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The Romantic Poets. A Guide to Criticism

(Blackwell, 2007)

by

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THE NEED for a book of this kind derives from the fact that in most areas of literary studies the amount of criticism has grown to proportions unmanageable to first-time students, and also for scholars who embark on a specific topic of research a first orientation provided by an expert who commands a survey of the whole field may be felt helpful. The publication under review belongs to the well-established series of Blackwell Guides to Criticism. It deals with the six 'major' English romantic poets, William Blake, William Wordsworth, Samuel Taylor Coleridge, Lord Byron, Percy Bysshe Shelley, and John Keats, whose work represents an outstanding achievement which has stimulated a huge body of critical literature, so that a guide to criticism is highly desirable.¹ The individual chapters of this book are all organized along the same lines. They felicitously combine the character of a survey with that of an anthology. They follow the history of each of the poets' critical reception from its inception to the beginning of the twenty-first century in a strictly chronological order, halting several times to give longer extracts from landmarks in the history of criticism. In three instances there is a continuous survey from the contemporary reception to a major twentieth-century work of criticism, from which extracts are given: Frye's study (1947) in Blake's case; Lowes's (1927) in Coleridge's; and Pulos's (1954) in Shelley's. In the other chapters the presentation of the contemporary and Victorian reception is interrupted by extracts taken from important texts, Hazlitt's commentary on Wordsworth in *The Spirit of the Age* (1825), Mazzini's account of Byron in 'On Byron and Goethe' (1839), and Lockhart's account of Keats in 'The Cockney School of Poetry' (1818). The choice of extracts from modern criticism is, in view of the great amount of extant high-quality research, precarious and could not, one might assume, avoid producing displeasure among some scholars; but on the whole Natarajan's book is likely not to give offence in any way, because she makes it clear that she does not actively engage in controversies, wishing to be 'functional and informative rather than polemical' (p. 1). A problem is, however, that students should not only be made acquainted with criticism, but that their capacity for reading secondary literature critically should also be developed. It is disastrous for the development of the critical intelligence of students to rely too strongly on what has been written on the authors they have to deal with. They ought to become

¹ I do not understand how the editor comes to describe the whole body of the works of the major English Romantics as a 'genre': 'Chiefly, its [the book's] scope is an established canon of writers, six male Romantic poets [...], of whose works is comprised a canonical genre' (p. 1).

aware that what seems so definitive and authoritative as a consequence of its printed form may be questioned and that the printed word, at least in criticism, is not sacrosanct.

If the editor's survey of the history of the critical reception of the six poets is presented as a fascinating story, so do the annotated reading lists after each extract represent a kind of 'narrative in itself' (p. 2). The critics, from whose works extracts are taken, usually represent different critical concerns, which may tie in with different theoretical and ideological positions. Accordingly the reading lists subsequent to the individual extracts are also given a certain thematic unity, although it is not the aim to establish strict analogies. The book's narrative design and its attempt at thematic organization prevents the danger of the reader getting lost in what is ultimately a very great amount of material and information. For the users' further benefit the individual chapters are concluded by references to useful editions and reference material. The carefully prepared index is also an indispensable help for the user.

The critical texts from the twentieth and early twenty-first century are well chosen. Classical monographs such as Erdman's on Blake (1954), Hartman's on Wordsworth (1964), Beer's on Coleridge (1959), McGann's on Byron (1968), Wasserman's on Shelley (1971), and Bate's on Keats (1963) are represented. So are recent historicising and contextualising (particularly neo-historicist, materialist and deconstructivist) studies: De Luca on Blake (1991), Liu and Bromwich on Wordsworth, McGann and Perry on Coleridge, Christensen on Byron, Clark on Shelley, and Levinson and Roe on Keats. A problem of the chronological and narrative presentation of the material is that it may suggest a developmental plot, reaching its *telos* in the present time, which is in literary studies dominated by an interest in context rather than text. This problem is enhanced by the editor's predilection for critical work on large-scale texts such as Blake's visionary poems, Shelley's verse drama *Prometheus Unbound* or Byron's satire *Don Juan*, which lend themselves more readily to historical or political interpretations. Conversely, criticism on shorter poems, which are in many cases more suitable for treatment in seminars, though frequently not so explicitly political, are to some extent neglected.

A characteristic example of recent criticism is the extract from Nicholas Roe's in many ways brilliant book *John Keats and the Culture of Dissent* (1997), which in a close observation of the poet's texts detects biographical, historical, and political resonances of Keats's language. However, when Roe relates the participle 'conspiring' in 'Ode to Autumn' ('[Autumn] Conspiring with him [the sun] how to load and bless / With fruit the vines that round the thatch-eves run') to the accusation of 'a treasonable conspiracy' raised against the 'ringleaders' in the Peterloo Massacre, he allows himself to be carried away by mere associations. It is well-known that Keats was deeply aware of social distress in a world 'where men sit and hear each other groan' ('Ode to a Nightingale'), but why should one not accept the fact that 'Ode to Autumn', though imbued with inner tensions, simply has no political resonances, either

overt or covert?

Another controversial aspect of the book seems to be its almost exclusive and nowadays hardly tolerable concentration on an established canon, a problem of which the editor is aware. Only the last chapter, which at first glance looks like an appendix, addresses the expansion of the canon, focussing on John Clare and romantic women poets. If we consider that this chapter on the 'expanding canon' makes 22 of a total of 335 text pages, i.e. about seven per cent, the proportion seems to be grossly in disfavour of romantic poets who have not yet been canonized or are about to be canonized. However, a closer look at this additional chapter shows that it provides an excellent survey of the critical reception of John Clare, who has long been a candidate for the canon, and of Romantic women poets, who have recently found considerable attention by critics not only of female sex. And what is more, this chapter contains two extremely valuable critical texts, an extract from John Barrell's essay on Clare in his *Poetry, Language, and Politics* (1988), and an extract from Stuart Curran's seminal article 'Romantic Poetry: The I Altered', first published in Anne Mellor's *Romanticism and Feminism* (1988). Thus a book, which perfectly fulfils its aim of providing students with a reliable guide to criticism on major romantic poets, giving them invaluable material and information in a readable way, ends with a highlight in the chapter on the changing canon, which turns out to be much more than an appendix.