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Clifford Siskin, The Historicity of Romantic Discourse

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Clifford Siskin. *The Historicity of Romantic Discourse.* New York & Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1988. x + 225 pp. $24.95.

Reviewed by
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In "History and Genre," Ralph Cohen argues, *pace* Derrida and Jameson, that by treating genre as a process and not as an essentialist configuration of common elements literary critics can use genre "to study literature as an interrelated system of texts and society."[1] Grounding its analysis of diachronic continuities and discontinuities in romantic literature and criticism in a study of the social and psychological implications of generic transformations in the late eighteenth century, Clifford Siskin's *The Historicity of Romantic Discourse* puts Cohen's theory of a generic literary history into practice. By examining how certain generic features recur in romantic discourse from Hazlitt to Hartman, Siskin convincingly shows that criticism of romanticism inevitably replicates the discursive practices of the romantics themselves. Thus, the "visionary company" has engendered a revisionary company whose attempts to produce criticism of romanticism have resulted only in a proliferation of romantic criticism. Few critical texts manage to break free from the developmental tales of romanticism (see below), even those, like Jerome McGann's *The Romantic Ideology*, which remark how romanticism haunts the critical texts it generates.

Offering yet another "new literary history" to replace the old—Alan Liu and Jonathan Arac have recently offered other kinds of "new literary histories" of romanticism—Siskin cautiously avoids taking what he calls the "lyric turn" of the romantics and their critics.[2] Instead he makes what might be called a generic turn that rejects the idea of developmental continuity between generic features and functions. In looking at differences, not developments, in the use of genre—what Siskin, using the eighteenth-century term for genre, calls distinctions of "kind"—Siskin hopes to discover in the discontinuity of function and form the features that constitute, and enable us to objectify, literary and social change. Like Foucault's archaeology, Siskin's inquiry treats genre as a dynamic set of formal procedures which function differently at certain historically specific junctures. By giving priority to genre (as process) Siskin's project purports to posit change "in terms of how the functions of shared features and procedures shift as the forms they constituted enter into different hierarchical relationships" (28). Thus, unlike the neo-Marxist and New Historical studies of romanticism (among which Siskin's book should nevertheless be placed in its attempt to shake Anglo-American critics of romanticism out of their romantic slumbers), Siskin's book discards the language of ideology for a Foucauldian "vocabulary of change" (10) that locates the practices of power not in repressive state apparatuses nor in determined acts of historical displacement but in the discursive practices through which human beings produce knowledge.

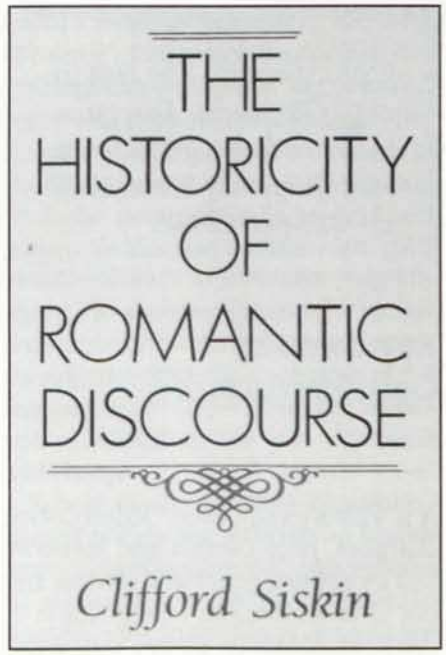
In exploring the repetition of romantic discourse in romantic criticism, Siskin first describes what he calls the "lyric turn," the discursive strategy that results from an uncritical assimilation of the generic procedures constructed by romantic discourse: writing up difference in terms of degree rather than kind, depicting change in terms of development rather than succession, and psychologizing change in terms of expressions of imaginative genius rather than functions of form. The lyric turn attributes change in literary form to the progressive development of individual genius(es), fitting the individual products of that genius into an *oeuvre* whose sum transcends its constituent parts and which is marked by an expressive unity. That desired unity is the trap in which post-romantic criticism of romanticism finds itself endlessly revising the "developmental tales" that defer all questions of formal innovation to states of mind. Spousal verse, in other words, engenders a spousal criticism that begins with the priority of the subject and ends tautologically by tracing back through selected works (often of different genres) the developmental history of that subject. As Siskin puts it in his critique of Thomas McFarland's *Originality and Imagination*, "Since the early nineteenth century, the *literary order* of lyrical development has dominated the disciplinary interrelations of our educational institutions, producing scholarship that documents developmentally conceived truths by assembling facts and sources into developmental narratives" (45).

