

Home-Grown Romanticism

David Fairer, *Organising Poetry: The Coleridge Circle, 1790–1798* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009)

Thinking of Romanticism as a radical turn away from tradition or as a disruptive historical moment may illustrate a claim Jerome McGann makes in his *Romantic Ideology*: that the study of Romanticism at large suffers from the lack of critical distance and is therefore under the ideological restraint of those ideas that it ostensibly examines.¹ Early responses to the historical events of the 1780s and 90s voiced in a rhetoric of revolution may have contributed, arguably, to the later critical evaluation of that period as a radical new beginning. In *Organising Poetry: The Coleridge Circle, 1790–1798*, David Fairer looks at this politically and poetically decisive time in England from the conservative side of the revolutionary debate. Instead of pursuing ideas we might call Romantic by virtue of their novelty, he highlights those that persist through the 18th century well into the period we have been trained to think of as the beginning of something entirely new.

Fairer's book is part of a recent trend in Romantic studies that emphasizes the continuities between Romanticism and the 18th century. A new *Cambridge Com-*

panion to English Literature 1740–1830, which came out in 2004, traces the roots of what is “still often defined as the ‘Romantic’ period”² back to the literary culture and “a series of cultural, social, and political developments”³ of the 18th century. Fairer does more interesting and difficult investigative work by looking at a potential, surprising, and fundamental philosophical continuity between Lockean empiricism and ideas of poetry, friendship, and identity that occupied Coleridge and his friends in the 1790s.

At the heart of Fairer's argument is the claim that the poetic output of the 1790s in England is better described through “a native eighteenth-century organic that is empirical in character” (16) rather than the German idealist tradition. Though suspicious of binaries, in his early chapters Fairer himself makes heavy use of a set of binaries to sharpen the distinction between empiricist and idealist notions of organicism. Diversity, continuity, and process are therefore contrasted with unity, teleology, and structure. These pairs reverberate throughout the book.

The specifically British organic that looms behind the major claims of this study is derived from Locke's *Ideas of Identity and Diversity* (33), which emphasized the continuity of personal identity through change and disruption. Locke's metaphor of the tree for identity also serves as a governing metaphor for Fairer's book: the tree “continues to be the same Plant, as long as it partakes of

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the same Life, though that Life be communicated to new Particles of Matter vitally united to the living Plant, in a like continued Organization” (34). Continuation through change and difference, communication, vitality, and, above all, organization are concepts that connect his discussions of history, the British constitutional debate, poetic friendships and volumes of poetry.

In Locke’s metaphor, ‘organization’ is central to the life of the plant: for diverse elements to cohere under an organic whole, they must be organized and the identity of the whole is inevitably shaped by the manner of the organization. As the title of the book suggests, Fairer is equally devoted to the idea of ‘organization.’ It places in centre stage the key issues: what does it mean to organize poetry? Who organizes it and how? The title intentionally puzzles in order to encourage us to recognize our own cemented notions of poetry. If we are perplexed by what “organising poetry” can possibly mean, it is because we still think of poetry as the product of a mysterious infusion of transcendental inspiration into a lonely genius. Fairer’s title warns us that we are about to enter a very different world of poetry: an empirical world where writing poems is an entirely human endeavour, one which is strongly suggestive of revision, negotiation, and collaboration.

Fairer’s interest in organization has methodological consequences. The book itself is, first of all, an impeccable exercise in organization. In the manner of an

evenly expanding sphere, each chapter further explains and enriches the central argument, which never fails to maintain its centrality. Fairer uses the relevant aspects of Locke’s identity theory (continuity, process, and organization) to explain the circumstances which directly or indirectly affected Coleridge and his friends during the 1790s. Hence, we get a sort of Lockean re-evaluation of the immediate historical context – the British responses to the French Revolution and the latter’s effect on the constitutional debate between Paine and Burke – in which Paine and revolutionary sentiment are allied with the idealist organic, while Burke and the conservative argument are seen in terms of empirical organicism. From the historical circumstances, Fairer goes on to describe a nurturing poetic context of non-canonical poets of the 1780s, which effectively grounds the Coleridge circle in the 18th-century tradition of “riperian” (112) or “the riverbank-revisited” (113) poetry.⁴ From the poetic context, we transition to Coleridge’s early poetic persona in his first volume of poetry and his friendships with Charles Lamb, Charles Lloyd, and John Thelwall. These discussions occasion genuinely interesting and refreshing pieces of criticism: a psychological-poetic portrait of the young Coleridge and a sketch of the Coleridge–Lamb–Lloyd friendship. Fairer looks at the way in which Coleridge organizes individual poems into larger units in the volumes of *Poems on Various Subjects* (1796)

and *Sonnets from Various Authors* (1796), in order to navigate in these areas of the personal. The chapters on the two 1796 volumes are the heart of the book in the sense that they show how the argument in the early chapters translates into actual critical practice.

