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David Simpson. **Irony and Authority in Romantic Poetry**. Totowa, New Jersey: Rowan and Littlefield, 1979. 267 pp. \$22.50.

Reviewed by Gavin Edwards

David Simpson
**Irony and Authority
in Romantic Poetry**



The novelty of what David Simpson is doing in this book about irony in Romantic poetry is indicated by the fact that Byron gets only one brief mention in it. Correlatively, Simpson aims to unseat established views of Romantic poetry as personal expression or as poetry of experience (though lines of communication are kept open with both views). Instead, the work of Keats, Blake, Wordsworth, Coleridge, and Shelley, and approximately contemporary tendencies in philosophy and aesthetics (notably the work of Hegel) are described as ironic, but not in a sense which most readers will be familiar with. But then "defamiliarisation" is what the book is all about.

Most of us think of irony as, with various provisos and sophistications, "saying one thing and meaning another." David Simpson is talking about a more radically unsettling practice, a practice named in a German theoretical tradition and invoked in some recent North American criticism (notably, and relevantly, by Paul de Man in "The Rhetoric of Temporality"). According to the notion of irony with which most of us are more familiar, the meaning of what is said, the real position of its author, can be deduced from what is said. The reader knows where he stands because he knows where the author stands: a reciprocal identification established via the material through which they communicate. Romantic irony on the other hand insistently disturbs or even subverts these relationships, drawing attention to

the processes of identification and interpretation themselves. Language, if it can still be talked about as a "medium" at all, becomes "a medium which takes us by the arm and shakes us into activity, rather than one which vanishes in reverence to the prior clarity of the message it embodies" (p. 56). Romantic irony forces us to construct meaning for ourselves in what is therefore a "performative" activity: an activity, that is to say, which involves making meanings as much as responding to and describing them. All such attributions of meaning, interpretations, are therefore, by definition, themselves put into question. The link between the question of irony and the question of authority is evident: Simpson avoids the pun on authors and authority, but perhaps a reviewer may be allowed it.

He quotes Shelley on the primary task of philosophy:

Philosophy, impatient as it may be to build, has much work yet remaining, as pioneer for the overgrowth of ages. It makes one step towards this object; it destroys error, and the roots of error. It leaves, what it is too often the duty of the reformer in political and ethical questions to leave, a vacancy. It reduces the mind to that freedom in which it would have acted, but for the misuse of words and signs, the instruments of its own creation.¹

What is identified, in the poetry and the philosophy, is this work of deconstruction; and reconstruction, except that such reconstruction is never more than provisional, itself always subject to further deconstruction. David Simpson moreover shares the principles he finds at work in Romantic writing. That he does so is, as he is well aware, itself unsettling. He is aware of the questioning which must attend continually on his own critical discourse; aware that it cannot exclude itself from the paradoxes of that "hermeneutic circle" to which it refers. A book of this kind is bound to be difficult, and this is certainly a difficult book. Its success needs to be judged by its ability to go on thinking clearly when what has to be thought clearly is the impossibility of thinking clearly, or at any rate without doubleness. By this criterion the book is, most of the time, an outstanding success.

The book's descriptions of its own procedures necessarily resemble the poetic procedures to which it refers. Thus "we shall find ourselves constantly laying and unlaying the same bricks, in a process marked by repetition rather than clearly defined progress" (p. 24). The book begins with detailed readings of *Ode on a Grecian Urn* and *La Belle Dame Sans Merci*. Thereafter individual chapters are devoted to specific issues--the image of childhood, theories and practices of language, the relation between author and narrator, metaphor, irony--which are at the same time reapproaches to a single chameleon problematic. Some poems are discussed, or referred to, repeatedly; so one way of grasping the drift and force of the argument, in the context of the present review, is to describe some of these readings.

In Wordsworth's *The Thorn*, Simpson argues, we may eventually decide that no real facts are available to us that are uncontaminated by the gossip of the community in which Martha Ray lives or by the "old sea captain" who is identified by Wordsworth, elsewhere, as the "loquacious narrator" of the poem. Even the description of the moss upon the little hill at the beginning of the poem

As if by hand of lady fair
The work had woven been;
And cups, the darlings of the eye,
So deep in their vermillion dye

introduces under the cover of "observation" the primary images and metaphors of the human drama to which all this is supposed to be but a preface (p.104).