Such developmental narratives, as Siskin emphasizes, do not simply function to authorize the independent subject but also to legitimate the professional position of literary critics within the Anglo-American university system. The "rhetoric of imagination" has the institutional power "to delimit the range of literary studies and to write the politics of the profession" (46). Rather than repeat ourselves and the romantic poets whose discourse we speak, we should ask how our repetitions define our positions in the practice of criticism, how they privilege the concepts of originality and imagination, and especially how they naturalize the hierarchy they construct. The answer to the last question is that the developmental tales of the transcendental subject collapse differences of "kind into degree" (46). This distinction of degree naturalizes the "transformation of hierarchy from a structure based on inherited, unchanging distinctions to one that

posits an initial equality subject to psychological and developmental difference" (46). Siskin shows this strategy at work in Wordsworth's evaluation of the poet as a man who differs only in degree from other men, Coleridge's distinction between the primary and secondary imagination, and Blake's collapsing of the difference in kind between the human and the divine. In each of these instances we see an articulation of a discursive feature that attempts to make sense of the changes in the structure of social relations at the beginning of the nineteenth century when horizontal affiliations of class displaced vertical affiliations to the landlord or to the familial centers of small-scale communities. In academia today, the distinction of degree perpetuates and legitimates our institutional practices: "As critics serving the creative, our sympathetic turn from kind has made us the arbiters of degree—the degrees of cultural literacy that naturalize the social hierarchy by psychologizing difference as a matter of developing minds" (63). Thus romantic discourse serves social and political as well as aesthetic interests.

If abolishing distinctions of kind naturalizes the priority of, and the hierarchy produced by, the romantic subject, what features construct that priority in the first place? One constitutive feature of the romantic turn to the transcendental subject is a particular kind of personification, the function and form of which differs from the familiar trope of eighteenth-century literature. Siskin convincingly demonstrates that in its eighteenth-century form, the authoritative voice of personification acts upon a passive self. For example, in Gray's "Elegy in a Country Churchyard" the speaker's identity is a consequence, not a source, of the personifications that subject him to their active power: "'Fortune,' 'Fame,' and 'Science' ignore him, 'Melancholy' marks him, and 'Misery' takes from him 'all he had' (ll. 117-23)" (74). Thus, personification is an agency of collective truth that subordinates the writer's individual judgment to a general voice of authority. Moreover, in demanding a certain competence, personification excludes entire classes of readers from its purview. In substituting universal for individual judgment, personification functions "as a metonymic affirmation of community" (69) sustained by a hierarchy of kind. In its romantic form, on the other hand, these terms are transformed. Personification gives way to an active subject; the "I" of the romantic poem itself becomes a kind of personification that "casts nature in its mold" in order to "form an authoritative identity" that must construct—through a process of development or growth—its own links to community (79). Hence the need for the apostrophes to an implied reader in Wordsworth's or Coleridge's poetry—a Dorothy or a Sara—whose presence in the poems offers a family model of the relation between author and reader.

The shift from an objective to a subjective form of personification, as one might describe this formal transformation, inscribes a new relationship between poet and reader. Siskin suggests that the aporias and fragments we find in romantic poetry are formal devices that propose to hand over the completion of the poem to the reader. That is, romantic discourse interpellates the reader, too, as an autonomous subject who must enter into a sympathetic relationship with the writer in order to form a new kind of community. Writer and reader become co-producers of a community founded upon the communicative act itself. Because Wordsworth believed that the model of community posited by objective personification was artificial, Wordsworth rejected personification (of the eighteenth-century kind at least) and proposed instead a natural community, "a new poetic family" (81) elicited in the text by repetitive diction, negative transitions, and apostrophes to an implied reader. As Siskin summarizes the significance of this shift, "in the absence of personification, the individual self has been rewritten to occupy the center of power; replacing the myth of uniform selves tied to the old hierarchy of interests is a myth of individuality that masks the newly drawn inequities of class by emphasizing not what everyone has passively in common, but rather what each person can accomplish actively on his or her own" (78).



