

**Zeitschrift:** Colloquium Helveticum : cahiers suisses de littérature générale et comparée = Schweizer Hefte für allgemeine und vergleichende Literaturwissenschaft = quaderni svizzeri di letteratura generale e comparata

**Herausgeber:** Association suisse de littérature générale et comparée

**Band:** - (1997)

**Heft:** 25: From Rousseau to Wordsworth : what happened in European literature between 1770 and 1850?

**Artikel:** Introduction : the native grounds of style

**Autor:** Rehder, Robert

**DOI:** <https://doi.org/10.5169/seals-1006528>

### **Nutzungsbedingungen**

Die ETH-Bibliothek ist die Anbieterin der digitalisierten Zeitschriften auf E-Periodica. Sie besitzt keine Urheberrechte an den Zeitschriften und ist nicht verantwortlich für deren Inhalte. Die Rechte liegen in der Regel bei den Herausgebern beziehungsweise den externen Rechteinhabern. Das Veröffentlichen von Bildern in Print- und Online-Publikationen sowie auf Social Media-Kanälen oder Webseiten ist nur mit vorheriger Genehmigung der Rechteinhaber erlaubt. [Mehr erfahren](#)

### **Conditions d'utilisation**

L'ETH Library est le fournisseur des revues numérisées. Elle ne détient aucun droit d'auteur sur les revues et n'est pas responsable de leur contenu. En règle générale, les droits sont détenus par les éditeurs ou les détenteurs de droits externes. La reproduction d'images dans des publications imprimées ou en ligne ainsi que sur des canaux de médias sociaux ou des sites web n'est autorisée qu'avec l'accord préalable des détenteurs des droits. [En savoir plus](#)

### **Terms of use**

The ETH Library is the provider of the digitised journals. It does not own any copyrights to the journals and is not responsible for their content. The rights usually lie with the publishers or the external rights holders. Publishing images in print and online publications, as well as on social media channels or websites, is only permitted with the prior consent of the rights holders. [Find out more](#)

**Download PDF:** 30.09.2025

**ETH-Bibliothek Zürich, E-Periodica, <https://www.e-periodica.ch>**

Robert Rehder

## Introduction: The Native Grounds of Style

The purpose of this volume is to look again at what happens to European literature during roughly Wordsworth's lifetime (1770-1850). Despite the fact that his autobiographical poem (1805) offers one of the most analytic and self-aware accounts of the inward effect of the French Revolution (he was an eye-witness of events in France in 1790 and 1791-1792), despite his translations of Michelangelo and Chiabrera and the two cycles of poems on his Continental tours in 1820 and 1837, despite his being one of the major innovators in the history of poetry, Wordsworth has never been thought of as a European figure. Consequently, his dates were chosen deliberately as an approximate focus for these essays in an attempt to break away from conventional periodization and to provide a new perspective. The whole period can indeed be characterized by a Continental resistance to the greatest contemporary English poet (a resistance that continues to this day)<sup>1</sup>.

The figure of Wordsworth is only a hypothesis, a point of departure. The past is a single continuum and not only is it a gross falsification and over-simplification to attempt to detach any part, it is also unnecessary. The alternative is simple and easy: to make all historical statements in terms of specific authors or texts, to talk about literature from Rousseau to Wordsworth, or from *Les Confessions* to *The Prelude*, and to attempt to date individual phenomena (changes in poetry, the novel, autobiography or travel writing) without trying to condense them into an abstract entity with two terminal dates.

1 On the Continental response to Wordsworth, see Robert Rehder, *Wordsworth and the Beginnings of Modern Poetry [WBMP]*, London, Croom Helm, and Totowa, New Jersey, Barnes and Noble, 1981, 201-204.

The primitive state of literary studies is such that there is no period in which we really understand what is happening, more than that, the whole idea of periods is, at best, extremely dubious. As yet we have only the most imperfect notions of change and development. We are uncertain as to *what* happened in the past because we do not know *why* it happened. The best answer to the question: what is the period? is that there are no periods, and if we wish to think clearly and accurately about literary history, or any history, the sooner we give up the old, obsolete notions of periodization the better. *Eighteenth Century, Enlightenment, Lumières, Romanticism, Nineteenth Century, Victorian* are terms without any validity whatsoever (except, of course, when they appear in contemporary documents and then they have the value of any primary source)<sup>2</sup>.

