Kim Wheatley[1]

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Lives of the Dead Poets: Keats, Shelley, Coleridge

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by Karen Swann

KAREN SWANN'S ELEGANTLY WRITTEN *Lives of the Dead Poets* explores the role played by biographical knowledge in the ongoing reception of John Keats, Percy Bysshe Shelley, and Samuel Taylor Coleridge. Swann is interested in the way in which fascination with the poets' lives—and deaths—affects how readers respond to their poetry. She focuses narrowly on the posthumous reputations of Keats and Shelley as figures poignantly cut off before their prime, and the related reputation of Coleridge as an emblem of wasted potential. The book works its way towards rather than away from Coleridge, the subject of its final two chapters. Swann's decision to group the "late" Coleridge with the two shortest-lived younger Romantics concentrates attention on his image as a writer who—so unlike Keats and Shelley—lingered on well past the peak of his achievement.

Swann aims to complicate the assumption that reading poetry biographically is a retrograde practice fostering the illusion that literature inhabits an autonomous aesthetic realm detached from social and political realities. The linkage of biography and aestheticism might seem counter-intuitive given that the messiness of a human life is at odds with the supposed ineffability of the aesthetic, but Swann emphasizes biographical material that is self-consciously figurative in depicting the three poets as visitors from another world. The world of these aestheticized revenants, she contends, reflects on our own. The "undead" poets (22), lingering on to haunt their own poetic remains, represent what Swann calls "the perilous status of poetry in modernity" (17).

The book does not delve into the nitty-gritty nuances of reception along the lines of Stephen Gill's *Wordsworth and The Victorians* (1998), David Higgins's *Romantic Genius and the Literary Magazine* (2005), or Tom Mole's *What the Victorians Made of Romanticism* (2017). Rather, it is in dialogue with other books that emphasize the links between "the (actual or anticipated) death of the author" (2), posthumous fame, and canonicity: for example, Andrew Bennett's *Romantic Poets and the Culture of Posterity* (1999), Samantha Matthews's *Poetical Remains* (2004), and Deidre Lynch's *Loving Literature* (2014). Swann explains that her claims cannot necessarily be extrapolated to other poets (especially not Lord Byron because of his early success), although they might apply to women poets whose deaths loomed large for their early readers, such as Mary Tighe and Letitia Landon. Her study is strongly influenced by Paul de Man's deconstructive account of autobiography as well as by Walter Benjamin's writings on "the experience of 'shock' to life lived under the regime of

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commodity capitalism" (35) and the figure of the outmoded poet as a simulacrum (51). She acknowledges that her introduction was written retrospectively to pull together separate essays on similar themes that do not necessarily cohere into an "unfolding argument" (24). The book is self-consciously episodic. Instead of charting Romantic afterlives, it succeeds in illuminating selected texts that uncannily allegorize the fates of the poets.

Swann's first chapter uses John Keats's own comment about his "posthumous existence" as a jumping off point for a meditation on the way in which his poetry is shadowed by the knowledge of its author's untimely death, a cutting short that she equates to "romanticism itself" as "unfulfilled promise" (29), living on anachronistically into modern capitalist society. Giving some—but surprisingly little—space to biographical materials (such as Joseph Severn's account of Keats's death), Swann turns to how the story of Keats's hostile early reception and all-too-soon demise remains bound up with his canonization. Here she builds on Marjorie Levinson's reception-focused *Keats's Life of Allegory* (1988) and Thomas Pfau's melancholy-oriented analysis of early Keats in *Romantic Moods* (2005). The chapter concludes with a persuasive reading of *The Fall of Hyperion* as depicting the melancholy fate of the poet outliving its "intimacy with the human" (49).

Chapter two offers a fascinating interpretation of Shelley's *Adonais* as a text that helps to create the posthumous life of Keats—and that of Shelley. This notion itself is not new, but in Swann's reading, Shelley grasps Keats as the poet of negative capability (the poet without a self) while flaunting biographical baggage (Keats's early death; Shelley's notoriety during his own truncated lifetime; Shelley and Mary Shelley as the parents of dead children). Swann, like more than a few other Shelley critics, sees Shelley as almost preternaturally knowing—capable of anticipating the insights of post-structuralist theorists—although she dismisses the "fantasy" of intentionality (65). The chapter includes an intriguingly anti-biographical reading of the infamous "Frail Form" passage (usually read as a Shelleyan self-portrait) while acknowledging the "queasiness" (57) that besets readers of *Adonais* over the poem's apparent self-indulgence. (A similar feeling is associated with the line, "I fall upon the thorns of life—I bleed!" from "Ode to the West Wind.") Swann tends to make general assertions about how readers respond sentimentally or viscerally (responses that she sees the poems as inviting) rather than bringing up actual biographically-inflected reactions to the poetry (Mary Shelley's claim in letters after her husband's death that she felt "chained to time" like Urania in *Adonais*, for example). Ending her chapter by quoting without commentary the last stanza of *Adonais*, Swann illustrates the inescapability of the biographically-charged frissons evoked by the poem.

