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R E V I E W

Lucy Newlyn, Coleridge, Wordsworth, and the Language of Allusion

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God is a preface, a citation, a spacing, a difference characteristic of writing" (69). While Blake "seems to be afraid of such a semiotic void" (cf. the formulation in the preceding sentence) time and again we stumble on "a somewhat undecisive relationship between speech and writing" (72). Discussing Albion's lament that his soul "is melted away, inwoven within the veil" (*J* 23.4), Slawek observes that "if the veil is the element of life, then what it can display when rent is only more veil." So, even while "desperately clinging to the notion of 'Naked Beauty', to the image of a reality different from the 'Vegetable world', Blake sees a possibility of such a world where the signified is separated from its signifier by a *long detour*, by an endless wandering of signifiers" (116). Following the intriguing ontology of his *Nelson* and *Pitt* presented in *A Descriptive Catalogue*, Blake's compositions are "similar to" some ancient designs "still preserved on rude monuments" but which are themselves only "copies from some stupendous originals now lost" (or, adds Blake's wistful epitome of logocentric nostalgia, "perhaps buried till some happier age"). We do not un-veil, whatever we may re-veal.

Slawek nicely details some of the contra-dictions of Blake's stance, juxtaposing, for instance, the famous assertion "Imitation is Criticism" with the statement of categorical dislike for imitation, "To Imitate I abhor," and finding in Blake three different positions with regard to mimesis. One useful concept for this discussion, announced in the title, is "outline"—which for Blake, Slawek argues, has not only an "aesthetic importance" but also "a marked ontological-existential character" (129). This idea of "outline" leads to a version of the Derridean paradox spelled out in one of Blake's hard and haunting lines: "Truth has bounds. Error none" (*Book of Los* 4.30). Outline entails difference, and the fact of difference cuts through the possibility of transcendental, absolute identifications of value. "Blake in his attempt to retrace the origin of the mark, to move towards the 'wonderful originals', towards the realm of primal unity preceding all differences . . . eventually speaks the language of *outline*, i.e. of difference [sic] . . . But the language of difference, of the outline, is the language of writing" (140–41). This fearful symmetry, we might note, is also perceived by Edward Larrissy, who writes that Blake's "rejection of the unity of Reason is conceived in terms of the unity of the mystic, but it really belongs to difference" ("A Description of Blake: Ideology, Form, Influence," in Francis Barker et al. eds., 1789: *Reading Writing Revolution* [n.p.: University of Essex, 1982] 108). The book leaves us with the thought that "Derrida draws the ultimate conclusion which Blake stops short of," that what Blake would term "Eternal Existence" is "another name for death" (142). From which the reader may draw, extending Slawek's shadowy outline, a rather

more provisional conclusion and then perhaps return to the foolish young man of *The Marriage of Heaven and Hell*: "but I said, if you please we will commit ourselves to this void, and see whether providence is here also, if you will not I will?"

Given some curiosities in the nature of Polish university publishing, the book cannot be purchased from abroad. The author has sent 10 copies to the *Blake* office for distribution. This is a first-come, first-serve basis; send your request to Patricia Neill, *Blake*, Department of English, University of Rochester, Rochester NY 14627.

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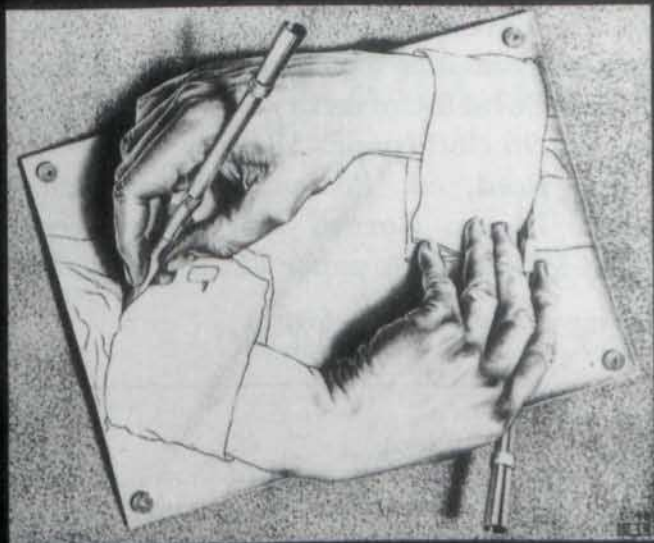
Reviewed by John Hodgson

Coleridge, Wordsworth, and the Language of Allusion is above all a study of a poetic dialogue. The dialogue, of course, is a famous one, and has been often studied, even from this perspective; but Lucy Newlyn's sustained and informed attentiveness to the poets' reciprocal literary allusions in their private and public contexts produces fresh insights which justify this retracing of familiar ground.