There is a need not only to discard the inaccurate and unexamined jumble of period terms, but also to look again at our various models of interpretation. We have virtually no understanding of the dynamics of culture. We find it next to impossible to generalize about any longer span of time, and have a deep resistance to doing it. Over the past thirty years or so, there have been very few comprehensive and summary books of literary history published. There has been little attempt to build on the work of Hazard, Van Tieghem and Auerbach. Many books that appear to be comprehensive are, in fact, no more than collections of separate studies of a restricted number of works, frequently used to argue a narrow thesis, rather than an attempt to look at any longer unit of time as a whole. Of course, as the interpretation of details depends upon the interpretation of their context, most things cannot be described accurately without an understanding of the larger context.

There are many reasons for this situation. Among the most important is the increasing specialization of literary studies, although this is probably more a symptom than a cause. Certainly, it is another way of stating that there is a resistance to looking at what happened over longer periods of time. It has something to do, I

2 For a discussion of this subject, see Robert Rehder, "Periodization and the Theory of Literary History", *Colloquium Helveticum, Mélanges offerts à Manfred Gsteiger*, 22, 1995, 117-36.

think, with the fact that students of literature find it very difficult to believe in anything and are more comfortable if they feel that they are the masters of a small, carefully defined, self-contained area. To read texts written over a span of several hundred years feels like disorder and self-dissolution. The increasing numbers of university teachers and students has meant that people feel they must specialize in order to compete, and to differentiate themselves from their colleagues. As a result, the majority of university teachers are reading more criticism than authors. The conventions of periodization enforce a ready-made set of assumptions and interpretations at the same time that they encourage an ignorance of the periods before and after the period of specialization. Historical survey courses are disappearing from undergraduate curriculums. Graduate students in American universities are no longer held responsible even notionally for the whole corpus of English literature. To see any author in his or her time becomes increasingly difficult.

Chateaubriand who lived in England from 1792 to 1800 and who is writing in 1822 mentions Wordsworth only once in passing in his idiosyncratic survey of English literature in *Mémoires d'outre-tombe* (I. 405-420)<sup>3</sup>. He sees English poetry as being transformed in this period by the rejection of French models and a return to its national traditions (although it is not at all clear what he means by this):

Cowper abandonna l'école française pour faire revivre l'école nationale; Burns, en Ecosse, commença la même révolution. Après eux vinrent les restaurateurs des ballades. Plusieurs de ces poètes de 1792 à 1800 appartenaient à ce qu'on appelait *Lake school* (nom qui est resté), parce que les romanciers demeuraient aux bords des lacs du Cumberland et du Westmoreland, et qu'ils les chantaient quelquefois. (I.412).

He then gives an extremely motley list of contemporary poets who are presumably associated with this transformation and the "Lake school": "Thomas Moore, Campbell, Rogers, Crabbe, Wordsworth, Southey, Hunt, Knowles, lord Holland, Canning, Croker", adding

3 All references to Chateaubriand are to *Mémoires d'outre-tombe*, ed. Maurice Levaillant and George Moulinier, Paris, Gallimard, La Pléiade, 1946. The volume and page numbers are given in parentheses in the text.

that: “il faut être né Anglais pour apprécier tout le mérite d’un genre intime de composition qui se fait particulièrement sentir aux hommes du sol” (I.412). For Chateaubriand, Beattie “avait annoncé l’ère nouvelle de la lyre” (I.413) and Byron is the greatest English poet since Milton (I.418). Sainte-Beuve names Wordsworth as the chief of “les lakistes”, but discusses his poetry only very briefly and very generally in one of his *Causeries du lundi* (25.10.1825)<sup>4</sup>. The autobiographical poem, Wordsworth’s greatest work, was not translated into French until 1949 and, as far as I know, there is as yet no complete translation in any other European language<sup>5</sup>.

The effect of Wordsworth on European poetry was mostly at second or third hand and, in the earliest period, largely a function of what was communicated through the work of Byron, who from 1812 to 1824 was the most popular and best known poet in Europe. Van Tieghem states that “le début en Europe de la poésie ouvertement personnelle et confidentielle” can be dated from Canto III of *Childe Harold* (1816). He wrongly believes that this intimate tone was Byron’s invention when in fact it is the creation of Coleridge and Wordsworth in the poems they wrote between 1795 and 1799, however, his specification of Canto III of *Childe Harold* is significant in that it is the work of Byron in which the effect of Wordsworth is most clearly evident, as Wordsworth himself was aware (see his grumbling letter to Henry Taylor, 26.12.1823). Lindenberg proposes “a probable line of descent from *Lyrical Ballads* through Sainte-Beuve’s very influential poem ‘Les rayons jaunes’ to the city poems of Baudelaire and Rimbaud”<sup>6</sup>. Understanding the complexity of the effect of one literary work upon another demands a psychological knowledge that we are unlikely ever to have.

