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reads
The Truth About Romanticism: Pragmatism and Idealism in Keats, Shelley, Coleridge
(Cambridge University Press, 2010)
by Tim Milnes

THE TRUTH ABOUT ROMANTICISM bears a purposefully misleading title, in that it is precisely the notion of a singular, self-affirming 'truth'—romantic ideal, or philosophical Absolute—that its author wishes to challenge. Milnes's most recent, characteristically terse and erudite work diagnoses a romantic criticism still largely in thrall to such a vision: from the lingering Hegelian effort to realise it dialectically, to the deconstructionism that exposes its fallacy, contemporary scholarship remains wedded to (or parasitic on) truth. But what if that concept need not be ineffable essence, or forever-retreating destination? Milnes argues precisely that it need not; that idealism and its legacies distract us from a far more quotidian, and finally far suppler, truth—the truth of pragmatism. On this plan, an extensive philosophical cast-list that ranges from Richard Rorty to Jürgen Habermas, Donald Davidson to Charles Taylor, suggests a revised notion of the 'alethic', as the condition of possibility for rational communication itself. '[T]here is no "truth" outside dialogue', Milnes summarises succinctly, 'but […] *because of this*, there can be no dialogue without a shared concept of truth' (5). His most ambitious step follows next: for all that they are commonly taken as radical antinomians, the canonical romantics in fact both anticipated and elaborated pragmatism proper.

Supposing truth to be relational and dynamic certainly permits Milnes' new answers to (or deflections of) old questions. In the face of a contemporary 'postmodern historicism' that 'produces a constricted criticism, watchful, suspicious, constantly doubling back on itself, fearful of ideological contamination and unhappily obsessed with the hygiene of its own methodologies' (191), the pragmatic imperative urges us simply to get on with the work of interpretation, convinced that by saying anything whatsoever we cannot but both presume and embody a notion of veracity. Amen to that, says this reader. And while the call to replace a hermeneutics of suspicion with one of 'charity' is unlikely to persuade poststructuralists or new historicists of more unbending persuasions, the desire to ease what Rorty calls the 'critical cramps' of modern discourse—a deflationist procedure that can now seem peremptory or over-facile in certain philosophical contexts—appears welcome indeed in the congested field of romantic theory.

The foregoing summary should give some sense of the counter-intuitiveness of such an argument (Habermas is seldom wheeled out in support of Shelley's conception of the public sphere); and yet, not least of Milnes's achievements is to tie conceptual incongruity to historical pertinence. This history unfolds both in our own age, and through the eighteenth century. The opening chapter, 'Romanticising Pragmatism', addresses the former, offering a fine summary of

analytic philosophy's striking recent rediscovery of literature. While its tour through Cavell, Taylor, Habermas, Putnam, Rorty, Davidson and Quine (among other stations) can feel more than a little whistle-stop, such a survey reveals a more fluid and suggestive critical discourse than literary critics often suppose. Not only is a thinker such as Quine revealed to have much to say to literary conceptions of semantic ambiguity (25); his related interest in elenchus—the truth arrived at through Socratic dialogue—challenges the received idea that analytic philosophy neglects the history of its own discipline.

It is in the succeeding chapter, 'Pragmatising Romanticism', that Milnes's argument really hits its stride, however. In it, we see that communicative rationality is not only the latest of countless optics trained upon romanticism, but also a mode of enquiry itself already in evidence during the eighteenth century. Milnes traces the means by which thinkers such as Godwin, Bentham and Tooke gradually evolve a 'counter-discourse' of truth as linguistic and intersubjective, which rubbed against (and was often ground down by) the two dominant discourses of the time: on the one hand, a naïve empiricism that clung to Lockean 'correspondence'; on the other, a self-purifying idealism that restricted truth to the psychological, transcendental—and ultimately atomised—subject. *The Truth About Romanticism* is particularly fine on the ways in which this philosophical third way struggles fitfully into existence, in the face of residual commitments to more ideal constructions: Godwin's lingering faith in the unity of truth despite his awareness of its dialogic underpinnings, for instance (115); or Bentham's somewhat anguished response to the linguistic relativism that his own philosophy had revealed (113).

