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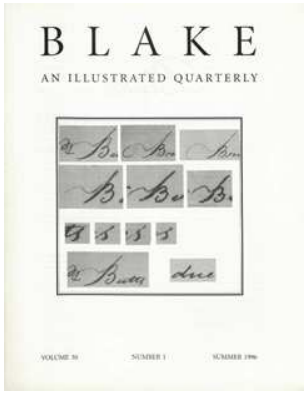


# David Simpson, Romanticism, Nationalism, and the Revolt against Theory

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# R E V I E W S

David Simpson, *Romanticism, Nationalism, and the Revolt against Theory*. Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, 1993. ix + 243 pp. $16.95, paperback.

Reviewed by Michael Gamer, Paul Wayne Rodney, Nanora Sweet

In reexamining David Simpson's critical corpus on British romanticism—beginning with *Irony and Authority in Romantic Poetry* (MacMillan, 1979) and *Wordsworth and the Figurings of the Real* (MacMillian, 1982), and continuing with *Wordsworth's Historical Imagination* (Methuen, 1988)—we find his most characteristic and repeated move to be a determined rejection of what we would now call "old historicism." Simpson's rejection of historicism—and his career in general—follow a trajectory similar to that of romantic studies: the late-seventies, high-deconstructive *Irony and Authority* rejects any search for origins as being driven "ultimately [by] a myth of authority" (x); the late-eighties, Foucault-indebted *Wordsworth's Historical Imagination* locates traditional historical method "within what we might roughly think of as the 'Marxist' tradition, which tends to work with pre-established causal vocabularies that, ironically enough, often pre-empt a sense of the need to recover the precise features of a historical moment" (11). Simpson's resistance to a totalizing reading of romantic poetry, in other words, has evolved into assumptions that we have come to identify with New Historicism; in resisting what he has come to call "theory"—defined as a critical approach whose way of seeing not only limits the ways in which it can approach a text but also what it can value in one—Simpson, we might say, has been a critic in search of a "method." As a study of the origins of British aversion and American ambivalence to method, Simpson's most recent book will prove most interesting to romanticists as an embodiment of the romantic "methods" of Germaine de Staël and Samuel Taylor Coleridge.

The concepts in this book's title locate its enterprise within "romanticism." Its "nationalism" does not refer to the post-colonial events of the nineteenth century but rather to Britain's "national character," the product of a romantic debate conducted most influentially by de Staël and Coleridge. In this debate, Britain is evaluated as a European power and reconsidered in Continental terms (Italianate terms are offered in Staël's *Corinne*, Germanic in her *De l'Allemagne*). The title's "revolt against theory" does not, as Simpson suggests, signal the beginnings of a "history for this theory" (3). It leads instead to a history of romantic "method," and Simpson's book is most romantic when it emulates romantic "methods" like the Staëlien cultural catalogue and the Coleridgean desynonymy.

The book's most accessible and striking contributions are Staëlien ones. In *De l'Allemagne* (first published in Britain in 1813), Staël assembled and disseminated thumbnail sketches of German culture-makers—Frederick the Great, Pestalozzi, the Moravians, Schiller, Goethe, Kotzebue, and Herder. In his mapping out of British culture, Simpson reconsiders a similar array of groups and figures from the Methodists and the Illuminati, to Condorcet, Priestley, H. M. Williams, Mary Hays, Wordsworth, and Coleridge. His book becomes a treasure trove of glosses on romantic writing and culture—a book worth examining for its comprehensive surveys of the diverse political and aesthetic positions that emerge in Britain in response to French and German culture.

As alike in theory as they are in method, Staël and Simpson both gender their subjects, though with very different implications. While Staël matter-of-factly details the gendered manners of Germany, in his central chapter Simpson engenders method only to grow anxious in his later chapters about the role of gender in culture. In chapters 6 and 7, he recurs to "the feminization of literature" with increasing unease, and in his closing chapter pointedly asks of feminism, "what relation it intends to the in-place feminization of intuition and sensibility . . . associated with the literary" (185). Recent work in feminism and romanticism that would help the book address its anxieties about gender and literature goes unmentioned: examples are Julie Ellison's *Delicate Subjects* and all of Mary Jacobus's work since 1976.[1] As Ellison's work would reveal, Simpson's anxieties over a "feminization of literature" resemble those of Coleridge, his other mentor in romantic method.