Chateaubriand has his own explanation for the phenomenon of resistance to an author. European literature is a series of misunderstandings: “C’est à rire de savoir quels sont nos grands écrivains à Londres, à Vienne, à Berlin, à Petersbourg, à Munich, à Leipzick, à Goettingue, à Cologne, de savoir ce qu’on y lit avec fureur et qu’on

4 *WBMP*, 203.

5 *WBMP*, 237-8, n 21.

6 *WBMP*, 238, n 22.

n'y lit pas" (I.412). (His examples show that Germany did not exist as a unity or a distinct entity.) To understand a culture, you need to be born into it: "En vain vous croyez posséder à fond un idiome étranger, le lait de la nourrice vous manque, ainsi que les premières paroles qu'elle vous apprend à son sein et dans vos langes" (I.412). The passage is remarkable for its implicit acceptance of the importance of the earliest moments of childhood (one of Wordsworth's fundamental ideas), and that identity starts at the breast (compare Wordsworth's autobiographical poem, 1805, II.237-287). Chateaubriand assumes that identity is a function of where you grow up, a process of growth with its own history, and that your surroundings matter. This is the idea of the individual whose development is one of the major characteristics of this time. Chateaubriand returns to this idea when he discusses style:

Plus le talent est intime, individuel, national, plus ses mystères échappent à l'esprit qui n'est pas, pour ainsi dire, *compatriote*, de ce talent...Le style n'est pas, comme la pensée, cosmopolite: il a une terre natale, un ciel, un soleil à lui. (I.413).

The landscape is a necessary part of his thinking about individuality.

There is perhaps no subject in greater need of theory than literary studies, and while the developments of the past thirty years or so have made us much more aware of our assumptions about language and culture, and cause us to think more about unconscious structures, they have contributed very little to resolving the particular problems of criticism and literary history. Theories need to be *about* something. They are ways of seeing the specific facts of a case. They are statements about data, about what is known – tentative, hypothetical explanations. We need a theory of the development of the novel, of poetry, autobiography, the essay, indeed, of every genre and form. We need a theory of changes in style, of the processes of secularization and individualization. We need a theory that can relate the history of science to that of literature. We need a theory of how cultures function.

What is currently called *theory* is interested in none of these things. It is about itself. It is not concerned with authors or texts, but rather with abstractions and legal fictions. It is philosophical, reductive,

ahistorical and anti-historical. Instead of being tentative and hypothetical, it tends to be dogmatic and tendentious, and wants to be systematic. Scientific thinking demands the capacity to tolerate large amounts of uncertainty. *Theory* shows a need for certainty so strong that it can neither focus on the world nor wait for the facts. One of its purposes is to create a realm in which things can be made to fit. It has also been the occasion for some very obscure writing.

This obscurity has been chosen for a number of reasons (and it is worth noting that almost all the people who write in this way could write more clearly if they wished). Rather than submit to another author or to any discipline, they want to be independent and creative, to be writers rather than scholars. The purpose is not to communicate (except perhaps privately with themselves). They do not want to explain anything. Their writing is unconscious autobiography, an attempt to return to the amorphous states of the earliest period of life. Caroline Rehder suggests that they are attempting to describe states that are beyond language, and that for them confusion is a better model of truth than clarity. This deliberate obscurity is a defense against the world, an inward rather than an outward search and predicated on a desire to believe that the way things are is ultimately mysterious instead of determined – a belief that what is mysterious is somehow richer and more significant. It is informed by ambivalent feelings about science: jealousy, envy, admiration, fear and desire. There is, moreover, a political element. “Writing well...is evidence of one’s wholesale, indeed fatal, accommodation to the existing (‘bourgeois’) political order. It follows then that careless or sometimes deliberately crude writing registers one’s innocence...”<sup>7</sup>.

