

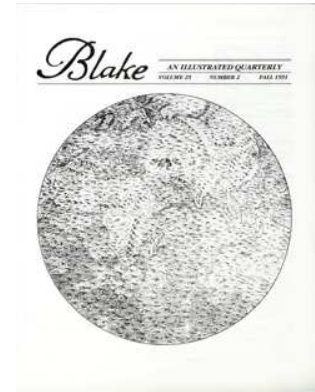
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R E V I E W

G. A. Rosso and Daniel P. Watkins, eds., *Spirits of Fire: English Romantic Writers and Contemporary Historical Methods*

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Reviewed by
David Simpson

For some readers and critics *history* is surely still a nightmare from which they are hoping that they, and the rest of us, may still awaken; for publishers, it remains a good bet, though not as good as gender studies; and for most of us it is probably something undecided in advance—good news when done well, and probably useful enough even when it isn't. After all, the historical approach has to offer something in the way of information. At its most doggedly empirical, it may offer nothing else. And as grand theory, we can always learn from its mistakes and omissions.

This volume contains various kinds of history, which the editors predictably and probably wisely do not attempt to cast into an organic whole. One thinks of Wordsworth's recourse to the image of the Gothic cathedral, where the side chapels and the very gargoyles are ornamental and appealing, even though they cannot be said to be holding the structure up or together. This book's three sections contain, respectively, essays attempting grand theory, essays on the formal-generic component of historical inquiry, and essays on politics and gender (separately and together). The late John

Kinnaird, to whom the volume is dedicated, might have been proud of it. Despite the previous publication of five of its twelve essays it works as a well-designed (redesigned) sampler of contemporary historical methods. Some of the samples are predictable: Marxism, for instance, is permitted to appear as grand theory but not as close reading, and deconstruction, in any of its arguably historical applications, does not appear at all. But there are always omissions and preferences. Enough said.

The first essay in the volume is the most unusual and, though previously published in *New German Critique*, the most in need of (re)reading by the audience that this book will likely appeal to. Robert Sayre and Michael Löwy's "Figures of Romantic Anticapitalism" is the grand theory component of the book, and it makes some of the blunders that grand theory has to make in order to subsist, most of which are ably pointed out by Michael Ferber in his response. In the long romanticism for which they argue, the authors do not sufficiently discriminate the then from the now, and they confuse a quite invigorating concept of totality with an egregiously metaphysical vocabulary of "inner essence" and "essential principle" (86). But, for the right readers—that is, all of us reposing smugly in the postmodern consensus against all totalizing—there is more of virtue than of vice here. First, Sayre and Löwy offer an internationalist analysis, as befits their thesis that the core of romanticism is a shared resistance to capitalist values and practices in the name of pre-capitalist ideals (26). Second, the argument marginalizes the causal priority of 1789, which cannot but be therapeutic after the constant conjunction between professional self-interest and scholarly inquiry that marked 1989. Third, and best of all, the authors generate so many subsets from a beginning in a primary category, that of "revisionist" romanticism (40f), that they provide an indefinitely extendable

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and combinable set of paradigms for the description of particular syndromes. The compulsion for nuance that affects all of us at the sight of grand theory is here largely accommodated. Disbelievers may find the five types (the last of which is subdivided into five further subtypes) an instance of a merely technocratic taxonomy; others may discover, as I do, a healthy determination to account for detail without giving up on the attempt to articulate a totality. The strong effect of the essay is to displace "Romanticism" as a narrow period definition (and along with it the debates about preromantic and postromantic) by an expanded and sophisticated concept of anti-capitalism. For most readers of literary criticism, this can only be fresh air.

