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The Idea of Infancy in Nineteenth-Century British Poetry: Romanticism, Subjectivity, Form
(New York: Routledge, 2016)
by D. B. Ruderman

DAVID RUDERMAN'S *The Idea of Infancy in Nineteenth-Century British Poetry* emerges at a time when the meaning(s) of childhood and infancy in the writings of romanticism and the nineteenth century are being seriously reevaluated and expanded upon.[1] Working to clarify or augment the critical positions of scholars such as Wierda Rowland and Judith Plotz, Ruderman examines major writers including Wordsworth, Erasmus Darwin, Samuel and (daughter) Sara Coleridge, Shelley, and Tennyson, using a toolkit of Freudian and formalist techniques to search out fragmentation and "blank misgivings" of the Wordsworthian variety in writings previously shored up by their reception into and subsequent preservation by the Western canon of the twentieth century. Rather than viewing infancy—which Ruderman defines broadly to include the formative years of childhood, in addition to the postnatal period of our earliest years—as a fixed, bygone time of life to be viewed nostalgically and cherished for its ideological innocence and ontic freedom, Ruderman takes on (or perhaps takes off) accepted canonical definitions of romanticism by charting its Plotzian projections onto the figure of the child. Ruderman uncovers what he calls "another, more fraught and less continuous and synthetic narrative" (4) of romantic infancy in the period. He shows that these writings on infancy—which are in fact writings *of* infancy—are only loosely joined together (with themselves, and with other writings of a similar form and genre) by a shared condition of what he calls "universal monstrousness" (4).

The book begins with a familiar Coleridgean scene (in a section called "Beginnings"): Ruderman describes himself as an undergraduate at the beginning of the new millennium, awake one night looking after his six-month-old daughter while his wife is working late. Like Coleridge in "Frost at Midnight," he finds himself alone in a state of wakeful questioning and vexed meditation:

> My daughter would be in my lap or on my shoulder. It seems to me now that she weighed less at that time than a book, or a jacket or pillow. I was surprised to find myself at these moments jotting down notes for song lyrics, poems, essays, or letters that I imagined she would read when grown. Besides the constant sounds of traffic and the occasional late-

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> night reveler, her breathing would be the only sound in our apartment. What was I doing? Who was I addressing, a portion of myself or her? We seemed to form a chiasmus. But what was being connected, her as a grown-up or me as an infant? (1)

Ruderman exploits the figure of the chiasmus to full effect in this book, because it seems by its nature to be connected to his thesis that "romanticism . . . [brings] into view an introjection or internalization of infancy itself" (6). The word "introjection" generally refers to the psychoanalytical notion that the ego takes into itself pieces of the outside world such as expressions or behaviors witnessed in others in order to replicate them. The figure of the chiasmus, then, may be said to stand in as a kind of literary introjection, a phrase which internalizes and replicates its own figures but in reverse. The moment of the introjection which brings about a new formation in the self, and thus a new beginning, is at the heart of the critical labors Ruderman undertakes in this book.

Ruderman also draws inspiration from Jean-François Lyotard's (1924–98) idea that infancy or childhood is "disruptive to linear theories of progress . . . precisely to the degree that it remains an accessible space open to memory, mutability, revision, and modification" (7). He treats this conception of infancy as a space of revision and introjection chiefly in Wordsworth's "Immortality" ode, which Ruderman calls "an ur-text for psychoanalytic and philosophical conceptions of infancy" (37). Ruderman's squaring up with the world's arguably most famous poem on the progression from childhood to adulthood is ambitious, as he attempts to show that Wordsworth's poem is "profoundly resistant to narratives of development" (38), even as it seemingly describes the development of a person from childhood to adulthood. I thought in some places that Ruderman may have buried the strength of his psychoanalytic approach in verbiage courting redefinitional subtleties. For example, in looking at the phrase "blank misgivings" (which is also the title of the chapter) from the "Immortality" ode, Ruderman writes that "[Wordsworth's] new theory of infant freshness and interfusion turned out to be 'blank,' that is, not empirically provable, as well as a literal 'mis-giving,' that is, a gift that often seemed to miss its mark, often as much of a curse as a blessing" (42). Citing critiques of the "Immortality" ode by Coleridge, Mill, and Arnold, Ruderman attributes the poem's historical failure of unity—an aesthetic or philosophical failure—to the fact that the child as infant is a transcendental subject, a "figure" in Lyotard's thought who opens up "a site of perpetual beginning" (37). Thus, in taking the infant as its subject, the ode can never truly be finished.