The contributors to this collection include a number of the most distinguished scholars in the field. The essays are not only a pleasure to read, but theoretically unusually interesting. Each author begins with a specific problem or set of texts and, in the process of analyzing them, attempts to elaborate, modestly, tentatively, new methods of interpretation and new theoretical conclusions. The es-

7 J. Behar, “Fredric Jameson’s Style”, *The Times Literary Supplement*, 11 July 1997, 17.

says offer the chance of a variety of new beginnings. All the contributors work from the assumption that the individual is the basic unit of literary history. Their method is that of close reading. They believe with Shelley that:

there must be a resemblance, which does not depend upon their own will, between all the writers of any particular age. They cannot escape from subjection to a common influence which arises out of an infinite combination of circumstances belonging to the times in which they live, though each is in a degree the author of the very influence by which his being is thus pervaded<sup>8</sup>.

Their major concern is with the psychology of form and a search for the half-conscious and unconscious psychological structures on which this resemblance depends. Women are as important as men. Burney, de Staël, Williams, Smith, Robinson, Seward, Austen and Mary Shelley all figure prominently.

Corngold begins with four accounts of the act of composition, from Rousseau's *Ebauches des Confessions* (c. 1764), Hölderlin's *Grund zum Empedokles* (1799), Wordsworth's "Preface" to *Lyrical Ballads* (1800) and Hegel's *Phänomenologie des Geistes* (1807). For him phenomenology means looking at the way the mind represents itself to itself. *Poetic* here stands for any serious writing. Genre is not important. Hegel is as much an author as Wordsworth. What matters is the quality of the work, which includes the author's intentions, seriousness, honesty, intelligence and competence as a writer. This is to bring back to the center a number of categories (origins, intentionality, judgement, the aesthetic) that certain recent criticism has vigorously attempted to exclude.

Corngold catches each of his four authors at a moment when they are reflecting upon the moment of composition. His concern is with the structures of thought and consciousness. All four of his authors are concerned with the transfer of experience, *états d'ame* (Rousseau), *zeitlichen und sinnlichen Beziehungen* (Hölderlin), emotions (Wordsworth), *das Ansich* (Hegel) by a process of surrender (Rousseau), self-denial (Hölderlin), contemplation (Wordsworth), be-

8 Percy Shelley, *Shelley's Prose*, ed. David Clark, Albuquerque, University of New Mexico Press, 1966, 318.



coming-awareness (Hegel) into an artifact of language. Each, nevertheless, has his own distinctive sense of what is lost and found in this transaction. His essay offers an answer to one of the most important questions confronting historians: how to reconstruct a *mentalité*. His evidence is particularly convincing because he works from texts in three European languages: French, English and German. Corngold shows us a Rousseau who like Tristram Shandy is vividly aware of the incommensurability of experience and language, and of changing as he writes, although Rousseau's feeling of the incompleteness of his work is related to the incompleteness of expiation that it provides.

Kuhn assumes that all the works of an author make a pattern and, therefore, need to be seen as a whole. Like Corngold, Doody, Wagenknecht and Rehder, he believes that all writing is self-expression and self-description. He wants to show that the scientific writings of Rousseau and Goethe are an integral part of their work and exhibit the same concern as their other works. His essay is a contribution to establishing the connections between the history of science and the history of literature. He asks what "is the relation between the study of nature and the study of the self"? The answer can be summed up by Rehder's statement that "the awareness of the outer world is symbiotic with the awareness of the inner world. Self-consciousness increases with world-consciousness and vice-versa".

Kuhn points out "that Rousseau's intense interest in botany began only two years before the composition of the *Confessions* in 1766", and that "there appears to be a compelling coincidence between Rousseau's conception of the scientific rhetoric of botanical writing and the rhetorical ideals of a language that would give a true representation of the self". "The natural sciences", says Kuhn, "provide both Rousseau and Goethe with an objective, stable reality upon which to anchor themselves in a time of personal crisis". It is also the case that the stability of this reality did not prevent it from being perceived at the same time as changing, subject to light and shadow like the mind.

Certainly, the major poets contemporary with Wordsworth describe the landscape in order to discover how they feel and who they are:

For Wordsworth and the poets who follow him only the landscape is commensurate with the moods of the mind, nothing else is at once as various and definite. The thorn's "mass of knotted joints", the sky's "peculiar tint of yellow green", "the rainbow of the salt sand-wave" and "the vitreous pour of the full moon just tinged with blue" are like the calibrations of an infinitely subtle instrument of measurement. Every particular of a landscape can be made to correspond to a nuance of mood, thereby generating a complete language in which to discuss feeling. As a result, poets have a compelling motive for looking at the minutiae of a landscape, and poetry is increasingly filled with objects and precise observation<sup>9</sup>.

