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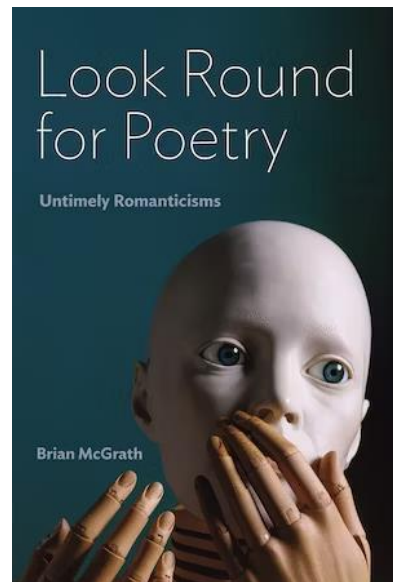
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Look Round for Poetry: Untimely Romanticisms

by Brian McGrath¹

BEAUTIFULLY WRITTEN AND UNCOMMONLY CLEAR, Brian McGrath's second monograph, *Look Round for Poetry: Untimely Romanticisms* is an argument for the continued reading, writing, and researching of literature and literary criticism. Specifically, it argues that romanticism, rather than a set of periodized genres, forms, and thematic concerns, can better be understood as an allegory of periodization itself—McGrath's preferred term for this way of reading is 'untimeliness'. The concept of untimeliness doesn't displace romanticism from its familiar eighteenth- and nineteenth-century critical coordinates of industrial capitalism, imperialism, enclosure, privatization, primitive accumulation, war, and the emergence of bourgeois subjectivity. Rather, it passes into the very language and figuration of our most pressing contemporary concerns. If we 'look round for poetry', McGrath argues, we will find it in the discourse of neoliberalism, the rhetoric of financialization, and the ideological forces of necro-politics and racialization. As McGrath demonstrates, to read in this untimely way requires that we read as 'beginners', that we follow Keats's example and abandon our own self-certainty; building on the work of Hannah Arendt, he argues that, given our increasingly alienating and alienated world, we should constantly begin again without knowing with any certainty what will come of our efforts. Despite this ambitious if not audacious critical itinerary, the book is a very modest 196 pages, including notes and index. Written in a clear, precise, and economical style, it is not only convincing in its claims, but is also eminently ethical and insightful and an absolute pleasure to read.

Like *Constellations of a Contemporary Romanticism*, another book in the excellent *Lit Z* series of Fordham University Press, *Look Round for Poetry* theorizes the continued relevance of romanticism via the concept of 'constellation'. Originating with Walter Benjamin, the figure of constellation allows McGrath to theorize romanticism's unique and often recursive literary, political, and historical temporality in a more generative, reciprocal, and flexible way as a 'theory of articulations' and disarticulations (14, 15). By focusing on the repetition of figures and tropes across periods, media, disciplines, and



¹ Brian M. McGrath, *Look Round for Poetry: Untimely Romanticisms*, Lit Z (New York: Fordham University Press, 2022).

fields—for example the figure of prosopopoeia in poetry and politics—McGrath is able to think constellations of structure and form in a way that avoids vulgar determinism. While it is not surprising that capitalism in its various forms and guises—catastrophes, detachment, racial violence, self-certainty, alienation—are central to the concerns of the book, what is surprising—to the point of actually drawing out something that feels strangely like hope from this reader—are the subtle yet powerful readings that McGrath’s juxtapositions of political and poetic texts engender.

After an introduction that situates the book’s arguments and methods, chapter 1 takes the reader through a quick critical and historical review of debates within lyric theory. McGrath does this, in part, to adduce the rhetorical opposition of hyperbole and litotes. It is here that *Look Round for Poetry* begins to establish its unique method. Having introduced the theoretical and historical frames of the 2 tropes, McGrath cites a speech by (then) U.K. prime minister David Cameron in which he uses litotes to offer an olive branch to the anti-immigrant opposition: ‘It is not wrong’, he says, ‘to express concern about the scale of people coming into this country’ (27). McGrath not only recognizes the poetic and rhetorical trope of litotes—popularized, in part, through its obsessive use by Wordsworth—recurring in political discourse, but he also recognizes the way in which language itself may participate in and/or short-circuit valorization: ‘When marketing to consumers, one embraces hyperbole; when managing the workplace, litotes’ (27). From here, McGrath introduces what he terms the ‘Not Lesser Romantic Lyric’, a somewhat tongue-in-cheek rephrasing of M. H. Abrams’s famous formulation of the Greater Romantic Lyric. Poetry, he suggests, may provide for us a way to respond to capitalism’s hyperbole in a ‘understated way’ (40).

