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

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"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 Bogel'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 Bogel 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. Bogel'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.

Peter L. Thorslev, Jr. *Romantic Contraries: Freedom versus Destiny.* New Haven: Yale University Press, 1984. ix + 225 pp. $21.50.

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 'providence, foreknowledge, 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 adduces—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 determinations being progressively distanced from us.

And thus it is also in the twentieth century, as Thorslev says when he subsequently alludes to the contemporary coming of the uncertainty principle: just as we begin to grasp the structures produced by the interaction of subnuclear particles, so our conceptualization 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 construction. And it is indeed metaphors that we here deal in; romantic attempts to "explain" the creative act can and should be read as the coining 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 assimilate metaphor to myth, although he prefers Santayana on myth (p. 74) to the more structuralist formulations which run through Lévi-Strauss and Barthes. "Dialectical thinking" during the romantic period has, so Thorslev claims, this kind of force: "it represents an attitude toward life, art, and moral action, rather than a philosophic, 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 peculiarity, 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 interpretation here. At the first level, there is the possibility of letting the coincidence lie, or referring it to the incomprehensible 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: although 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 unreflexive concept of coincidence.

And at a second stage, we can look for explanations largely in sociological terms: we can talk about the structural 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 conjuring 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 unconscious activity, to the romantics, who, "in the excitement 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 sequence 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 irrationalism. It is very strongly there, for instance, in his objections to those thinkers who have attempted to relativize the law of contradiction. In relation, for instance, to Friedrich Schlegel, he quotes Anne Mellor: "identity and contradiction are useful categories for dealing 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 transcendental 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 hypostasized 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 despaired 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 childing 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 "epoché"; 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 signification. 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?

Olivia Smith. *The Politics of Language, 1791–1819*. Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1984. xiii + 269 pp. $27.95

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 Knowlson, 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 acounts 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 concepts 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