Kuhn shows us Goethe on his journey to Italy fascinated by Vesuvius (which he climbs three times) as if "the sudden, violent and destructive action of the volcano" would give clues to understanding his own passions, and that if this "shapeless heap of things" could be discovered to obey a general law of change, so might his own life. "Goethe's investment in natural sciences", Kuhn argues, "is a desire to know the world for what it can tell him about himself".

The French Revolution, as Palmer points out, is not an isolated event. Beginning with the Battle of Lexington in 1775 and continuing through 1848, there are a whole series of revolutions, in North and South America as well as in Europe. Palmer calls it "the age of the democratic revolution". Hughes sees analogies in the Genoese Revolution of 1746. Hughes is not interested in the politics of these events. For him the whole period is one of violence and transgression, and he looks at the violence in the language of authors from Locke to Novalis and searches for patterns of metaphor.

Hughes' central text is a passage from Burke's *Reflections on the Revolution in France* (1790) in which Burke, discussing the British political system, states that "we have given to our frame of polity the image of a relation in blood...". For Burke the image of blood is one

9 WBMP, 163. The phrases are from Wordsworth's *The Thorn*; Coleridge's *Dejection: An Ode*; Keat's *Ode to Melancholy*; and Whitman's *Song of Myself*. Wordsworth is the first great poet to write a detailed guide to looking at a particular and very limited area of countryside. This was originally published as *Topographical Description of the Country of the Lakes in the North of England* (1820) and then as *A Description of the Scenery of the Lakes in the North of England* (1822, 1823) – titles that reveal the specialised nature of the enterprise. See also 217-21.

of family, domestic affections and customs. "Our liberties", Burke declares, are "an entailed inheritance...we transmit our government and our privileges, in the same manner in which we enjoy our property and our lives". Thus, we follow and preserve "the method of nature". Hughes sees in this image the blood-shed of the French Revolution and "a key to unlocking the great mystery of the French Revolution", its violence. The violence of the Revolution for him is a translation of the violence of many contemporary texts. (Burney's plays, says Doody, are "bloody and violent", and *The Wanderer* "plots the Revolution's violent turns and changes from 1792 to 1794"). By constantly juxtaposing Burke and Sade, Hughes suggests that perhaps all our ideas are informed by sexual phantasies. Like Corngold and Hamilton, he is looking both for shared ideas and unconscious structures of thought, like Doody, Wagenknecht and Rehder, he believes that the dynamics of events are psychological.

Theoretically, Doody's essay is interesting because of the way it enters into the psychology of Germaine de Staël and Fanny Burney and connects the details of their lives, in particular their attitudes to each other, to the details of their works. Madame de Staël was twenty-six and Frances Burney, forty when they met in England in 1793. De Staël had read and admired *Evelina* (1778) and *Cecilia* (1782) and looked forward to being friends with the older, more established English writer, however, for reasons that Doody analyzes in detail, the friendship never developed. Thanks to unpublished letters in the Berg Collection of the New York Public Library, especially those of Frances' sister, Susanna Burney Phillips, Doody is able to trace and mark the nuances of the ins and outs of their disengagement. The story she tells has not been told before.

Doody then compares the novels that the two authors wrote after their meeting and the cooling of their friendship, Burney's *Camilla* (1796, translated into French in 1798) and de Staël's *Delphine* (1802), to show the way in which their relationship gets into the plot and subjects of their novels. This provides another view of Rousseau, because in *Camilla* Burney is commenting on Rousseau's views of women and education, taking account, in all probability, of de Staël's views on Rousseau. "Burney's biggest target" in *Camilla* "would seem to be Rousseau's *Emile* (1762)". Doody also shows that in her

last novel, *The Wanderer* (1814), Burney is responding to de Staël's second novel, *Corinne, ou l'Italie* (1807). Thus, Doody argues, instead of friends, the two women became each others' muses.

No thinker of the last hundred years or so is more important than Freud. He has transformed our understanding of the psychological and changed the way we think about ourselves and others such that even those who reject his theories think in his terms. He is, moreover, a wonderful writer, although some of his works like the essay on "The Unconscious" (1915) that is at the center of Wagenknecht's argument, are extremely difficult. Wagenknecht meets the problems of Freud's theories head on. He is aware of the tension between the biological and the psychological, and between matters of fact and issues of representation in Freud's theoretical language. When, for example, Freud states: "An instinct can never become an object of consciousness – only the idea that represents the instinct can", Wagenknecht points out both the slippage in the terms *instinct* and *idea*, and the way in which they threaten the definition of the unconscious and that, nevertheless, "we are under the impression we understand Freud's distinction".