More compelling even than Staël as a romantic mentor to Simpson is Coleridge. Simpson discusses Coleridge's work on method, but more importantly, in his own terminological work he emulates Coleridge's characteristic "desynonymizing" method as developed and illustrated in *Biographia Literaria* and *The Friend*: Simpson's own term for this method is "disambiguation" (179). The most celebrated example of Coleridge's "desynonymizing" occurs in *Biographia Literaria* IV where he establishes *imagination* and *fancy* as distinct terms and then allows imagination to displace fancy as the correct term for romantic poetics. In chapter 13, "imagination" again divides into "primary" and "secondary imagination," leaving fancy in a distant third position. Early in his own book, Simpson desynonymizes *method* and *theory* and then allows method to displace theory as the critical term in British culture. Then, like Coleridge's "imagination," Simpson's "method" regularly produces new permutations such as "common sense," "empiricism," "practice,"

[1] Ellison's middle section on Coleridge brings her book's "ethics of understanding" to bear on the great romantic's anxieties about the feminine: *Delicate Subjects: Romanticism, Gender, and the Ethics of Understanding* (Ithaca: Cornell UP, 1990).

and "pragmatism," and these push first "theory" and then "method" further to the margins of Anglo-American culture.

Given Simpson's own career-long aversion to "theory," his attention here to "method" is hardly surprising; the patterns of Simpson's own desynonymizing, in fact, are the book's central interest, since he brings together clusters of terms that often radically challenge traditional conceptions of late-eighteenth-century British culture, as well as the ideological positions of his own introduction and conclusion. His reading of the current "revolt against theory" through British rejections of French Revolutionary "method," for example, convincingly describes the emergence of postmodernism as a further estrangement of method from theory: "With the advent of a postmodern position for theory itself, rational method has almost become the signature of an improper power, or aspiration to power, a masculine dream of reason that can only be for everyone else a nightmare. Theory and method, allies for so long in the critique of nationalism and of the national myth of common sense, are perhaps now more forcefully disambiguated than ever before . . . . We are, then, at an interesting point in the history of theory, one where, as I have said, the warning that theory often announces is against the pretensions and aspirations of method itself" (179). Given this passage's overtones of alarm, the book's tacit rehabilitation of an embattled romantic method and its closing gestures toward romantic theory should come as no surprise.

While Simpson's and Coleridge's "disambiguated" terms proliferate, they also accumulate at the site of British or Anglo-American "national character." Coleridge's desynonymy privileged a synthesizing imagination that was intended to strengthen the *via media* of Anglican apologetics, a synthesis of Protestant and Catholic that, in Coleridge's cultural retrospective, quite convincingly reunites the revolts and reactions of his own moment. Simpson's desynonymy too would strengthen a "middle way" through the culture wars and their "revolt against theory." For his *via media*, Simpson looks to the culture wars' most embattled site, gender, and finds, retrospectively, a "gender-neutral faculty of reason" that, as he argues, was forged by Wollstonecraft (185).[2] In the great feminist's use of a normatively masculine civic reason, Simpson finds the consolidation of pragmatic method and Enlightenment theory that he seeks. The result begins to resemble, as Simpson himself admits, the "good old British predilection for finding the truth between two extremes . . . the very ideology I am proposing to critique" (10).

Simpson's opening chapter begins tracing a genealogy of the conflict of "method" and "common sense" with matters well before the French Revolution, and well before even its sometimes-imaged precursor of 1688. He finds an implicitly middle-ground starting point in Peter Ramus, a Protestant martyr of the sixteenth century, who caused heated debate among academics for espousing leveling reform in university settings, including the use of abbreviated logic and graphic representation to assist less-sophisticated readers. For Ramus, knowledge boils down to a "single method" that reflects the order of both the mind and world. For Simpson, Ramist method occupies a position somewhere between theory (with its abstraction and specialized vocabulary) and common sense (with its resistance to reduction of the complexity of experience). Simpson argues that writers in subsequent centuries are "reannouncing or reinventing Ramist doctrine" (20). His first chapter then traces the Ramist equalizing gesture through Puritanism and Methodism, both of which were obviously rejected by mainstream English culture.

In chapters 2 through 4, Simpson characterizes English rhetoric about the national identities of England, France, and Germany, respectively. He portrays Bacon as the father of British "common sense"—the specifically male progenitor of a privileged relationship with knowledge (of which the Burke of the *Reflections* is a clear descendant). Baconian common sense rejects Ramism because of its willingness to reduce knowledge to a single method, insisting on repeated experimentation as an implicit acknowledgment of the deep complexity of experience that cannot be embraced by totalizing theories. Simpson notes, and could stress further, that the principle of experimentation is socially exclusionary, as not all people have the time, let alone the resources, to engage in repetitive experiment. Although Bacon did disavow the abstractly geometric argumentation that characterized Descartes and Spinoza, the rational method represented by Bacon and the Royal Academy could lead to an obvious distancing from common sense (hence Swift's critique of the Projectors in Book III of *Gulliver's Travels*). Simpson shows that Bacon becomes foundational for a national pride based on a belief that patience and repetition result in the reward of a true knowledge that does not give in to simple passions and that asserts the primacy of the individual. This develops into what Simpson calls a "mythology of common sense" that was perceived as uniquely English (50).