The four essays in the second section are more conventional in ambition, but valuable and cogent both in themselves and in their juxtaposition here. David Sebberson argues that the guiding spirits of Wordsworth's preface to *Lyrical Ballads* are those of Enlightenment rhetoricians like Campbell and Priestley. He traces an empiricist rhetorical theory that reveals Wordsworth to be reproducing the very ideology he "wished to break" (98). Yes and no. It's hard to be sure

exactly what Wordsworth wished; and Sebberson takes one strand in the preface (already noted by W. J. B. Owen, among others) and makes it whole. Michael Scrivener follows with a fine essay on Thelwall, whose career is instanced as that of a committed Jacobin trying to make a living in the counter-revolutionary marketplace. As they are here described, Thelwall's efforts to speak to the "judicious" on behalf of the "uneducated" reader offer a valuable analogue to, again, Wordsworth's preface, as well as an analysis of the predicament of the radical professional intellectual in the aftermath of the French Revolution. Scrivener implicitly takes the point of the Sayre and Löwy's essay: that one has to be very specific about a writer's subcultural site if one is to say anything telling about the politics of writing. In demonstrating the marketability of the literature of "character" and of "feeling," Scrivener has produced a useful piece of literary sociology, as well as a good case for paying more attention to John Thelwall.

Daniel Cottom writes on Scott's blurring or avoidance of the received notions of genre in his negotiation of the relation between the novel and the romance, specifically evident in his uses of the motif of the supernatural (e.g., in *The Monastery*). Scott appears here neither as a conscious and in-control exploiter of available strategies, nor as a prisoner of prefigured discourses, but as something in between, the vehicle of a "troubled act" (149) of mediation. The general-theoretical payoff is, again, worth pondering, and should trouble any simple confidence in one or the other extreme assumption about the relation of writers to writing and to the reading public. The last essay in this section is Marilyn Butler's account of Hazlitt's *Liber Amoris* as a critique as well as an in-

stance of romantic autobiography. The general case that there is as much criticism as affirmation of that genre in romantic writing itself is a convincing one, as is the placing of Hazlitt within a "collective enterprise" exploring the role of the "stereotypical intellectual" (167). Butler's use of "satire" as a description of this self-reflexive, critical imperative is, however, less than happy for its suggestion of a firm and inherited genre specification implying conscious control and precisely imagined responses. There must have been some of this, to be sure, but too much else is missed in this terminology. Butler ignores the considerable body of argument produced by others about the nature of indeterminate self-imaging in romantic writing, and projects herself into a position of (unsatirized) originality. No footnotes support the claim, which I at least find quite surprising, that it is "almost standard" to identify the narrator of "Alastor" with Wordsworth, or that the poem is "generally" deemed *not* to have a self-conscious ("satirical") dimension (but Norman Thurston wrote on exactly this in 1975, and he is not alone). Butler takes over McGann's "Romantic ideology" thesis, whereby all latterday readers are supposed to have missed the critical, satirical, intellectual strains in romantic writing. In her urge to be first, Butler goes a bit wild, accusing even the "deconstructionists" of such oversights (168). Among the many possible critiques of Paul de Man, failure of attention to the intellectual and critical strain is hardly one of them.

The final section contains five essays, two of which are already classics: Stuart Curran's "The Political Prometheus" is a model of its kind as it traces the microcosmic and general-historical determinations affecting the production of the image of Pro-

metheus; Jerome McGann's "The Meaning of the Ancient Mariner," first published in 1981, was a major precursor of *The Romantic Ideology*, published two years later. Here, as well as placing the poem in the field of biblical hermeneutics, McGann proposed Coleridge as the author of the tradition by which he has been subsequently read, and as one of the major architects of the core commitment of romanticism to Christian doctrine.

Daniel Watkins's essay on Keats's "Grecian Urn" ode is a reprint of a chapter in his *Keats's Poetry and the Politics of the Imagination* (1989). The poem is read as the expression of an "acute historical anxiety" (255) with gender as its ideological blind spot. The most feminized poet in the canon turns out to be, for this reading, anything but a feminist and nothing of a collectivist. The remaining two essays are both on Blake. G. A. Rosso writes on *The Four Zoas* (especially on Nights 8 and 9) as Blake's effort to escape individualism and critique deism; and Catherine McClenahan reads the poems of the Pickering Ms. as exploring the possibilities of a feminized narrative position, finding specific and important references to the career and cultural notoriety of Mary Wollstonecraft.

So, we have here a useful series of identikit motifs for the construction of a history. That Blake dwells at the microscopic end of the spectrum that runs from close reading to grand theory may be merely coincidental, or it may suggest that we are still unable to emerge from our respect for minute particulars in our reading of the strangest major Romantic. The grand theoretical reconstructions of Blake by Frye and Erdman are still unmatched, not because they are "right" but because no one in the know would now dare to see so much, or live so long.