Wagenknecht analyzes Freud's ideas at the same time that he uses them to analyze E. T. A. Hoffmann's "The Sandman" (1816/17), also mentioned by Freud in a footnote to his essay on "The Uncanny". "Organ speech" is Freud's term (borrowed from Tausk) for the verbal behaviour of a schizophrenic girl (a patient of Tausk's) that he describes in "The Unconscious" and contrasts with hysterical behaviour. Wagenknecht's hypothesis is that the problems of Freud's theoretical language derive from the same "generating matrix" as Hoffmann's problems in dramatizing "psychic exigencies" in "The Sandman". He argues that the problems of Freud and Hoffmann occur when they attempt to describe the unconscious, and goes on to suggest that there is an opposition between narrating and acting out, between interpreting and dramatizing. Wagenknecht closes with a comparison of "The Sandman" and *Hamlet* (that he believes to be one of Hoffmann's sources). It is not any historical link that interests him, although the importance of Shakespeare is one of the defining characteristics of this time, but the structural analogies and the difficulties of representing the unconscious. The discussion of *Hamlet*

and “The Sandman” poses all the theoretical problems of comparing texts widely separated in time, even now a relatively unexplored field of comparative literature.

Where Wagenknecht thinks about the analogies between Shakespeare and Hoffmann and Hamilton considers Shelley’s debt to Lucretius, Burwick engages in a different kind of comparison over a long period of time, relocating Wordsworth in the tradition of the sonnet going back to Petrarch’s sonnets. Introduced into English by Wyatt and Howard in poems published in Tottle’s *Miscellany* (1557), the sonnet was “a dominant lyric form that attracted virtually every major poet” up to and including Milton. Shakespeare establishes an English version of the form and “Milton’s ‘On the Late Massacre in Piedmont’ (1665)”, as Burwick indicates, “reveals a rhetorical power that had not been previously exerted in the sonnet’s compact structure”. Suddenly, the sonnet is rejected as a form. There are no sonnets of any “significant merit” for over a hundred years. The fact is recognized by Johnson in his *Dictionary* (1755). Defining the sonnet, he comments: “It has not been used by any man of eminence since Milton”. Neither the sonnet’s disappearance nor its reappearance has ever been fully explained. Burwick addresses himself to this major problem in the history of poetry and of genre.

Burwick shows that it is women poets who revived the sonnet. “The sonnet revival was marked by such publications as Helen Maria Williams’ *Poems* (1786), Charlotte Smith’s *Elegiac Sonnets* (1789), Mary Robinson’s *Sappho and Phaon* (1796), the six sonnets Anna Seward appended to her *Llangollen Vale* (1796) and her collection ... *Original Sonnets on Various Subjects* (1799)”. Wordsworth’s interest in these poems is shown by his copying two of Smith’s sonnets from her novel, *Celastina* (1791) into his copy of her *Elegiac Sonnets*. His first published poem is a sonnet dedicated to Helen Maria Williams that appeared in the *European Magazine* in March 1797. He writes a second sonnet at the same time, “Sonnet Written by Mr. – Immediately after the Death of His Wife” and a third between 1788 and 1791, “If grief dismiss me not” (translated from Petrarch’s “*Se la mia vita da l’aspro tormento*”) and then he lets the form drop.

Thanks to Dorothy Wordsworth’s journal, we happen to know the exact moment he took it up again, Friday, 21 May 1802: “A very

warm gentle morning – a little rain, Wm wrote two sonnets on Buonaparte after I had read Milton's sonnets to him"<sup>10</sup>. One of these sonnets is lost, the other is the famous "I grieve for Buonaparté". After this, Wordsworth did not look back. He went on writing sonnets and sonnet sequences until the end of his life. It is worth noting that it was his contact with Milton's sonnets that was decisive in persuading him to return to the form. For Burwick's argument it is significant that it was a woman reading the sonnets to him that was the occasion for this return. What we would like to know is did Dorothy choose Milton's sonnets or did William ask for them?