‘The Poetics of Downturns’, chapter 2, reads Wordsworth’s poetry through the trope of catastrophe (literally, down-turn), displacing the more conventional romantic apparatus of apostrophe (turn away). Here, McGrath’s counter-textual rhetorical examples come from the world of economic journalism. Whereas the characters in Wordsworth’s poems trudge along rural roads with eyes turned down, the prognosticators of economic busts and booms try to look on the bright side, arguing that ‘recessions [may] speed up the process of productive economic churn . . . [through] “creative destruction”’ (59). McGrath is quick to point out that (a) the commentators themselves are not likely to be the victims of the ‘economic churn’, and (b) that Wordsworth also naturalizes the damaging causes and effects of poverty. His point, however, is not whether or not Wordsworth or any other poet may or may not be anti-capitalist. Rather he shows us how the ideology of downturns allows us to turn away from the damage done to actual living beings.

Chapter 3, ‘I Wandered Lonely as an iCloud’, begins in earnest to deconstruct any semblance of strict periodization. Whereas in Chapter 2, McGrath could look at Wordsworth’s actual responses to economic hardship, there was, of course, nothing remotely like cloud computing in the late eighteenth- and early nineteenth-centuries. McGrath begins the chapter

poetically, that is, using the resources of poetic language to demonstrate his argument:

We always read in the present, in the present moment, but of course we never do. The present always remains at least a little absent, out of touch, ghostly, out of time. Dissatisfied with older historicist methods that strove to place a literary text back in its proper context (though no historicist method was ever quite so naïve), readers of literary texts today have embraced forms of strategic presentism, anachronism, and unhistoricism. (61)

There are, minimally, two aspects of this fragment that are worthy of immediate comment. First, McGrath uses repetition and apposition to illustrate his reconceptualization of literary temporality. The repetition ‘in the present, in the present moment’ does the work of demonstrating the difficulty if not impossibility of present-moment-ness, something Percy Shelley demonstrates in ‘Defence of Poetry’ and elsewhere. The apposition of ‘a little absent, out of touch, ghostly, out of time’ enacts the very ‘unhistoricism’ that McGrath theorizes via Jonathan Goldberg’s and Madhavi Menon’s conceptualizations later in the same paragraph, a way of ‘thinking history through “connotations of sameness, similarity, proximity, and anachronism”’ (61).² The other aspect of this passage that I find exemplary of McGrath’s overall method is his reminder of the mischaracterization of new historicism on the part of some critics: ‘no historicist method was ever quite so naïve’. At several points in this book, McGrath speaks to a tendency in literary criticism that seems to be other than, or adjacent to, his own (new historicism, new materialism, historical poetics); each time he describes, fairly and generously, the arguments and agendas of the movement, including what they can add to whatever issue is at hand.

The majority of chapter 3 is taken up with the reading of Wordsworth’s poem ‘I wandered lonely as a cloud’ as a precursor to cloud computing technology and aesthetics: ‘If Romantic poetry anticipates contemporary media theory, contemporary media often extends Romantic theory into the future’ (67). As other critics have emphasized, clouds, vapor, smoke, etc. have important metaphoric resonance for romanticism, often taken as a figure of concealment and de-materialization. Yet, as McGrath convincingly reminds us, the dialectic of materiality and ideality in romanticism is vertiginous and vexed. While on the one hand romanticism seems to favor ideality and imagination over materiality and embodiment, it also, on the other hand, resists this same ideality. Having introduced arguments from various new materialisms, he returns us to the well-known quote of Wordsworth’s from the Fenwick Notes concerning ‘The Immortality Ode’. Wordsworth writes that often as a child while walking to school he would be overtaken by the ephemerality of the world and would need to reach out to a wall or tree to recall himself from the

² For a reading of ‘apposition’ as a strategy for resisting subjection, see Fred Moten, *Stolen Life (Consent Not to Be a Single Being)* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2018).

