Peter L. Thorslev, Jr., Romantic Contraries: Freedom versus Destiny

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Blake/An Illustrated Quarterly, Volume 20, Issue 2, Fall 1986, pp. 60-63
“the pervasiveness of the elegiac in the Literature of Sensibility.” Some years ago Fussell had noticed that “of all the Augustan humanist images and motifs, it is elegiac action which conducts us into the closest recesses of the humanist experience,” and from the perspective of Romantic literature Wordsworth presents himself as one of the greater elegists in the language. What is the distinctly period malady that summons the elegiac mode, rendering it the special possession of writers in the later half century?

These and other objections can be brought against Bogle’s work. I most emphatically do not offer them as disqualifying, and I want strongly to resist anything like a conclusive judgment about this book. It is a subtle enterprise that Bogle conducts with skill and learning. For myself, I do not see that his sense of the period can be said to stand more adequately or definitively than others I have cited here. His fascination with ontological insecurity, Sitter’s with literary loneliness, Cox’s with “eighteenth-century efforts to conceptualize what Young called the ‘naked self,”’ my own, if I may say so, with the theme of the probable and the marvelous, seem to me to move more or less in unison (though not entirely in agreement) in one generally accepted and common direction. Something of a consensus is in process of shaping a new and large-scale idea of the second half of the century. It has the merit of not suffering, as Frye put it, from the false teleology of “pre-romanticism,” but assumes the value and specific presence of a literature complex and vexed. Bogle’s contribution will command our respect and attention for quite some time to come. Most importantly, it will be something for us to think with and against.


Reviewed by David Punter

Romantic Contraries: Freedom versus Destiny is a learned and complex book which invites reading on two levels. At the first level is a substantial meditation on freedom and destiny, free will and determinism, that “philosophical morass of ‘freedom, foresight, will, and fate’” (p. 6), into which Thorslev introduces a considerable degree of clarity. He concentrates several times on the significant differences between romantic discourse and the Anglo-American philosophical discourse within which similar issues have later been captured, and moves thoughtfully between them. At this level, the book is an argument; consisting broadly of an outlining of problems about human purpose, as they may have appeared to the major romantic writers; and then a depiction of three “universes,” three constructs within which attempts were made to tackle those problems—the “organic universe,” the “Gothic alternative,” and the “open universe,” which is intimately associated with the practice of irony.

Interestingly, though, when read at this level the book leaves an unsatisfied feeling; there is no conclusion, and no attempt at the end to “read back” the apparent discoveries. I think this is largely because this central argument is couched in humanist terms. I do not mean anything very polemical by this, only that Thorslev is happy to talk about the romantic poets as being, for instance, “in general too concerned with the loss of destiny to feel it as a burden”; about Shelley as happy to accept “the suffering and sacrifice that go with the role” of poet (p. 19); about Walter Pater as keeping “his true self detached from actuality and history” and feeling “free to treat all philosophy either as the subject of esthetic contemplation, or as a means to an end of further experience” (p. 181). I have no quarrel with any of these judgments, within their own frame of reference; but they do help to reveal a problem endemic to humanist criticism, which has to do with the object of attention. If our focus is squarely upon the writers (or, we might want to say, on the mythically reconstructed figures whom we produce from the texts), then how do we escape from this individualist closure into a wider realm of structured history?

We may well, of course, not want to; and here we come upon an important knot in our cultural attention to romanticism. Part of Thorslev’s argument is about the pressure of history; part of our own cultural problem, clearly, is continuous with that. Thus some of the established discourses about romanticism fit neatly into an ideological frame: attempts, for instance, to recapture Shelley as a radical tend to offer only marginal displacements of the myth of soaring individual supremacy which is inscribed on the surface of the poetry itself. Reading has to do with systems of identification; where better to find refuge for the harried self than in the myths of the west wind?

Yet, of course, things are not as simple as that. In speaking of identification (and I mean to allude specifically to the Kleinian concept) we are touching already upon the shadow, upon that which haunts: haunts romanticism with the hovering suggestion that the individual may not have his or her own responsibility within grasp; haunts contemporary philosophy with the prospect that the ‘I’ itself may be that which invites
deconstruction; haunts language with the awareness that the bedrock of pronouns through which we appear to
organize our everyday discourse and behavior are really
only "shifters," least conclusive of all the items we count
on as we painstakingly assure ourselves of coherence.