The next chapter is devoted to infancy in the writings of Samuel Taylor Coleridge and Erasmus Darwin. Interestingly, Ruderman looks into the failure of Coleridge's emigration scheme (pantisocracy) from the point of view of Coleridge's claim in *The Friend* (1809) that his system of beliefs came about from reflecting in part on the behavior of young children (70). Citing Locke's *tabula rasa*, Ruderman writes that Coleridge "worried that the small children

they had planned to bring over from England might already be too ideologically tainted by English culture" (71). "These children," wrote Coleridge to Southey in 1794, "Are they not already *deeply* tinged with the prejudices and errors of Society? . . . *How* are we to prevent them from infecting the minds of *our* children?" (71). Darwin's book *Zoonomia* had only recently appeared in 1794, and Ruderman reads a chapter of *Zoonomia* "against another from Coleridge's *Opus Maximum*" (72), an unfinished "great work" recently published as a part of the Bollingen series of the Collected Coleridge. Ruderman's readings of Coleridge against Darwin seek "to establish a partial genealogy for two competing versions of the aesthetic" (72); and Ruderman, by way of demonstrating that "ambivalent aesthetic feelings and forms remind us that we often see what we expect to see when we look at the child" (73), hopes to show that "all of our judgments are, . . . partial and necessarily in flux" (73).

I was particularly struck by the chapter on "Merging and Emerging in the Work of Sara Coleridge," as it was my first encounter with a critique of Coleridge's writings, her poetry and her published diaries and the often troubled thought that these texts partially reveal. Ruderman's title refers to Coleridge's sensation—delusion?—perhaps related to her melancholy sufferings that her body and afflictions are merged with those of her children; and this protean conceit often informs her writings. However, as Ruderman shows, "Like her famous father, Sara Coleridge continually oscillates in her writing between" (110) being so open to the presence of her young children that she is absorbed by or absorbing them, and wanting to close them off from her "nervousness," i.e. her depression and suicidal ideation, which seems to manifest sometimes in homicidal urges toward her own children: as in her poem "To Baby Edith" (130–31) upon which Ruderman remarks, "The alliteration in the line 'burn baby's biscuit' makes it almost seem as though they could burn the baby . . ." (131). In a Coleridgean multiplication of identity relations, Ruderman also points out that Coleridge likewise "intensely identified with her father, and experienced the identification at the level of the body as well as the mind" (131–32). Chapters 2 and 3 of *The Idea of Infancy* therefore form an interesting sort of global chiasmus whereby the senior Coleridge's "two hours . . . spent unable to decide" (95) whether he was elated or despaired by the announcement of the birth of his son are introjected in the body (as sickness) and in the mind (as poetry) of his adult daughter Sara, who experiences intense ambivalence toward her own little children within the "accessible space" of her sickness-cum-infancy.

The book's final chapters deal with Shelley and Tennyson, and poetics of dissolve and of dispersion respectively. Ruderman breaks into fascinating if not totally novel ground when he connects the eighteenth-century theory of animal magnetism with "what Coleridge calls 'correspondence,' and what Winter terms 'the astonishing power of sympathy,' and that we might think of as the capacity for dissolve" (159): that is, dissolving of self, dissolving of borders between the self and others. Ruderman likewise brings in Hazlitt's notion of

"chaunting," which "acts as a spell upon the hearer, and disarms [or dissolves] the judgment" (quoted by Ruderman 158), in order to argue that "Prosody, rhythm, meter . . . are experienced at the level of the body" (159). And because of this esoteric connection of prose, rhythm and meter in poetry, a poet such as Shelley is able to "produce for the reader a sense of suspension, alienation, and dissociation" (172), which Ruderman poetically describes as "the musicality of infancy" (174): a return to the "origin of the subject" (174) which becomes, in the poetry of Tennyson, "a concomitant desire to return to the infancy of English poetry . . . as well as to the anamnestic space of infancy's perpetual beginnings" (188). In either the reader or the writer, infancy thus represents a fragmentation, a space that opens up within the text, as artifact or readerly production, displacing the subject into a state of introjection, repetition, and continual self-discovery.

Ruderman's *The Idea of Infancy* has the unique attribute of posing, through all of its searchings and researchings, its somatic and psychoanalytic detections, and its multifaceted approach to Romantic poetry and prose, a contribution to a burgeoning theoretical formation on the subject of infancy. Such a formation allows us to rethink what we know about romanticism or romanticisms, because, of course, so much of the writing that we attribute to the period under question is unified directly or indirectly by a concern with infancy inclusive of childhood. And, although I have not much commented on it during this review, it will be clear to any reader of Ruderman's well-researched book that it is in dialogue with scholars of Romanticism and the nineteenth century: he is constantly bringing in work both old and new within the field in order to create an effective nexus of thoughtful relations between his special theory of infancy and the vast body of writing that has grown out of—sometimes as a rupture, and sometimes as a child—the more classical romantic definition of infancy against which his book pushes. The large array of scholars and ideas, not to mention important poems, that Ruderman works with in his book is a testament to the fruitfulness of the theory of infancy at work within it, a theory that will likely spawn as well as constellate new writers and readers of Romanticism for many years to come.