While Siskin links this need to construct a poetic family to the rise in literacy in the late eighteenth century, his argument would be more precise were he to further consider the problematic relationships between reader and writer, not only in Wordsworth's idealized poetic family but particularly in the case of Blake's vexed relationship to the poetic family his work envisions but never effectively produces or Shelley's apparently contradictory attempts to cultivate both an elite community "of the more select classes of poetical readers" and a mass readership among the proletariat. Readers of *Blake* may find interesting Siskin's suggestion that in the introduction to *Jerusalem* Blake fuses the language of sympathy and the language of family as an invitation to his readers to join his poetic community. Yet they will

also question, as Paul Mann has, whether or not that community is ever realized.[3] By contrasting what romantic discourse intends and what it accomplishes, we might have a better idea of the actual social power and social effects of that discourse. One often gets the sense from Siskin's book, *contra* Jon P. Klancher, that romantic writers actually succeeded in creating the audiences they imagined.[4]

As a result of the formal innovation upon eighteenth-century personification, romantic discourse constructs the subject as an autonomous entity in need of linking itself to others by continuously transcending its former self, by developing within a continuum from past to present and beyond. The self becomes, in Wordsworth's phrase, "something ever more about to be." Furthermore, with the formation of the developing self arise institutions based upon the naturalization of the subject as an inevitable unity whose place among others depends upon "the psychological conformity necessary for 'sympathetic identification,'" which is itself dependent upon "the ability to communicate—literacy—as the means and measure of social power" (84). Much of Siskin's argument turns on how romantic discourse posits this subject as a center of feeling, which, as in Jane Austen or Wordsworth, may be taught to feel more deeply in the process of its development. This progress of feeling is possible because of the invention of depth. Literature, for this subject, intervenes in the depths of the self to effect a cure (*vide* John Stuart Mill on Wordsworth).

For romantic discourse, the deeper one feels, the greater degree of sympathetic identification with others is possible. Thus the distinction of degree reconfigures feeling for the romantic subject as a measure of the depths of personal development. Within these depths romantic discourse covertly inscribes the normative imperatives of the culture. Siskin makes a useful distinction between the novels of sensibility, which use personification as a means to make overt their moral purposes, and romantic novels in which that purpose persists but in a more subtle form: "We will find that long after the novel stopped lecturing us on sensibility and poetry ceased being elevated and didactic, both types of writing remained, and remain, conduct books of the most sophisticated kind" (93). Rather than wear the badge of their morality on the sleeve of the text, as it were, romantic novels (and poems) insert that badge in the deep pockets of the subjectivity the discourse enunciates. The agency of that pocketing is the lyric turn.

In attempting to summarize the broader outlines of Siskin's book, I have necessarily overlooked many useful observations the book delivers. Siskin, for example, attributes to romantic discourse the very invention of Literature (with a capital L) as a restorative agency for the feeling self. In an important chapter, he shows that the practice of revision in the eighteenth century admits of gaps between past and present which undermine the conception of the writer's *oeuvre* as a continuous whole transcending the sum of its parts. The idea of a writer's *oeuvre*, as he points out, is the product of romantic discourse itself which rejects the eighteenth-century principle of revision as addition and replaces it with one founded on a theory of transcendence. Citing Young's *Conjectures on Original Composition* (1750) and Burke's *Sublime and the Beautiful* (1757), Siskin notes how each text uses the past to provide models for, not (as in romantic discourse) explanations of, the present. Whereas Burke and Young consider change as discontinuous succession, Wordsworth conceives of change as a utopic process of development that may eradicate hierarchy: "the wished-for end of development *and* of Romantic revision is a Unity that transcends difference" (108). If this sounds like something we've heard before, it is. But what is unique about Siskin's retelling of the desire for such unity is that he shows that the desire is formally constructed, not inevitable; that it is a change in *kind*, not in degree, from eighteenth-century conceptions of self and society. In many ways, the texts that Siskin's argument most effectively liberates from the hegemony of romantic discourse are those mid- and late-eighteenth century novels and poems whose unique features have been obscured under the rubric of "Preromanticism."

As much as this book gives us a way of seeing through the blinders of romantic discourse and a means to free certain texts (including our own) from the hold of the romantic developmental tale, it does raise many questions that it leaves unanswered. It's never clear, for example, how epistemological differences grounded in discursive transformations outside of literary discourse are functions of generic difference. The text seems at times to place upon literary discourse the burden for the epistemic shifts Foucault has described as the consequence of the redistribution of multiple discursive formations across various cultural and social networks. In addition, although Siskin discusses a "politics of feeling" and shows that nominally aesthetic arguments translate into arguments over proper conduct in the new society of the early nineteenth century, the impact of that rhetoric of morality and its appropriation by certain interests are evidently not the concern of this book. The purpose of the final three chapters is to link the distinction of degree, the developmental tale, and the transcendental subject to specific social texts and practices: the debate over high wages, Malthus's *On Population*, and the discourse on addiction. Yet even in demonstrating the "literary historical 'fact' that both the *Essay* [*On Population*] and the [developmental] tales can be shown to have been configured by the politics of developmental desire" (165), the emphasis is upon the literary rather than the historical nature of that fact.