The insidious thing about such figurative language in the poem

is that it is just ambiguous enough to make the casual reader think that he is making genuine connections and finding things for himself; whereas all the time he is simply falling into the trap laid by an unconsciously cunning narrator. (p. 105)

So the poem must encourage the *uncasual* reader to get "beyond, in our own voices, the sorts of misprision which the old sea-captain inflicts on the

landscape, and on the human beings who are dragged into it." (p. 105). But this is impossible; by definition since the contamination is complete and no other source of information is available. A commitment to "things in themselves" is both posited and put out of reach. In this respect the poem, and our experience as readers of it, dramatizes what Simpson calls Wordsworth's "uncontrollable epistemological predicament." After all, *The Lyrical Ballads* are about situations wherein "the feeling therein developed gives importance to the action and situation and not the action and situation to the feeling." And this is, as Simpson says, "a positive manifesto as much as a crime" (p. 107). In which case the would-be open minded narrator of the poem can indeed be seen as an emblem of the poet Wordsworth himself. So that poet and narrator, whom we have to separate, also come together again. And Simpson connects this, through a discussion of certain developments in eighteenth-century philosophy, with a widespread instability in "the very vocabulary and concept of distinction" (p. 122). The mind's relation to the world, to itself, and to its possible "parts" is uncontrollably shifting: "Each is present, or absent, simultaneously with the other" (p. 123).

What happens to names, the practice of naming, is a central instance of this complex instability. And some of the most interesting remarks on Blake's work appear in the context of Simpson's discussion of how, for the Romantics, the "disruption of the stability of objects and names . . . unsettles the subject whose tools they are" (p. 70). "Blake's undertaking begins, notoriously, with the proper name itself" (p. 76). In speculating on the etymology of "Urizen" Simpson argues that the "list of homophonal substitutions which can be made into this name seems almost infinite" (p. 76). His own suggested substitutions are, he insists,

not matters for scholarly proof, perhaps, and what I have suggested will no doubt be accorded various degrees of probability by different readers. But this could be exactly the point. In the fallen world which Urizen, and our reason, represent, dominated as it is by intentional projections and inflections of the self into the world (a process which Blake the artist does not consider himself immune from), is not this fronting of the altering eye the most important meaning of all? (p. 77)

Naming is also the theme of Simpson's discussion of *Infant Joy*. He rejects the notion that the *Innocence* poems are spoken by Innocence and that we therefore need to slough off adult sophistication in order to read them properly. Some, at least, can be read as spoken by dramatically presented adult narrators implicitly conditioned by the properties of experience. *Infant Joy* is a case in point. It is usually read as "a celebration of maternal love, a loving dialogue between adult and infant" (p. 52), and "the flower containing the group of figures" in the illustration "is usually deemed to be opening, with the limp flower yet to open." But Simpson points out that "this latter flower could as well have gone through its cycle already, and the open flower could be in the process of closing" (p. 53), a reading which of course gives a very different significance

to the family relationships going on in the open flower. And in the poem the speaker

turns (that is, paraphrases the infant into turning) the description of a state--"I happy am"--into a proper noun--"Joy is my name"--society's gesture of appropriation and admission, and, of course, of signification. (p. 53)

Sweet joy *befalls* the helpless infant. But we are not offered a simple reversal of the standard positive reading:

I do not mean to imply that my reading is the authoritative one, and it is not simply modesty which makes me say so. For we can pass on beyond it, to a higher level of consciousness and self-consciousness. The benediction again comes to seem positive, and the smile again holds a degree of promise, when we recall or realise that the fall is a necessary fall, and that there is no innocence except as it is discovered or constructed. (p. 54)

A discovery and construction which applies of course both to our relationship to the text and to the other kinds of relationship to which the text refers.