I am not talking only of Thorslev's book; this haunting
is painfully there in much of the material he addsuces—in, for instance, Oswald's perceptual shift in
'The Borderers:

Action is transitory—a step, a blow
The motion of a muscle—this way or that—
'Tis done, and in the after-vacancy
We wonder at ourselves like men betrayed:
Suffering is permanent, obscure and dark,
And shares the nature of infinity.

There is a paradox here in Oswald's act of recognition,
summarized neatly in the juxtaposition of "permanent"
and the "nature of infinity"; this realization, after the
event, that even an apparent excess of individualism—
the performance, for instance, of a seemingly irrevocable
act—may only have demonstrated our alignment with a
working out of larger forces binds us to an iron law
at the same time as it removes the cognizance of that
law from human apprehension. Thus even as we glimpse
the tantalizing contours of a determined universe, with
all the possibilities of explanation attendant upon it, we
sense the possibilities of explanation attendant upon it,
we sense the origin and meaning of that set of deter-
minations being progressively distanced from us.

And thus it is also in the twentieth century, as
Thorslev says when he subsequently alludes to the con-
temporary coming of the uncertainty principle: just as
we begin to grasp the structures produced by the in-
teraction of subnuclear particles, so our conceptualiza-
tion of those particles explodes and we find ourselves
once more among the shards of explanation, trying to
cobble together a metaphor—matter, wave, light—which
will retain purchase on the shifting landscape of con-
struction. And it is indeed metaphors that we here deal
in; romantic attempts to "explain" the creative act can
and should be read as the coming of a new series of
metaphors, and these metaphors transcend the field of
obvious "influence" in ways which continue to alarm
literary historians.

Thorslev is thus, I would say, quite right to assim-
lilate metaphor to myth, although he prefers Santayana
on myth (p. 74) to the more structuralist formulations
which run through Lévi-Strauss and Barthes. "Dialect-
tical thinking" during the romantic period has, so Thor-
slev claims, this kind of force: "it represents an attitude
toward life, art, and moral action, rather than a phil-
osophic, abstract, or scientific description of them"; it
is a "metaphor" which "is implicit in much of Romantic
poetry" (p. 75). But the question, it seems to me, is
not only about the ramifications of such myths, about
where we can find them cropping up, about the pecu-
liarity, dwelt upon so much by Abrams, McFarland and
other critics, that we do indeed find a similar range of
metaphor during this period in writers and whole schools
of thought which clearly had little or no contact with
one another; the question is about what we do with this
perception of similarity, and within what discourses we
try to contain it.

We can trace a series of possible fields of interpre-
tation here. At the first level, there is the possibility of
letting the coincidence lie, or referring it to the incom-
prehensible wonder of the human mind. This we could
characterize as the romantic attitude itself; and it is still
very much alive. This position can, of course, be refined
through the deployment of psychological concepts: al-
thought they have rarely been taken up, the perceptions
about the collective unconscious contained in Freud's
work on group psychology would clearly lend themselves
to a first-stage critique of the unreflective concept of
coincidence.

And at a second stage, we can look for explanations
largely in sociological terms: we can talk about the struc-
tural similarities between, say, the British and German
states in the period and suggest that particular parallel
developments in the economy and in social organization
are likely to conduce to the evolution of a common set of
metaphors to express alienation, lack, a common con-
jouring of that which is other. Thorslev organizes some
of his argument in terms similar to this: for instance,
he has an interesting passage on the emergence of notions
of the unconscious (p. 91) in which he dwells upon the
conditions under which such notions could emerge, and
traces their history from the "seventeenth-century anti-
Cartesians," via Enlightenment repudiation of uncon-
scious activity, to the romantics, who, "in the excite-
ment of their rediscovery, may at times have gone to
the opposite extremes."