Although questions of power here seem always to be resolved in questions of literary form, Siskin's critique of the lyric turn's pervasiveness certainly draws out the generic features constructed in the romantic discourse emergent from 1760 to 1825. The cost of such a new literary history is its tendency perhaps to blur the distinctions between Blake and Wordsworth, Abrams and Arac, McFarland and McGann. If Wordsworth's *Prelude*, Malthus's *On Population*, Abrams's *Natural Supernaturalism*, De Man's "The Rhetoric of Temporality," and McGann's *Romantic Ideology* all take the lyric turn of Literature with a capital L, as Siskin rather convincingly shows they do, certain historical differences in the institutional practices those generic functions serve over two centuries, or even within the present critical debate at our own historical juncture, are sometimes obscured.

To raise these questions is not to devalue what I think is an important new perspective on the question of a historical criticism of romanticism. Siskin, no doubt, would answer that a more historically particular study of these differences is one of the other kinds of work that a generic literary history enables. Indeed his work suggests that genre, conceived as process, may help us to see how certain writers make particular use of common generic features, to see how those features have been recombined, repositioned, and redeployed throughout their diachronic history. In so remarking the differences in function from 1789 to 1989 a generic history might put to use those persistent features to examine that historical change which, as Ralph Cohen claims, "can be seen only against continuity. . . ."[5]

At a time when both Marjorie Levinson and Alan Liu have recognized the need to include the analysis of formal innovations and the rhetoric of tropes among the procedures of a historical or cultural criticism, Siskin reaffirms the importance of examining the relations between genre and history.[6] His work offers one way of combining an interest in genre as a constituent feature of a new kind of historical criticism that might engage the rhetorical turns of changing generic formations and functions. As Siskin hopes, the value of this kind of history and this kind of book lies in the possibility of its "setting the formal stage for more work that, in examining the transition to the Romantic norm, will help to construct the next one" (14). At the least, this book will help us be more aware of the kind of work we do and make us more self-critical as we question whether our own critical projects produce a criticism of romanticism or just another inflection of romantic criticism.

[1] Ralph Cohen, "History and Genre," *New Literary History* 17 (1986): 213.

[2] Jonathan Arac's *Critical Genealogies: Historical Situations for Postmodern Literary Studies* (New York: Columbia UP, 1987) 1, announces as one of its two major goals "to contribute to a new practice of writing literary history." Like Siskin, Arac notes that contemporary criticism "is still significantly determined by its romantic beginnings" (3), but Arac ignores the tenacity of generic features in that discourse in order to focus on the romantic turn away from history and society that he sees in need of correction. For a useful comparison of Siskin's and Arac's variant methods and purposes, see Don H. Bialostosky's comparative review article in *The Wordsworth Circle* 19 (1988): 194-99. Similarly Alan Liu in "Wordsworth and Subversion, 1793-1804: Trying Cultural Criticism," *Yale Journal of Criticism* 2 (1989): 55-100, uses Wordsworth's apparent indebtedness to Welsh colonial discourse to try his own inflection of the New Historicism. David Simpson's entry into the formation of a new kind of literary history should be mentioned: see his "Literary Criticism and the Return to 'History,'" in *Critical Inquiry* 14 (1988): 721-47.

[3] See, for example, Paul Mann, "Apocalypse and Recuperation: Blake and the Maw of Commerce" *ELH* 52 (1985): 1-32.

[4] See Jon P. Klancher, *The Making of English Reading Audiences 1790-1832* (Madison: U of Wisconsin P, 1987).

[5] Cohen 3.

[6] See Alan Liu, rev. of David Simpson, *Wordsworth's Historical Imagination: The Poetry of Displacement*, in *The Wordsworth Circle* 19 (1988): 172-82. See Levinson's *Wordsworth's Great Period Poems: Four Essays* (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1986), *The Romantic Fragment Poem: A Critique of Form* (U of North Carolina P, 1986), and most recently *Keats's Life of Allegory: The Origins of A Style* (London: Basil Blackwell, 1988).