The next chapter, "Shelley's Pod People," does include analysis of nineteenth-century reactions to Shelley, his death, and his dead body by members of the Shelley circle (including Mary Shelley), but given the familiarity of these characterizations of the poet's unearthliness, this section proves less compelling than the chapter's discussion of a still often-overlooked

masterpiece by Shelley, *The Witch of Atlas*. The claims of this chapter, first published online in the Romantic Circles *Praxis* series in 2005, enlighteningly extend those of the previous two chapters. Swann shows how during his lifetime Shelley performed the "not quite of this world" persona cultivated by his friends after his death. According to her, the image of the phantasmic poet eventually haunts De Man's "Shelley Disfigured" with its emphasis on the allegorical slippage of one figure into another. Swann links Shelley's self-proclaimed lack of "human interest" in *The Witch* not, like other critics, to his supposed idealist philosophical interests but to his investment in the power of figuration. She takes the beautiful hermaphrodite that the Witch creates and discards to enact the tension between poetry's "appeal to our passions" (89) and the persistent myth of its abstractedness from human life. For Swann, the dehumanized "pod people" of *The Witch* also evoke the Shelleys' own dead children and their mutually frozen postures as grieving parents.

The remaining two chapters of Swann's book, "Late Coleridge" and "Coleridge the Talker," address the later Coleridge as a "prematurely arrested" figure of unfulfilled promise (92), a familiar figure made freshly arresting through juxtaposition with the preceding chapters. The chapters both take as their stepping off point Hazlitt's well-known characterization of Coleridge as a talker, not a doer, one whose wondrous thoughts are lost to posterity because "he lays down his pen to make sure of an auditor," as Hazlitt puts it in *The Spirit of the Age*. This image of Coleridge is of course contradicted by his vast output of work, as Swann is far from the first to point out (162), but it exemplifies the power of perception. Other than relying on this notion of wasted potential, chapter four sets aside biographical material as such in order to zoom in on certain poems and notebook entries that explore Coleridge's *self*-perception as one engaged in what he called "work without hope" and ostensibly unproductive "abstruse research." Swann takes "Limbo," with its image of a blind man with a "Look sublime," as an emblem of the late Coleridge, who engages in what she calls "post-hope expenditure" (99), work—including thought—that bears no fruit. But the chapter is not all gloom. Drawing on *The Work of the Negative* (1999) by the psychoanalytic theorist Andre Green, she uses a notebook entry on the persistence of "Hope" even when it seems "exterminated" (106; CN II 2839) to bring out the glimmering underside of Coleridge's desolation. She then turns to "Constancy to an Ideal Object" to find what she calls the "black hole" of "Genius" (113), a pointed oxymoron. Swann ends the chapter with a comparison between the plight of the late Coleridge and the way in which academic labor is currently devalued; in both cases, allegedly, there is room for the recuperation of the visionary.

Swann's final chapter, itself less abstruse than the previous one, lingers over reactions to Coleridge's spoken monologues by his contemporaries, pulling together life and work in the sense that Coleridge, holding forth in mesmerizing fashion, was often seen as a latter-day Ancient Mariner. Swann again takes Coleridge to dramatize the role of the poet at odds with the

demands of a market economy: the "failure" to "produce" is the very sign of Coleridge's "Genius" (118). But Swann is not just concerned with the "resistance to capture" of Coleridge's spoken words (118); she emphasizes the extent to which the poet's listeners found his talk impossible "to understand or remember" (118), perceiving him, for that very reason, as a ghostly visitant from a magical lost world. Here Swann brings in Hannah Arendt's *The Life of the Mind* (1978) to help interpret Coleridge as performing not just the anachronistic status of poetry but the way in which "the old, posthumously surviving philosophical tradition coexists with its breakup" (132). Hence Hazlitt's concluding image, in "Mr. Coleridge," of Coleridge (unlike Wordsworth and Southey) "pitching his tent upon the barren waste . . ., and having no abiding place nor city of refuge" (131). This state of homelessness, the sign that Coleridge, unlike his fellow Lake poets, has not irretrievably sold his soul, is itself, in Arendt's terms, the site of a "frail resistance" (131).

Throughout this study, Swann relies on an understanding of Regency-era writers (advanced by Pfau in *Romantic Moods*) as operating in a reduced and attenuated state compared with the heavenly fervor of first-generation Romanticism. The book seems shadowed by Hazlitt's somewhat cynical characterization of the spirit of the age, which implicitly (as in Pfau's book) foreshadows Walter Benjamin's insistence on "the shocks of modern life" (35). (Thomas Love Peacock's pessimistic "Four Ages of Poetry" also comes to mind.) Coleridge, as a new honorary member of the second-generation Romantics, arguably emerges as the most poignant of the three writers covered, since he personifies the decline into supposed cultural insignificance. Swann's coda refers to "this long melancholic moment" (134), including "professional romanticists" as inhabitants of the "disenchanted world" in which poetry becomes socially irrelevant (135). The effect could be dispiriting. Yet this book is above all about survival: the endurance of charismatic poets, entrancing poetry and the redeeming power of Romantic art into a hostile yet nostalgic age. Swann uses terms such as magic, wonder, and even "grace" (111) to gesture towards the elusive feelings evoked by the "concatenation" of poetic lives and works (44). Whether or not one assents to the assumptions underlying her characterization of second-generation Romanticism, or to each nuance of her subtle analyses, the strength of the book lies in this insistence on the possibility of the recovery of enchantment.