Newlyn's thesis is that Wordsworth and Coleridge "mythologized their relationship, presenting themselves as joint labourers even while they were moving apart" (vii). "The key to this interpretation," she suggests, "is in the poets' private language, for it is through allusions to each other that their tacit opposition emerges" (viii). This apparently forthright declaration is actually a bit slippery at several points ("private," "allusions," "tacit"): the allusions Newlyn has in mind are most often the poets' literary allusions to each others' (and their own) texts, and the language these constitute is thus a traditional and to a great degree a public one—not a secret dialogue but an undersong.

Since Newlyn's emphasis falls upon reciprocal, dialectic allusion, and since her interest in allusion itself is *ad hoc* rather than theoretical, "the language of allusion" would seem to promise a larger subject than this book actually engages. Newlyn takes no notice of recent meditations on allusion, such as those by Ziva Ben-Porot and James Chandler, and avoids confronting the ideas of Harold Bloom. Nor does she build on or even note the kind of allusion-study recently pursued in Blake's texts,

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especially by Robert Gleckner. Readers accustomed to what Gleckner calls Blake's "habitual self-quotation and intracanonical allusiveness" (*Blake's Prelude* 10) will perhaps wonder at Newlyn's characterization of Wordsworth's and Coleridge's "self-echo[es]" as "abnormally pervasive" (ix). More significantly, Newlyn's sense of "the embalming process which allusive language tends increasingly to enact" (163) might have profited from Gleckner's analyses there and in *Blake and Spenser* of how Blake's inversions and subversions of allusive contexts can be vital and progressive in their very contrariness.

Newlyn's emphasis, as she says, "is finally on poetic relationship" (ix), one particular relationship. The field of her analysis stretches from "Lines Left upon a Seat in a Yew Tree" and "This Lime Tree Bower My Prison" in 1797 (in the dialogue between which "one sees, not the consolidation of an old friendship, based on shared assumptions, but the start of a new one, grounded in significant difference," and "sees also, for the first time, an allusive idiom that is conscious of its power" [21]) to "To

William Wordsworth" and "A Complaint" in 1807 (the former ending "with self-deception, but not of a kind that was likely to deceive," the latter marking a conclusive break with the poets' decade-long "habits of poetic reference," their "customary allusive games" [202-04]). Within this period, Newlyn pays particular attention to the "Letter to Sara Hutchinson," "Resolution and Independence," and "Coleridge's Presence in *The Prelude*" (a chapter each), without scanting the other major and minor texts of the poets' dialogue (especially the conversation poems and "Tintern Abbey," "Stanzas written in my Pocket Copy of the Castle of Indolence," "To H. C." and the "Intimations" Ode) or the wealth of supporting evidence in letters and journals. Throughout, her larger argument about Wordsworth's and Coleridge's dialogue shares the characteristics of her sensitivity to their allusions: she sometimes misses, sometimes strains, sometimes fails to pursue; but usually her observations are apt, and her inferences intelligent.

If "the language of allusion" seems to stake a misleadingly large claim for this book's project, the phrase's half-promise is yet symptomatic of a deeper ambivalence: much here suggests that Newlyn has not defined the scope of her argument to her own complete satisfaction. While her thesis traces a dialogue of reciprocal allusion, her attention often turns to other voices. Inconsistently throughout, but with increasing frequency and emphasis as the book proceeds, she notes and pursues Wordsworth's and Coleridge's allusions not only to each other, but to earlier poets as well. While many of her observations are in themselves interesting (though in general Newlyn deals with such allusions less surely than she does with the poets' reciprocal ones), still they are potentially tangential. Newlyn's implicit justification for considering these other allusions is that they make part of the very mythologizing which is her subject, and that in at least some cases (her examples are almost exclusively Miltonic) they constitute "a shared habit" (69), a link between the poets. In practice, however, her emphases seem inconsistent, almost arbitrary. At one extreme, for example, Newlyn's sustained attentiveness to the Wordsworthian and Coleridgean allusions in "The Nightingale" is weakened by her complete disregard of the poem's single most prominent allusion, Coleridge's recurrence to Orsino's affected and self-indulgent line at the opening of *Twelfth Night*: "That strain again!" (1. 90). Surely, in this poem about subjectively colored perception and poetry's "dramatic propriety" (see Coleridge's note to his "Il Penseroso" quotation in line 13), Coleridge's gesture here is significant. At another extreme, Newlyn too insistently relates the "Intimations" ode's seventh stanza to Marvell's "On a Drop of Dew" (151), but ignores the particularly Coleridgean allusion there in the child's play at "A wedding or a festival / A

mourning or a funeral" (cf. "Ours is her wedding-garment, ours her shroud!" in "Dejection"). Certainly Newlyn amply balances such omissions with other strengths: her analysis of "The Nightingale" masterfully sets the poem in its immediately allusive context (which includes "Lines Left upon a Seat in a Yew Tree," "The Ruined Cottage," "Frost at Midnight," "A Night Piece," and many other occasions), and her attention to Marvell's "On a Drop of Dew" significantly enriches our appreciation of Wordsworth's "To H. C." (146-47). There's much scholarly insight here—but also a certain unevenness of vision.