Much that is strongest in the subsequent close readings of canonical romantic poets emerges against this enlarged philosophical backdrop. Milnes is surely right to suggest that a Godwinian materialism returns, in transfigured form, at the apparent height of Coleridge and Shelley's idealism; where for Keats, such questions (albeit in a less philosophical register) never really went away. The tension between competing notions of Socratic truth (neoplatonic essence on the one hand, elenchus on the other) offers a persuasive explanation of the continual oscillations of *A Defence of Poetry*, caught as it is between 'centrifugal' and 'centripetal' impulses. While Milnes does not push the case explicitly, the notion that 'Shelley's writing manages to celebrate the destruction and renewal of "meaning" while preserving a sense of "the eternal truths charactered upon the imaginations of men"' (143) to my mind captures perfectly the feel of a late work such as *The Triumph of Life*, whose ceaseless dissolutions and re-formulations efface any hypostasised truth, while also—through the lingering question, 'Then, what is life?'—refusing to give up on its commitment to truthhood.

Readers of this journal will be pleased to find a similar deftness toward Coleridge's own, notoriously treacherous, philosophical output. By contrasting his 'para-philosophical means such as illustrations, flashes of insight, aids to reflection and above all the willingness of his reader to be *guided*' to the 'negativity' of dialectics (168), Milnes offers one convincing explanation for the

striking absence of reference in Coleridge's work to Hegel, a thinker with whom he might otherwise have been seen to have much in common. It might seem nit-picking to suggest that a work of such theoretical finesse might have benefited from greater biographical reference: yet the central claims for intersubjective and dialogic truth would seem to be strengthened, not trivialised by, reference to Shelley's early pamphleteering (the experience of which never left him, as proof of the limits, in addition to the possibilities, of community). And although Milnes's chapter on Coleridge ranges admirably broadly, from the 1795 'Lecture on the Two Bills' to the *Logic*, it seems a mite odd that the discussion of the charitable, volitional and amicable nature of Coleridge's 'conversation' fails to mention *The Friend* itself—a peculiar exercise in communicative rationality, if ever there was one. All such questions are tribute to the work's suggestiveness.

And yet, for all *The Truth About Romanticism*'s freshness, clarity and theoretical sophistication, doubts continue to nag its central argument. While at several points the translation of romantic texts into a pragmatic register is sanctioned both by direct influence and theoretical assonance, the reader is often left wondering as to what that translation really implies. When *A Defence of Poetry*, or Keats's letters to Bailey, grope toward a proto-pragmatism, it is one thing. But when we are told that Keats's 'beauty'—famously equivalent to truth—and Shelley's 'love' interchangeably imply 'a connection between the theory of truth as communication and Socratic notions of deixis' (117), we might rightly question firstly, why these two poets chose different terms to express themselves; and secondly, why they might need either 'beauty' or 'life' to get at something that communicative rationality, by itself, could not. We do not need to reserve one specific role for literature, in order to summon such doubts. Nonetheless, some consideration of what Rorty himself might have had in mind when—in a stark deathbed essay—he stated that 'I now wish I had spent somewhat more of my life with verse', is surely necessary.[1]

One of the ironies, in this respect, is that Milnes himself has recently raised many such queries regarding where poetry might necessarily diverge from pragmatism. In a November 2011 article for *Pragmatism Today*, he drives home a fundamental distinction, arguing that

> […] by imagining a dialogue with a corresponding form in nature, Wordsworth foregrounds the constitutive role of the aesthetic imagination in mediating one's interaction with the world and with other people. From this perspective, aesthetic idealisations (such as visualising the possibility of communication through the image of a pansy) and public behaviour cannot be divided. For Wordsworth, the relationship between the personal and the social is aesthetic insofar as the normative forms that our thoughts presuppose are shaped by complex relationships between sense,

[1] Richard Rorty, 'The Fire of Life', in *Poetry* (Nov. 2007), available at http://www.poetryfoundation.org/poetrymagazine/article/180185; retrieved on April 29, 2012.

> memory, emotion, and pleasure. Rorty's flowers, by contrast, are Platonic and remote, detached from everyday life.[2]

Parts of the full-length work suffer from comparison with such fine analysis. Although *The Truth About Romanticism* hints at the significant differences that obtain between Habermas and Rorty's understanding of 'public behaviour', any notion of what this Wordsworthian 'aesthetic imagination' might itself contribute is harder to discern. Indeed, when Milnes's dissent from Robert Kaufman turns precisely on the insufficiency of 'critical aesthetics' as a theoretical category (129), Rorty's pragmatism increasingly seems a dominated and inflexible critical method.