But the question raised by these attempted modes
of explanation is, of course, the primary contemporary
critical question: what is it that we are doing in seeking
for explanation in terms of sources, of origins, at all?
And at several points Thorslev touches on this question,
in ways which threaten to undermine the rational se-
quence of his argument—a rational sequence to which
he is deeply wedded. There is a continuous polemic
running through the book about the dangers of irra-
tionalism. It is very strongly there, for instance, in his
objections to those thinkers who have attempted to re-
lativize the law of contradiction. In relation, for in-
stance, to Friedrich Schlegel, he quotes Anne Mellor:
"identity and contradiction are useful categories for deal-
ing with the exigencies of daily life, and especially in
matters relating to the corporeal world, but they have
no absolute validity"; and goes on:
To which one can only respond that on the contrary, the law of contradiction is denied every day in household arguments or in political debates, with no lasting ill effects; it is precisely in one's dealings with ultimate reality that it cannot be denied, or one's philosophical system loses all coherence. It is worth respecting the elementary truth of logic that once one allows even a single contradiction into one's language system, it becomes possible to prove anything whatever. (p. 163)

In separating the realms of “household arguments” and “ultimate reality,” Thorslev is surely taking on himself some of the protective coloration of romanticism: in the sublunary sphere, things may indeed be messy, and people may refuse to subscribe to those neat rules which “ought” to govern human behavior and our perceptions of the “truth,” but out there beyond the stars, in the windy depths of metaphysicalization, there continues to exist a world in which the categories are not confused—although, of course, that transcendent world needs rather a lot of continuous work to maintain it in being, work on the boundary of what is or is not “allowed.”

But second, and more important: who or what is the “one” which is the apparent agent of this passage? Clearly it is the hypothesized individual, directly contiguous with Blake’s agent who takes his free choice about whether or not to subscribe to philosophical systematization. The other side of this, of course, would be a very different approach to the power and role of language; and in saying that Thorslev’s text works on two levels, I mean to draw attention to the moments when this different view invades the stockade of individualism. He mentions, for instance, Paul de Man’s assessment of romantic irony as existing only “in and through language” and as consisting “in the recognition that there is no escape from the ‘prison-house’ of language into the world of the actual” (p. 177). There is another kind of invasion going on when Thorslev mentions the various kinds of notational translation which may be happening in approaches to the Gothic:

There is surely a sense in which the world of modern analytic theory . . . is merely the Gothic universe internalized: the grisly phantoms and indifferent or even malevolent fates replaced with the conflicting desires and irreconcilable forces of the unconscious, or with such (almost personified) abstractions as Eros and Thanatos. (p. 137)

It is these invading forces which, I suggest, this text tries to keep out; and it is in this sense that I believe that a book which apparently addresses itself to a romantic problematic in fact engages in its own subtext with a whole range of argument about contemporary critical practice.

This, one might say, is in some sense inevitable; we can only write against the background of what is, and certainly the spectre of Derrida and deconstructionism is one of those which hovers outside the carefully sealed gates (albeit of Troy). But some of Thorslev’s formulations go beyond this: he argues, for instance, that there is “no clear evidence that any of the major Romantics despairs of factual history . . . nor of the referential capacities of language. They choose to take an esthetic and ironic attitude towards history, just as they choose a poetry of ironic ‘inclusion,’ a poetry which avoids closure . . . .” (p. 180). The point I would want to make about this is that it is not a critical judgment at all: it is an unverifiable statement, precisely in the irrationalist area from which Thorslev claims to be distancing himself, and it embodies within itself a search for origins.

What I mean by this is that Thorslev’s deployment of the romantic writers is as figures of reassurance, complexly related to childhood and adulthood. The world may be limited by our conceptual apparatus; or by perceptual difficulty; or by the overarching claims of language and the ineradicable but forbidden memories of our induction into the word. But these pinions cannot hold down the romantics: even where they themselves manifest a troubled awareness of the voices which speak through them, this awareness is relieved by a strenuous effort at self-fulfillment. Our parents cannot, after all, be impotent.

And, of course, this is the point at which, in order to be consistent, I need to “depersonalize” Thorslev, the author of this text, and to refer instead to this critical discourse in its manifold articulations with other discourses, critical and otherwise. This would be an enormous task, but one point stands out. In its very structure, this text is an enactment of a search for origins and of an attempted validation of free choice, and these structural coordinates underlie the argument. The text begins from definitions: from an attempt to set up clear structures in the void. It then proceeds to use these structures as a “background” (the first set of three chapters) against which the romantics can be perceived choosing which of three universes to inhabit (the second set of three chapters). Between these two parts comes a brief “Prologue” (to Part Two), in which there is an interesting passage which depicts what a romantic poem might actually be (a brave attempt!): “poems as wholes, or relatively self-contained passages in them, can be viewed as phenomenological exercises in which problems of existence are bracketed so that questions of ontology or of ultimate beliefs need not arise” (p. 82).