Newlyn's analysis of Coleridge's "Letter to Sara Hutchinson," the early version of "Dejection: An Ode," can serve as a paradigm of this book's strengths and weaknesses. Her reading and contextualizing of the poem's "densely allusive idiom" (61) is informed and often very shrewd. Her observation that repeatedly "Coleridge associates the word 'swimming' with usurpation: the subjugation of normal sense perceptions to the power of 'Joy'" (64), her recognition that behind "the blending of 'Tintern Abbey' and 'Frost at Midnight' in the background of Coleridge's prayer" for Sara lies a still deeper affinity with Spenser's "Epithalamion" (75-76), her suggestion that the gothic excesses of the storm passage are "pervaded . . . by self-echo" (especially to "France: An Ode") and thereby evince a self-conscious humor and "parodic control" (72), her analysis of the complex ironies informing Coleridge's double allusion ("My genial Spirits fail") to "Tintern Abbey" and *Samson Agonistes* (68-69)—these varied insights typify her critical virtues. At the same time, however, she seems to miss not only a few odd trees, but even much of the forest. While perhaps the allusion to Horace and Aesop in "be this Tempest but a Mountain Birth" (*Parturient montes* . . .) is merely incidental, the preceding apostrophe to the wind as "Thou mighty Poet" carries us allusively to a central document in the Wordsworth-Coleridge dialogue ("mighty poets in their misery dead" ["Resolution and Independence"]), and ought to be addressed. If the opening atmosphere of the evening vaguely recalls that of "The Nightingale" (66), surely the very crux of the verse-letter directly engages that earlier conversation poem, responding to the faith that "In nature there is nothing melancholy" with the harsh rejoinder that in nature there is nothing joyful, either. And why, finally, when that "mighty Poet," the wind, modulates its song from gothic frenzy to tender lyric (the "Lucy Gray" allusion) should it also be shifting from a second-rate (deliberately so, Newlyn argues) Coleridgean voice to a first-rate Wordsworthian one? Despite her sense that "Coleridge's anxiety about Wordsworth pervades everything" in this poem (78), Newlyn has remarkably little to say about this, the

poem's most insistent allusion to Wordsworth's poetry. But surely this passage extends the characteristic vicariousness of Coleridge's affirmations to new levels. "We receive but what we give"; is it now only Wordsworth's imagination, then, that Coleridge can give and receive without regret? These lapses, too, are characteristic of *Coleridge, Wordsworth, and the Language of Allusion*.

Morris Eaves and Michael Fischer, eds. *Romanticism and Contemporary Criticism*. Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1986. 246 pp. \$29.96 cloth/paper \$8.95.

Arden Reed, ed. *Romanticism and Language*. Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1984. \$38.50 cloth/paper \$12.95.

Reviewed by John E. Grant

These two collections of essays often show how the deconstructionist movement in criticism, with its program of dissipating poetry into "language," effects a rollback of revolutionary romanticism. Despite the revolutionary ambitions of individual theoreticians, the movement they have generated, like many other successful sociological or ideological movements, produces effects opposite from those intended. In overturning "the authority of the text," the deconstructive machine has given us the monopoly of the indefinite. Since some of the ideas held up in these volumes as being particularly illuminating derive from errors of earlier critics, it is evident that would-be devils are only angels of the most recent heaven. Critics of the "language" school wander into crucial misconstruals, intermingled with valuable new perceptions, because they are preoccupied with *words* rather than poems, and thus have no structure of reference for distinguishing among endlessly proliferating meanings.

Moreover, any sense of the work conveyed by the text, if ascertainable at all, is assumed to be less important than what it may signify for a modern reader who usually has some point of view very different from that of the author. Maureen Quilligan has accounted for this mind-set as follows:

In Marxist theory, as well as in all strong modern theories of interpretation, the assumption necessarily is that the text does not, at the surface level, want said what the critic finds in it to say. The critic, by his or her interpretation, brings to light what was repressed from the text's surface.¹