The image of the child has a crucial role to play in this reading of Romanticism, as of course it has in other readings. But for Simpson it is very much the *image* of the child which is at stake. Childhood reproaches us with "the errors of acquired folly" as Blake put it. And the child, who is therefore an agent of deconstruction is also the Romantic ironist *par excellence*: he is never reachable except as the receding image which the adult consciousness has of him. The child disrupts institutions and personalities outside himself by being conceived as their "other" but by the same token "is himself denied the level of metacommentary, the stable identity which would enable him to replace in any absolute way the authority which he challenges" (p. 33).

Clearly Simpson commits himself to the view that there was something which can be called Romanticism. A commitment of this kind needs to accomplish two things, I think, in particular. It needs to show that the writers so designated are linked by their differences as well as by their similarities. And it needs to show that what is said of them cannot really be said of other writers.

On the first count the book is impressively successful. At least so far as the poetry is concerned; I am less competent to judge the philosophical texts, though there certainly seems to be a close analogy between what the poetry is doing and what the philosophical texts are saying (and sometimes doing). As for the poetry it is already clear that, for instance, Blake is more extreme and more self-possessed in his engagement with issues that Wordsworth also addresses. Blake, that is to say, is more thoroughgoing, enthusiastic, and explicit in his subversion of self-possession.

The chapter on metaphor is perhaps the most difficult part of the book, and I am not sure that

its various elements are ever effectively coordinated. Nevertheless it is in this chapter that I get the strongest sense of writers who are linked by their differences. Simpson sets out to show that Shelley's commitment to metaphor as the *sine qua non* of poetry is consistent with a deep scepticism about metaphor on the part of Wordsworth, Coleridge and Blake. The figurative language of the old sea-captain is evidence of the dangers involved in metaphor for Wordsworth. We may be deceived into believing that relationships made by the mind and through language are already present in the real world as facts which the mind and language then respond to. In other words a danger of reification is built into metaphor, "both of [consciousness] and of the elements of its world, reciprocally" (p. 160). We are tempted to deny the performative character of our activities as minds in relation to the world, as authors or readers in relation to texts.

The hostility to metaphor is most explicit in Coleridge's criticism and theory, as part of his campaign against our tendency to be convinced by "impressive images in juxtaposition." Wordsworth's ambivalence on this issue will already be evident from the ambivalent relationship between "author" and "narrator" of *The Thorm*. Blake prefers analogy to metaphor because it brings out, what metaphor tends to conceal, the *activity* of making connections. And Simpson suggests that for Blake the uncreative activity of creation (as it is evoked for instance in *Europe* when "Thought changed the infinite to a serpent") is "exactly the metaphorical process, which shuts up the infinite revolutions" (p. 159). In a similar way one could say that the passage from joy to Joy in *Infant Joy* imposes on the child a name that is then said to be proper to it.

The central place given to metaphor in poetic creation by Shelley is a different response to the same kind of insight. "The reification through metaphor which Wordsworth fears so much is countered by Shelley with an oversupply of metaphor which prevents us ever coming to a *stop* in the production of meanings" (p. 161). Shelley's metaphors tend to "interfere" with one another; "each single relation develops out of and turns into another." And correlatively "the subject which is accustomed to the 'outhering' gesture as a means of establishing its identity will also be in a state of becoming, the ethical corollary of which is love, where all things 'meet and mingle'" (p. 163). As Shelley said, "Veil after veil may be withdrawn, and the inmost naked beauty of the meaning never exposed."²

In its attempt to show that things are true of these writers which are not really true of previous writers the book is I think less successful. In effect Simpson presents a kind of "modernization theory" which claims that there is a direct link between the spirit of our age and the spirit of the Romantic age and a pretty clear historical break between Augustan and Romantic discourse.

Augustan discourse was usually content to insinuate the unquestioned verification of the perceiving subject by never describing it, never suggesting that it might be responsible for what it sees. It exists as an unspoken

but implicitly central presence from which, and not through which, the landscape is organised, and the precision-crafted gallery of general specificities, visual and psychological, which it conveys, are deployed through the rhymed couplet. Romanticism, on the other hand, seems fundamentally committed to a model of 'reciprocal causality', wherein the self and object are articulated coinstantaneously, and poetic description, with its implication in and dramatisation of temporality, must then tend to provide an unsettled rhetoric out of which this synthetic moment emerges 'negatively', if at all, from a context of surrounding qualifications and blunted approaches. (pp. 138-39)