Between the “background” and the act of choice, then, there is interposed an “époche”; a space is constructed in which the poet can find elbow-room, can distance himself from the pressure of history, of, no doubt, household arguments—Wordsworth can, for instance, distance himself from Dorothy. Thus we are prepared for the possibility of entry into different and self-contained universes as an act of generational free will; although the point is made that no single poet should be categorized so simply, this has no structural
effect on the argument. What is operating here is a restriction of the signifier to linearity: genealogy and choice become a single prerogative, as they have been to aristocracies through the ages.

What is needed, I suggest, is an alertness to, and a reflexiveness about, what romanticism may itself signify as a sign in a system, and as itself still a productive generator of other chains of significations. The subtitle of the book is highly relevant: "freedom" and "destiny" are the terms, a doubled pride, in exemption or in a special placement. What is ignored, or suppressed, is the massive process of instituting; a perception that the processes which induct us without our acquiescence into the family have also a relevance to our induction into other processes: reading, professionalization, taking up membership of a larger structure (in whatever mode, including anarchistic rejection). The absence of conclusion in the book, I would say, is crucial: insofar as we explore sources in a non-reflexive way, we are enacting displacement, refusing the difficult trajectory through undifferentiation, refusing the knowledge of submersion which is the suppressed inverse of the melodrama of the Garden of Eden, and which takes on and recognizes death within life. That the romantics themselves had hints of this unmarked shadow is obvious; what, though, is the inner meaning of the critical act which continues to seek in romanticism a wide sphere of action, an untrammeled freedom of subject-position against all odds?


Reviewed by David Simpson

For a number of years historians of ideas and literary critics have been interested in eighteenth-century philosophies of language, both for their intrinsic epistemological sophistication and for their obvious analogies with syndromes apparent in other fields of discourse—perhaps indeed in all fields of discourse, given the fashionable tendency to identify language in particular with mind or culture in general. Studies by Hans Aarsleff, Murray Cohen, James Knowlsen, Stephen Land, and James Stam, among others, have insured that students of the eighteenth century are now very likely to pay some attention to its linguistics. Along with these largely philosophical and descriptive accounts there is another tradition, most recently and thoroughly explored by John Barrell in *English Literature in History, 1730–80* (London, 1983), which insists that arguments about dialect, about a "common" language, and about the priorities among the various parts of speech, are not only analogous to the political debates of the time but are more directly determined by and addressed to them.

Olivia Smith's book is a valuable contribution to this second tradition, arguing as it does that "late eighteenth-century theories of language were centrally and explicitly concerned with class division and...cannot be entirely understood without their political component being taken into account" (p. viii). Her study avoids what many readers might regard as the "highlights" of the period, in order to describe the language debate during the crucial thirty years or so of the French wars. We are well enough aware of the political crisis of this period, but rather less well-informed of the debate over the language, and its relation to that larger crisis.

The book limits itself to a discussion of the printed word—suitably so, given the amount of material to be recaptured. Its six chapters deal with, among other things, the Rights of Man controversy, the pamphlet wars (Eaton, Spence, Hannah More), Horne Tooke, the Hone trials, Wordsworth, Coleridge and Cobbett. But Smith's study ranges much more widely than a mere summary of its major themes might suggest. She writes superbly about the debate over the classics, about Harris' assumptions in privileging abstract concept over particular vocabularies, and about Samuel Johnson and the contemporary reactions to his work. She is constantly attentive to the empirical results of the language debate, showing us (for example) how press and Parliament used "the notion of vulgarity to argue against the concept of extended or universal male suffrage" (p. 29). She convincingly locates Paine's challenge to the linguistic establishment as consisting in his mastery of an "intellectual vernacular prose" (p. 36), a medium that many would have preferred to believe could not exist. And she offers the challenging thesis that this medium vanishes (to reappear after 1815) as a result of the "hysteria" that greeted its publication, and because of the status granted to the "refined language" among the radicals themselves (p. 77). These radicals, according to Smith, were disabled by their inexperience of any alternative to the language and images of their opponents. Hence, for example, they constantly cast themselves as a "swinish multitude," their ironic embracing of Burke's famous phrase speaking for the absence of an antithetical language of their own. To test out Smith's thesis here would require rather more evidence than her book itself offers; given the strong case for authentic self-consciousness made by E.P. Thompson in *The Making of the English Working Class* and elsewhere, opinions are likely to remain divided. But the issue she raises is important, and likely to stimulate further important research.

Among the many fine things in this book, the