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R E V I E W

Olivia Smith, *The Politics of Language, 1791-1819*

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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 untrammelled 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 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 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

chapter on Horne Tooke is exemplary. Smith shows clearly how Tooke's "tracing of all parts of speech to nouns and verbs disregards the prevalent assumption that two distinct vocabularies exist for the learned and the vulgar, one which was pure and the other corrupt or barbaric" (p. 123). I at least am quite convinced by this account that those who have sought to make sense of Tooke in exclusively philosophical or linguistic terms have seen only part of the point.

The main thesis of this study, as has already been implied, is that by 1815 there had occurred a "weakening of the hegemony of the concept of vulgarity" (p. 154), so that radical writers are free to emerge into discursive self-confidence, and to project for themselves a serious and attentive audience. The conservative writers, reciprocally, have lost their grip on the "official" language. Whether this analysis contains a grain or a large measure of truth is again something that scholars will wish to ponder carefully.

Smith's final chapter offers a fascinating interpretation of the preface to *Lyrical Ballads*, and of the *Biographia Literaria* as an answer to it. The complex and ambivalent radicalism of the preface is much illuminated by Smith's approach, as is the sophisticated reactionary alternative laid forth in Coleridge's later book. It is fitting that this study concludes with an account of Cobbett's *Grammar*, a text that apparently sold a hundred thousand copies by 1834 (p. 231), but which is now scarcely known to students of the period.

The importance of this book to an understanding of Romanticism as a whole will by now surely be apparent. It also provides a new and provocative perspective on Blake. Blake is not much discussed here, but his ghost is constantly visible. Smith's comparison of Tooke's campaign against the privileging of abstract thought with Blake's against "mind forg'd manacles" (p. 139) suggests much about why the poet might have thought that to particularize is the alone distinction of merit. The analogies between Blake's writings and those of William Hone (as here described) are especially fascinating. Hone's "mock innocence" (p. 165), Smith suggests, speaks for a mastery of a whole range of styles whereby all distinctions between the polite and the vulgar, and the adult and the infantile, are made redundant in the face of "a unified, organic whole" (p. 171). Hone's use of the forms of the nursery rhyme seems very close to Blake's. But we would have to question whether the case made for Hone could also work for Blake: that his synthesizing stylistic posture *effectively* denies (as it might deny in principle) the "restrictive basis of concepts of language and literature" (p. 177). If Smith is right, however, then her thesis offers another account, besides that invoking the obscurity of Blake's medium, of why his poems had no significant audience in the 1790s: such inclusive and supple stylistic resources could not have

registered as fully intelligible to a readership still intimidated by the hegemony of the polite culture. Writing after 1815, Hone was more fortunate.

We still have much to learn about the historical energies that flow through the obscurities of Blake's languages. Olivia Smith's book is one of the most valuable contributions yet made to our recovery of such forms of knowledge.

THE
SEPARATE
PLATES OF *William Blake*
A Catalogue · Robert N. Essick



Robert N. Essick. *The Separate Plates of William Blake: A Catalogue*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton Univ. Press, 1983. 302 pp., 114 illus. \$75.00.

Reviewed by David Scrase

It is a little difficult to pinpoint the market at which this handsomely produced volume is aimed. All institutions who own prints by William Blake will need it as a standard reference work, but these are not many; for the layman, interested in Blake, but neither the happy owner of one of his separate plates nor a scholar to whose interest Blake studies is central, Bindman's