Although Fairer does not make a case for the validity of the bibliographical and biographical contexts in which he reads the poems, the justification is implicit in his choice of the specific works, which are either conversation poems or, in a literal sense, conversational because they belong to a clearly defined tradition. He reads poems in dialogue either with their antecedents or with their bibliographical companions, and in certain cases alongside various surviving text variants or the poet's related correspondence. His interpretations are often informed by the position of a poem relative to others in the volume, the way in which they are arranged and cooperate with each other. The meaning of a poem, Fairer implies by this method, depends also on these juxtapositions and negotiations inherent in the relation of parts to each other and to the whole.

Wordsworth's friendship with Coleridge is conspicuously absent from this study, especially considering the emphasis laid on the latter's friendships with Lamb, Lloyd and Thelwall. There is, however, a brilliant chapter on "Tintern Abbey," "The Old Cumberland Beggar," and "The Ruined Cottage," in which Locke's empirical 'one common life' serves as an alternative to the pan-

theistic 'One Life' model of nature, in which these poems are often read. Fairer's exciting reading of the Wordsworthian landscape draws on a distinction between pastoral and georgic modes. The by now well-established dichotomy between the idealist and empirical versions of the organic echoes in this juxtaposition. The pastoral mode represents a prelapsarian, innocent, unified world of Eden, while the georgic depicts the postlapsarian world "of time and change where nature offers a constant challenge to human strength, skill, and wisdom" (262) and where consequently organization is vital to keeping nature at bay.

The latest date by which Fairer is able to trace the empirical organic in the works of Coleridge and his friends is 1801, when Coleridge, after a tour in Germany in 1798–9, finally renounced Lockean empiricism for "its rejection of 'innate ideas'" (309). One of the virtues of this book is that it respects its own narrow temporal margins and does not seek the kind of generality that a new period definition could enjoy. Fairer's methodological impulse, in accord with his argument, is to forgo a unifying general theory for a more flexible, heterogeneous, and, let us say, organic study.

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Notes

1. Jerome McGann, *The Romantic Ideology: A Critical Investigation* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1983).
2. Thomas Keymer and Jon Mee, eds., *Cambridge Companion to English Litera-*

ture 1740–1830 (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004), p. xi.

3. Keymer and Mee, p. xii.

4. By the terms “riperian” or “riverbank-revisited” poetry, Fairer designates a late 18th-century British tradition of poetry that “established the revisiting of a river bank as the locus for a meditative self-assessment in terms of past and present” (110). The tradition originated with Thomas Warton’s sonnet “To the River Lodon” and in the 1780s and 90s drew contributions from various poets such as William Lisle Bowles, Thomas Park, Edward Gardner, Charlotte Smith, Henry Kett, Robert Southey, Coleridge, and Wordsworth.

About Romanticism through Genre

David Duff, *Romanticism and the Uses of Genre* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009)

“To argue for a Romantic genre theory may seem surprising. This is the period when William Wordsworth writes that every author must ‘creat[e] the taste by which he is to be enjoyed,’ when Madame de Stael praises Germany as opposed to France because its authors ‘form [their] public,’ and when Victor Hugo insists that writers be judged by the ‘laws of their personal organization’ instead of ‘rules and genres.’ But as Hugo indicates Romanticism may not so much reject genre as expand its provenance so that it is no longer a system of exclusion.”¹ These opening

lines of Tilottama Rajan’s essay, “Theories of Genre” provide a perfect summary of the underlying argument of *Romanticism and the Uses of Genre*. In his new book, David Duff systematically investigates the literary, cultural, social and political context of the long-standing critical assumption that the Romantics were “hostile to genre” (1) or that they were interested in them “only to transcend or dissolve them” (1). His confessed aim is to go against the anti-generic view of Romanticism and to display its very opposite: the Romantics’ hyperconsciousness about genre. This does not seem to be a new claim. Duff points to studies by Susan Wolfson² and Stuart Curran³ as hallmarks in approaching the Romantic period from a generic perspective; the former with the focus on the politicization of the poetic form, the latter with an insistence on the Romantic expansion of generic repertoire. The real novelty of Duff’s recent book lies in its comprehensive focus. Duff’s interest is not restricted to the development of a single genre, as is the case with Tilottama Rajan’s “Romanticism and the Death of Lyric Consciousness,”⁴ where the transformation of the lyric form from a monological to a dialogical discourse is addressed; Chapter 5 in Cyrus Hamlin’s *Hermeneutics of Form*,⁵ which relates Romantic treatment of the ode through particular pieces by Coleridge, Keats and Shelley; essays on the sonnet or the romantic fragment in *Romanticism and Form*;⁶ or Duff’s own