This is a helpful formulation. And it is unfair to criticize a book about one mode of discourse for not offering equally nuanced and complex analysis of other modes with which it is contrasted. But there is a particular problem when the modes of discourse involved are the Augustan and the Romantic. There is frequently in such cases, as I think there is here, a suspiciously perfect co-incidence between the description and what is described: we have a composed and generalized description of a composed and generalizing discourse and a complex, paradoxical, and very detailed description of a complex and paradoxical discourse. David Simpson is acutely conscious of the paradox involved, from a hermeneutic perspective, in offering to establish an historical origin for that perspective; acutely conscious of the probability of finding just what he is looking for. But this self-consciousness would be more convincing if some attempt had been made to analyze a few non-Romantic literary texts with the kind of concentration and deconstructive intent he brings so effectively to Romantic ones. He does comment on a few lines of Cowper and Crabbe; but since I disagree with what he says about the lines of Crabbe, I don't know whether this just means that Crabbe has been put on the wrong side of the line or that the line doesn't really exist in the way Simpson suggests. I suspect that the most resolutely composed Augustan poems can (and should) be decomposed. They can be read as ironic in the Simpson sense, even if secretly or reluctantly so. But this does not simply mean that the Augustan/Romantic distinction should be drawn less sharply. It needs somehow to be redrawn.

There could be no better indication of the distinction between the two concepts of irony than the distinction between *A Tale of a Tub* and Leavis' notable essay *The Irony of Swift*. Leavis' blindness, in my view, to an important dimension of Swift's practice coincides precisely with his use of the familiar notion of irony and the kind of meaning which it requires of a text. Now I don't simply want to set up Swift as disproof of what Simpson says about Augustan discourse; he says, after all, that it was "usually" as he describes it. The problem is rather that Swift remains, despite his "romantic" irony quite definitely *not* a Romantic writer. And I can't at the moment see how, with David Simpson's terms, that relationship of difference and similarity is to be described. (A difference and similarity written into the curious conclusion of Leavis' own essay: "We shall not think Swift remarkable for intelligence if we think of Blake.")

David Simpson's historical placing of the Romantic poets raises another problem, though in this case one that he is certainly aware of. In all this talk about "the reader" for instance

How . . . is the reader of 1798 to be distinguished from the reader of 1978? The answer is another question: 'which reader of 1798, and for which reader of 1978?' (p. xi)

Simpson quite fairly leaves that question to us. And this reader is immediately reminded of Wordsworth in *Simon Lee* addressing

My gentle reader, I perceive
How patiently you've waited,
And I'm afraid that you expect
Some tale will be related.

Wordsworth, a gentleman writing about "an old huntsman," draws the attention of his readers of 1798 to their status as, in all probability, gentlefolk; and to the doubtful moral claims which that title silently endows them with in its association of gentility with gentleness. Now this is an unsettling of relationships which suggests that Wordsworth is very well aware of the historical context of the crisis of intersubjective verification as Kelvin Everest has described it in *Coleridge's Secret Ministry*. It is instructive to read Simpson in conjunction with Everest, who describes "a shift in the poet's sense of audience, his sense of the authority which his values carry"³ but who sees it in the context of a general "cultural dislocation that took place in England in the 1790s, a dislocation that issued not only in the clearer manifestation of class conflicts developing with the industrial revolution, but in the separation of the creative intellect from its accustomed audience."⁴ So that the poets are "isolated by class from the common people, and by principle from their social and intellectual fellows."⁵