At other points, the translation of romantic texts into a pragmatic idiom comes at the cost of a certain violence to the feel, or affective tone, of the works in question. A telling instance of this arrives with Milnes's analysis of 'Mont Blanc'. It is not so much that the central phrase on which he hangs his analysis—'an unremitting interchange'—does not represent a plausible description of a pragmatic linguistic realm. Rather, when we learn that Mont Blanc, too, ultimately 'confirms that the indeterminacy of "this" and "thou" and "I" is a product not of the insistent contingency of grammar, but of the interdependence of communication and truth, elenchus and deixis' (133), we begin to wonder—what *isn't* a demonstration of communicative rationality? Far more crucial, however, is a related question: if 'Mont Blanc' is indeed an emblem for the dialogic and intersubjective conditions of all public discourse, why does the speaker who confronts its sheer surface so often seem so terrified by it?[3] Milnes quotes with approval Davidson's statement 'that we do not have to establish, argue for, or opt for, a [true] basis for such judgments. We already have it' (35). Yet one neither has to be an apostle of negativity, nor a vigilant critic of ideology, to feel that the romantics may have regarded a monolithic world in which they *could not but* speak truth with a certain amount of dread.

At times, moreover, the question as to what constitutes poetry in particular cannot so easily be banished. In a series of readings that ranges from *Endymion* to *Lamia*, Milnes suggests that, 'by modulating between everyday prose and metre, conversation and versification, Keats deictically embeds poetry in what Taylor calls "a form of life, a 'world' of involvements" that can only be understood transcendentally, through the articulation of what is implied in our everyday engagements with the world and with others' (86). The suggestion that 'versification' might represent one instance of what Peirce called deixis—a linguistic utterance that requires context for adequate understanding—is

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[2] Tim Milnes, 'Rorty, Romanticism and The Literary Absolute', in *Pragmatism Today* (Winter 2011), available at http://www.pragmatismtoday.eu/winter2011/Milnes.pdf; retrieved on April 29, 2012.

[3] '[…] how hideously
Its shapes are heaped around! rude, bare, and high,
Ghastly, and scarred, and riven. Is this the scene
Where the old Earthquake-daemon taught her young
Ruin? Were these their toys? or did a sea
Of fire envelop once this silent snow?' (69–74)

indeed a fascinating one. But its debatability marks the point at which thought should begin (can the 'context' of prose and verse be so easily 'modulated' between, for instance?), and not the moment at which it concludes itself into certainty. Rather than taking Keats's poetry to do essentially one thing—in Milnes's view, to sugar an already mannered style to the extent that it becomes difficult for the reader to take—does not a poem such as *Lamia* significantly refuse the conventions and implications of the earlier couplet verse?

Such reservations would appear to tend toward the 'singularity' of literature, and its capacity to resist theoretical scrutiny of even the flexibly pragmatic kind. But they in fact go to the heart of Milnes's philosophical endeavour. In this respect, it is revealing that Stanley Cavell, despite being by some distance the most dedicated 'pragmatist' reader of romantic poetry, receives a comparatively cursory treatment (58–61). For a work such as *In Quest of the Ordinary* not only provides a number of sensitive, extended readings of key romantic (and American transcendentalist) texts.[4] More crucially still, Cavell brings to bear linguistic or proto-pragmatist thinkers (Wittgenstein or Thoreau) in order to demonstrate precisely those moments where what Habermas would call the underlying conditions of communicative rationality no longer appear to hold—those moments where, in Wittgenstein's parlance, 'criteria' break down. Cavell would agree with Milnes that the pragmatic, ordinary world is the only world available to us. Yet equally human is the (impossible) desire to deny or flee from such contexts, to deny the claim that the world makes upon us. This is a truth—a romantic truth—that Cavell grasps more firmly than a whole battery of otherwise comparable pragmatists.

It is vital to state that such concerns testify to the real originality of *The Truth About Romanticism*, and more specifically to the subtlety that its first two chapters inspire in the reader. Milnes offers us a rarely-bettered account of the impasse at which so much modern scholarship finds itself, and argues convincingly that, rather than attempting to meet head-on the range of sceptical threats, a continuing criticism has simply to push past them. Just as importantly, he advances several ways in which our apparently self-evident notion of truth needs to be opened to the 'evaluative'—not only through the Humean collapse of facts and values, which leads so often to scepticism, but in such a way as to accommodate, even, 'love' (125). This work, then, both excavates and enriches the 'truth' of its title—what 'romanticism' has to contribute to it remains, on the other hand, enduringly unclear.

[4] Stanley Cavell, *In Quest of the Ordinary: Lines of Skepticism and Romanticism* (London: University of Chicago Press, 1988).