Theory, then, is always at a rhetorical disadvantage because it does not participate in this mythology—is, in fact, placed in opposition to it—leading English radicals (who become virtually synonymous with it) to an "insecurity of image and self-image" (52). Simpson leads this history up to the vituperative exchanges surrounding 1789; Burke, of course, holds central ground as the defender of tradition and common sense, Wollstonecraft emerges as the champion of rationalism or theory, and Coleridge emerges to critique the equalizing "method" of a Ramus or Paine while

[2] Simpson does not mention Gary Kelly's long-standing work with Wollstonecraft's rationalism: see Kelly's "Mary Wollstonecraft as *Vir Bonus*," *English Studies in Canada* 5.3 (Autumn 1979): 275-91 and his *Revolutionary Feminism: The Mind and Career of Mary Wollstonecraft* (New York: St. Martin's, 1992).

propounding his own "desynonymizing" method. As Simpson acknowledges, "Coleridge smuggled a methodical component into his synthetic conception of the poet . . . but only by insisting that the methodical element would always be unnoticed as such. . ." (150). As we have argued, Simpson himself accomplishes this same Coleridgean coup.

Simpson's next two chapters trace the various representations of the neighboring "others" against which England defined itself. He argues that, at least as early as the eighteenth century, the French represented abstract theory to the English, as well as uninhibited emotion and sentiment. The best writing in this chapter demonstrates how the different phases of the French Revolution were rhetorically elided by English reactionaries: all woes in France were due to the unrestrained tyranny of theory (even when the theorists themselves, like Condorcet, were imprisoned and eventually killed). In this struggle of empires, for English nationalists anything "French" was not the right course for Britain—and often only because it was French.

English portrayals of German identity represented Germany as perhaps more threatening than France because it was more like Britain: libidinous and emotional (like the French) yet also characterized by "genius" (like the English). Simpson traces a rejection of Germany by identifying the country with the loose morals of German plays. In such a narrative, the German dramatist Kotzebue—who enjoyed unprecedented success on the English stage in the late 1790s—becomes representative of a sexual wantonness that is definitely *not* English. Such associations, Simpson argues, cause English reviewers and readers to associate German writing with excess—be it Kotzebue's excessive sensibility or Kant's excessive abstraction—and therefore to see it as divorced from everyday English experience.

After describing the ways in which English cultural rhetoric feminized and libertinized the French and Germans, Simpson turns in chapters 5 and 6 to the question of how gender informs this nationalized opposition of theory and common sense. In Simpson's fifth chapter, "Engendering Method," both reactionaries and radicals after Wollstonecraft attempt in the 1790s to claim a gendered high ground, rejecting female aspirations to reason even while they located sensibility and literature in the realm of the feminine. The work of chapter 6 is thus given over to examining the reactions of the male writers who found themselves practitioners of a disempowered, feminized work. Simpson suggests that poetic rhetoric emphasized complexity and championed opposition to theories that might indicate human feelings could be generalized.

The problem of how one writes literature becomes even more specific in chapter 7: how does one write a *radical* literature? Simpson offers brief sections on Wordsworth, Blake, Shelley, and Keats and indicates that all of their versions of radicalism hover in the middle of the conflict between theory and common sense and ultimately conclude in inefficacy. Romanticism as practiced by the second-generation poets, Simpson opines, tries to navigate a revolutionary course between theory and a dense inwardness. In the final chapter of the book, Simpson brings the debate forward into the twentieth century, characterizing the postmodern academic as engaged in conflicts equally vivacious—as with E.P. Thompson's indictment of Althusserian Marxism or Camille Paglia's attack on "high theory" (especially of the "French" and deconstructive varieties).

In the context of such controversies, Simpson's closing gesture is especially revealing of his book's romantic, and specifically Coleridgean, method. Simpson has already confessed to anxiety over the weakening of literature under the dual threat of feminization and feminism. His romantic progenitor Coleridge countered his own similar fears by invoking a willed synthesis ("that willing suspension of disbelief") of theory and poetry and yoking it to a Wordsworthian poetics of masculine sublimity. Similarly, Simpson "suspends disbelief" and invokes a romantic poetics—a Shelleyan, "utopian" one, he says—to help him reimagine the "objective reason that disappeared forever with the Enlightenment" (188). Clearly, Simpson intends his book as a challenge to feminism and postmodernism. He does not mention the growing Habermasian movement in literary studies that, like his work, would recover notions of Enlightenment rationalism and theory. Because of his book, however, we are the better poised to lay critical claim to that movement. In sum, because of Simpson's book we now have a much fuller mapping of national and intellectual life during the romantic period; and it is altogether our further gain that the work also raises issues of gender and class and of theory and method.

## Donald Fitch, *Blake Set to Music: A Bibliography of Musical Settings of the Poems and Prose of William Blake* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1990). Volume 5, xxxix +281 pp. illus.

Reviewed by G. E. Bentley, Jr.

> "Loud & more loud the living music floats upon the air" (*Vala*, p. 58, l. 6[1])

According to Blake, "Poetry Painting & Music [*are*] the three Powers in Man of conversing with Paradise which

[1] *William Blake's Writings* (1978), 1157, the Blake text quoted below.