This cultural dislocation may be defined as a dislocation, across the whole range of social life, in the processes of signification. The processes through which identities are constructed became increasingly visible and problematic, and this may of course be cause for both hope and fear. Thus many of the poems with which Simpson deals bear directly upon other discursive activities which are themselves in effect "performative": a child is christened in *Infant Joy*, Martha Ray is gossipped into isolation in *The Thorn*. Tom Paine identifies the reifying tendency of metaphor in a way that closely parallels the positions of Wordsworth and Blake. He identifies Burke's metaphorical language as an integral part of the costume-drama of aristocratic society which works, as theatre works, by the willing suspension of disbelief on the part of the popular audience: "In England the right of war and peace is said to reside in a *metaphor*, shown at the Tower for sixpence or a shilling apiece."⁶ And "Titles are like circles drawn by the magician's wand, to contract the sphere of man's felicity. He lives immured within the Bastille of a word, and surveys at a distance the envied life of man."⁷ And in this context of naming and what to do about it, the history of the word "Jacobin" in England is very interesting. It was

applied to diverse reformers (including Wordsworth and Coleridge of course) by *anti*-Jacobins so as to reflect the Revolution in France onto English society in a way that suited their own interests; John Thelwall for one felt that the only defence against this naming was to accept it as a badge of honor because "it is fixed upon us, as a stigma, by our enemies."⁸

If the processes of human identification were peculiarly visible and problematic, the task--then or now--of deciding what was *really* going on must be a peculiarly difficult one, must involve from the start questions of metaphor, of narrative, of characterization. The question of whether there was really a promise/threat of Revolution in England is in *some* respects like the question of what really happened to Martha Ray.

David Simpson's reading of Romantic poetry leads out naturally and fruitfully, in my view, into these wider contexts. On the other hand the way in which he himself refers to the social and political context might discourage some readers from going in that direction. For instance:

... I have not given carefully constructed accounts of the reaction to the French Revolution, or a properly documented consideration of the reviews and the reviewers. Let me stress that I do not think these things unimportant; it is simply that one can only write one book at a time. It may well be for example, that the rather esoteric explorations of self-focussing revolutions which these writers offer have much to do with the repressive legislation and draconian censorship introduced during the Revolutionary and Napoleonic Wars. The ethical reservations which they project about their own tendencies towards authority, combined with the high sense of urgency about passing on these reservations, may after all be part of a sophisticated self-protection, producing a version of "revolution" which is permissible precisely because personal, because unorganised in the social sense. (pp. xi-xii)

This is a very interesting speculation, which needs to be followed up. And it is certainly true that, for instance, Paine's critique of metaphor is not insistently self-reflexive; it is linked to a confident commitment to the notion of a literal language of communication and the authority of his

own statement. But the way in which Simpson formulates his speculations is open to criticism. His book talks a lot about *The Prelude* but, as he admits, doesn't talk about the French Revolution. And this does seem to involve an assumption that the French Revolution doesn't exist in the poem in quite the same way as, for instance, Mont Blanc does; that "the reaction to the French Revolution" is different in kind, less "personal," than the reaction to Mont Blanc. Therefore, in so far as "self," in the phrase "self-focussing revolutions," refers to the self of the person as well as the self of the revolutions I think that Simpson's distinction between personal and social revolutions is misconceived. The speculative distinction David Simpson draws between Revolution and revolution is subtly prescribed in the circle which his own discourse draws around the practice of writing and reading poetry.

It is important to make these criticisms because of the use to which this book could be put, particularly in the current climate of criticism and theory in North America which seems inhospitable to questions of social and political context. That David Simpson's own readings are not closed in that respect is evident from his recent study of *The Echoing Green* in this journal. And his book does at least address itself, as we have seen, to a question that needs to be put to any deconstruction criticism: just how figurative is its own vocabulary of anti-authoritarian subversion? It must also be said, to sceptical *British* readers, that Simpson's book is a splendid vindication of theoretically informed and explicit textual analysis.

¹ P. 30, quoted from *The Complete Works of Shelley*, ed. Ingpen and Peck, (rpt., New York and London: Gordian Press and Ernest Benn Ltd., 1965), VI, 195.

² P. 163, quoting *The Complete Works of Shelley*, VII, 131.

³ Kelvin Everest, *Coleridge's Secret Ministry, the Context of the Conversation Poems, 1795-1798* (Sussex and New York: The Harvester Press and Barnes and Noble, 1979), p. 172.

⁴ Everest, p. 108.

⁵ Everest, p. 113.

⁶ Tom Paine, *The Rights of Man*, ed. Collins (London: Penguin, 1969), p. 99.

⁷ Paine, p. 102.

⁸ Quoted in Carl B. Cone, *The English Jacobins* (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1968), p. 111.