's Archimago (*FQ* 1.12, 2.1), Dulness always might escape.

I don't know if these remarks leave my "revisionist" essay closer to or further from the "tradition of Derrida and de Man" with which Douglas Atkins fears it might be confused. My purpose has been only to show that the essay does not "differ from itself" quite so energetically as has been suggested.

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