Burwick not only blows the dust off a number of beautiful lyrics by Wordsworth that have been almost totally ignored by recent criticism, he makes a case for Wordsworth's major contribution to the form being his adaptation of the Petrarchan octave/sestet division, giving to the *volto* "a dialectic function peculiar to his own poetry", making it "a spring-trap for his subject-object dialectics". Burwick, in addition, makes an important contribution to the problem of gender in literary texts. "By the women poets" (Williams, Smith, Robinson, Seward), "the sonnet was gendered feminine and was transformed into a fitting mode for reflection on the lot of women in a male dominated society". Wordsworth and Coleridge "and other male poets confronted the problem of regendering it masculine".

"Materialism", writes Hamilton, "might be called the unacceptable face of empiricism...". The ideas are as old as Epicurus and Lucretius, but the word is relatively new. The first occurrences given by the *OED* are 1748 and 1758 (Gray's letter to Richard Stonehewer of 18 August). Johnson has *materialist* but no *materialism*. The *Trésor de la langue française*, however, states that the word was coined by Robert Boyle in *The Excellence and Grounds of the Mechanical Philosophy* (1674) and gives Leibniz's *Réplique aux réflexions de Boyle* (1702) and Balzac's *Le Lys dans la Vallée* (1836) as the earliest occurrences of the French *matérialisme*. Thus, materialism

10 Dorothy Wordsworth, *Journals of Dorothy Wordsworth*, ed. Mary Moorman, London, Oxford University Press, 1971, 127.

appears as a major and defining feature of this time. Hamilton in his study of Percy and Mary Shelley sees the tradition as French and its major figures are Diderot, Helvetius, Condillac and La Mettrie, and it is the latter whom he discusses in particular detail.

Leavis in *Revaluation* (1936) tells us that: "Shelley, at his best and worst, offers the emotion in itself, unattached, in the void"<sup>11</sup>. For Hamilton, that void is material. "Percy Shelley", he says, "can be read consistently from a materialist point of view". "Much of Percy Shelley's own poetry confronts the shock of our subordination to natural process and the self-alienation and despair resulting from such a shock". This has the advantage, Hamilton argues, of clearing away what he calls the "idealist" criticism of Shelley and of "bringing Mary Shelley into play not merely as an explicatory mechanism, or even collaborator, but as giving the lead in important ways to Percy's thought". This enables him to reinterpret *Frankenstein* (1818): "the monster exemplifies La Mettrie's materialist language" and "Victor devalues the effect of organisation championed by La Mettrie over any privileged individual organ, material or immaterial". Hamilton also offers new readings of Mary Shelley's posthumously published *Mathilda, Valperga* (1823) and *The Last Man* (1826), as well as Shelley's *Alastor* (1816) and *The Triumph of Life* (1822). Rousseau makes another appearance as "that most provocatively egotistical of writers" and as the protagonist of *The Triumph of Life*. Unlike Doody, Hamilton is not concerned with the personal relations between the Shelleys, like Corngold, Hughes and Wagenknecht, and Kuhn and Rehder in a different way, he is interested in disengaging and elucidating the structures of thought that underlie the works of his authors.

Rehder is concerned with neither genre nor gender. Analyzing passages from *Sense and Sensibility* (1811) and that great neglected autobiography, *Mémoires d'outre-tombe* (1848-1850), he assumes that the way in which we apprehend the world changes over time and that these changes can be seen in the representation of the world and mental events in literary texts. He believes that after Rousseau the major writers are more self-conscious than before, and that the

11 F. R. Leavis, *Revaluation*, Harmondsworth, Penguin Books, 1972, 201.

---

idea of an unconscious becomes established around the time of the publication of *Les Confessions* and Wordsworth's composition of his autobiographical poem. The moment carefully delimited in time and space, he argues, "becomes a primary mode of organizing poems, novels and autobiographies" between around 1795 and 1814, between "The Eolian Harp" and *Waverley*. For him, "the moment as a form appears to be dependent upon a new capacity to see the object, to isolate, distinguish and detail the things of the world for their own sake" and "the object is individualized at the same time as its perceiver". He relates these changes to a variety of other events, the institution of democratic governments, the interest in scientific expeditions, the specialization of intellectual life and the increase in the number of chests of drawers and kitchen cupboards in France.

We are still a very long way from understanding what happened in European literature between Rousseau and Wordsworth. It is hoped that the essays in this volume will both take us closer to the events and provide new ways of seeing – and a great variety of intellectual delights in the process.



