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British Romanticism and the Critique of Political Reason

(Johns Hopkins, 2016)

by Timothy Michael

IN *BRITISH ROMANTICISM AND THE CRITIQUE OF POLITICAL REASON*, Timothy Michael presents a compelling and timely argument about the contested relationship between reason and politics in British Romanticism. Michael's study includes close readings of key figures, including Coleridge, Wollstonecraft, and Wordsworth, situating them within an earlier Enlightenment discourse on political knowledge. Michael provides a much-needed correction to simple narratives of Romantic anti-rationalism while also exploring deeper questions about the importance of knowledge to freedom. Concerns about political epistemology loom large, perhaps especially today—an age of echo chambers, political polarization, and "fake news." Thus, Michael's work not only recovers the world and language of the Romantics, but also speaks directly to contemporary issues in polities across the globe. The Romantic interest in the epistemic requirements for a liberal polity remain with us, and Michael's exploration offers a key contribution to this discussion of politics both during the Romantic era and since.

Michael begins with an introduction that combines both historical context and theoretical concerns and then moves on to set up the philosophical lodestar of the work, Immanuel Kant. Michael finds Kant's fingerprints everywhere among the British Romantics, from Coleridge's discussion of Reason and Understanding, to Wordsworth's "shaking off / The accidents of nature, time, and place," to Wollstonecraft's inward turn to "the contents of one's own mind" (3, 90). While the Kantian revolution centers Michael's philosophical discussion, the French Revolution provides an historical backdrop and impetus for all the interlocutors discussed, from Burke to Shelley, introducing a new urgency to the conversation, as these authors seek "the promise of enlightenment after revolution and terror" (1).

Michael's study focuses on three groups of authors, arranged both by chronology and by genre. Early authors—Burke, Godwin, and Wollstonecraft—write public discourses packed with the tools of classical rhetoric. Burke's subordinate clauses (hypotaxis) serve an aristocratic and hierarchical political message, while Wollstonecraft uses concatenation to express an egalitarian vision. These three individuals also represent the two contrasting viewpoints on political epistemology: while Burke "prescribes

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serious limits for abstract reasoning in practical politics," Godwin and Wollstonecraft find knowledge and reason the foundation for politics (76). After exploring this first trio of interlocutors, Michael turns to what he views as the Romantics—Coleridge, Wordsworth, and Shelley—in two parts. First, he tackles the "middle-period" political prose of Coleridge and Wordsworth, especially in *The Friend* and *The Convention of Cintra*, respectively (27). The last section of the volume takes on later poetic treatments of political epistemology, with chapters on Wordsworth's late poetry (*Recluse* and *Excursion*) and on Shelley's *Prometheus Unbound*. For Michael, the three Romantics occupy mediating positions between Burke's anti-rational conservatism and the alignment of reason and freedom presented in Godwin and Wollstonecraft.

Timothy Michael's *British Romanticism and the Critique of Political Reason* presents a compelling and well-supported thesis, attentive readings of key texts, and a multi-faceted work that "integrates intellectual history, literary history, and at times, formal analysis" (29). Michael's central argument that the Romantics valued political knowledge emphasizes how their inward turn never precluded, and in fact grounded, political engagement. Additionally, he thoroughly demonstrates the seriousness with which the Romantics took reason and its importance to life generally. He breaks down the overly-clean opposition between Enlightenment reason and Romantic feeling. Michael's reading of Wordsworth's *Home at Grasmere*, for example, conveys how the pursuit of tranquility fosters political freedom. Similarly, Shelley's *Prometheus Unbound* demonstrates the relationship between inward and outward freedom. Throughout, Michael establishes how the Romantic language of interiority serves distinctly political concerns and ends.

Another key strength of Michael's work lies in his careful attention to each author's approach and text. His readings carefully parse the language, nuances, paradoxes, and currents of each author, noting apparent or real contradictions and differences with other authors, both within and outside the study. Michael does not fall prey to the temptation to boil down authors' arguments to their basic components in the service of creating a clean narrative. For example, he carefully documents Burke's ambivalent view of reason in *Reflections on the Revolution in France*, as well as the inconsistencies between his writings on the French Revolution and those on the East Indian Bill and the American Revolution. Similarly, Michael portrays Godwin and Wollstonecraft as allied in key ways, but he does not reduce one to a version of the other. Rather, he draws out the authentic voice of both writers. Michael's particular attention to each text and author gives a very complex and finely grained view of each author's views on the relationship between knowledge and politics, and how they might change over time or vary with the situation or genre in question.