‘abyss of idealism’ (72, 73). McGrath seems to be suggesting that there is a material and undigestible kernel at the core of romanticism; on this reading, we are all versions of the childhood Wordsworth reaching out to touch a tree or wall.³ It is here, at this moment of reality testing, in this chapter about iCloud commuting and the dematerialization of our being, McGrath begins to ask several rhetorical questions that I believe begin to point in the direction of the ultimate argument of the book:

I suggested earlier and only half-facetiously that perhaps what makes Romantic texts Romantic is their resistance to romanticism, as if romanticism were nothing other than a resistance to romanticism, understood as the naive belief that one can know for sure that language is free from reference, as if the mind could know with certainty the ‘connection’ between language and world. Is idealism similarly the resistance to idealism, materialism the resistance to materialism? (81)

The chapter, and perhaps the book, seems to hinge on these questions—especially the relation between language and world—even as it is shaped by yet another question cited in the book, this one from Geoffrey Hartman: ‘How does poetry lead beyond poetry?’ This is a question McGrath attempts to repurpose and reframe rather than answer. Wordsworth’s simile—I wandered lonely *as* a cloud—represents a challenge to ‘the absolute formal system of late capitalism’, inasmuch as it resists the ‘very figurative potential of language’.

Perhaps the untimeliest chapter of *Look Round for Poetry*, and arguably its most affecting, is ‘On the Poetry of Posthumous Election’ (chapter 4). While it’s impossible, given the limited space allotted here, to give a full account of this chapter, I will try to touch on its most salient points. McGrath begins by rehearsing the history of critical writing about the figure of prosopopoeia, that is, giving voice to inanimate, unspeaking, or dead people or things. He then gives several accounts of politicians who died on the brink of an election but were nonetheless elected. This leads to a strikingly apt analogy: ‘In giving their voice(s) to the dead, the electorate, like the poet, animates the dead, gives life to the dead’ (92). McGrath then reads a poem by the twentieth-century poet Lucille Clifton. The poem, inspired by an actual murder in 1998, is voiced by the head of black man, the victim of unspeakable racial violence. The chapter’s focus on prosopopoeia as an uncanny figure demonstrates the ways in which romanticism’s obsession with the mutability of borders and boundaries does more than merely reenchant the world; it also gives voice to Marx’s own figuration in *Capital*, Vol. 1 of capital as vampiric and cannibalistic.

McGrath’s recentering of romanticism within a late twentieth-century U.S. context sets up a counterpoint to the voice of dehumanized black flesh in Clifton’s poem. He uses the occasion to think about ‘election’, that is, representative governance. In this context, lyric reveals the impossibility of

³ Quoting Paul de Man: ‘materiality occurs not when textual approaches are eschewed but only “by way of an epistemological critique of tropes”’ (75).

truly representational governance in a system of racial capital. In fact, the poem itself—in needing to legitimate its speech (the head reports ‘I was chosen to speak by the members / of my body’)—can be read as both a critique of representation and a call for direct democracy, to change the very coordinates that govern politics as well as poetry.

The final two chapters deal with Keats and Shelley respectively. ‘Keats for Beginners’, chapter 5, returns to a romantic-era author in order to argue for the continued importance of natality and its concomitant rejection of closure. McGrath shows how these seemingly subjective imperatives create the conditions for ‘a rethinking of poetry under commodity capitalism’ (104). In fact, the book returns us not only to core issues of romanticism—repetition, collectivity, relationality, autonomy—but shows how they continue to be inseparable from the core concerns of Marxism and psychoanalysis. McGrath demonstrates, for example, through a reading of trauma theory, the strange atemporality of cause and effect (107). The chapter closes with a reflection on the importance of beginnings in politics as well as poetry. Chapter 6, ‘The Grammar of Romanticism’, offers a sustained reading of prepositions in the poetry of P. B. Shelley. There are many masterful close readings here, but the overarching theme is being in relation. McGrath uses Arendt and Aristotle in order to argue along with Shelley that we ‘begin not as sovereign individuals, but as always already among others, among the multitude’ (135). I would say then that the grammar of romanticism is not only prepositional but also appositional. Apposition, like assembly, ‘makes a different sort of speech [and presumably, being] possible’ (137).

In my academic work as a romanticist, I often feel myself untimely, alienated, drawn to other disciplines to find comradeship and sustenance (music and sound studies, anti-capitalism, psychoanalysis, ecopoetics, etc.); it is as though the questions we are compelled to ask as romanticists are either unimportant, unanswerable, or have been asked and answered many times already. *Look Round for Poetry: Untimely Romanticisms*, unlike some other (less risky?) books in the field, makes me feel less alone, not so much in synch with the predominant ways of being in the world, but more okay about my own (our own) untimeliness.