While such particular attention to the chosen texts offers a rich narrative for the reader, it also leads to some questions about why particular authors and even particular texts were chosen above others. Michael recognizes this in the Afterword, where he notes that a further extension of the project would

necessarily involve more authors. This admission, however, does not entirely smooth over such questions of selection. One particularly confounding choice involves focusing the chapter on Coleridge primarily on *The Friend*, with occasional reference to *The Statesman's Manual*, *Biographia*, and the notebooks. Omitted entirely, even from the bibliography, is *On the Constitution of Church and State*, which would support and extend Michael's arguments on Coleridge's view of political principles, reason, social contract theory, and the natural comity between commercialism and empiricism. Coleridge's exposition in *On the Constitution of Church and State* separates property as the province of the state and the dissemination of knowledge as that of the national church. This distinction carries through the later notebooks and would help clarify how Coleridge can hold in tension an apparently Burkean view of politics as grounded in unequal property with a very un-Burkean and egalitarian notion of education and knowledge as the province of all citizens. Michael rightly identifies Coleridge, along with Wordsworth, as "perhaps the most nuanced, interesting political thinkers studied here," and expanding the analysis of political epistemology beyond the middle period would prove fruitful (30).

I also appreciated Michael's willingness to draw on a wide range of interlocutors. In his analysis of Coleridge's *The Friend*, Michael draws on the Enlightenment political theory of Hume, Hobbes, and Godwin, whom Coleridge directly sought to address. On the other hand, Michael brings in the Hellenistic traditions of Epicureanism and Stoicism to explain the political valences of Wordsworth's notions of tranquility and pleasure. Throughout, Michael draws on the frameworks of a range of contemporary political and literary philosophers, who, coming after the Romantics, both respond to their challenge and offer interpretive guidance. Examples of frameworks include Isaiah Berlin's dichotomy of negative and positive liberty, Adorno and Horkheimer's view of knowledge as self-alienation, Oakeshott's conservative critique of rationalism in politics, Arendt's critique of the *vita contemplativa*, and Heidegger's notion of being-in-the world as directed both inward and outward. On occasion, the sheer variety of interlocutors, ranging from the ancient world to well past the Romantics, can prove disorienting and raise further questions—what might Oakeshott have to say not only to Burke but to Coleridge?—but mostly it just displays the breadth and acumen of Michael's analysis.

Michael's *British Romanticism and the Critique of Political Reason* is a highly skilled and critical work of scholarship, still there are two areas where further work might enrich his study. First, he clearly establishes the overwhelming importance of political epistemology and the discourse around knowledge, freedom, and reason in the period, but I would like to hear more on how this relationship between knowledge and politics can be embodied in Romantic views on education—a place where, it appears to me, the importance of providing citizens with the requisite knowledge for their citizenship comes to the fore. Though admittedly the subject of another volume, this would further clarify the Romantic preoccupation with knowledge as a precondition for

liberty and could yield further insights.

Second, one conceptual aspect of Michael's analysis that could use further interrogation lies in the related, but distinct, notions of liberty, liberalism, and liberal. In his introduction, Michael lays out the scope of his work: "a revised account of the inward turn of Romanticism that sees it not as a withdrawal from history and politics, but an attempt to determinate how far liberty might be founded on a secure and rational basis" (5). In the history of political thought, "liberty" has taken on many meanings, from self-mastery and governance of the passions all the way to freedom from external coercion. Recent scholarship, most notably Jacob Levy's *Rationalism, Pluralism, and Freedom* (2015), demonstrates the complexity of nineteenth-century liberalism, encompassing a wide range of political positions from Burke to Paine. While today, liberty and liberalism link almost synonymously with notions of democracy, equality, and popular sovereignty during the Romantic period, liberalism existed in aristocratic and ancient constitutional varieties (the most well-known being Montesquieu's aristocratic liberalism). Careful attention to the various meanings of "liberty" can shed light on common principles underlying works by Burke, Coleridge, and Wordsworth, who stayed true in some way to certain principles of liberty even as they changed political positions over the course of their lives. Identifying various types of liberalisms can help sort out the variety of ways in which reason, knowledge, and rationalism were used in the period.

Michael's work does many things very well—careful textual analysis, historical contextualization, and the application of literary theory—making the work a genuine contribution to scholarship on both Romantic literature and political theory. The concerns he raises about the relationship between knowledge and politics, inward and outward, are not only those of the Romantics, but also remain with us today. The radical political polarization present in many liberal democracies today threatens to wear thin the common principles needed to ensure peace and freedom. Divergent views on what constitutes political facts, inequalities of education creating inequalities of political knowledge and power, and contradictory notions about the meaning of political sovereignty have all come dramatically to the fore. Michael rightly notes that in contemporary politics, "questions of freedom have been decoupled from questions of knowledge" (7). However, the deepening political polarization in modern democracies might ask us to question this separation of freedom and knowledge and look to the Romantics for insights on the underlying connections between knowledge and liberty.