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Puritan Legacies: Paradise Lost *and the New England Tradition, 1630–1890* by Keith W. F. Stavely. Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1987. Pp. xiv + 294. $29.95.

This is a boldly cross-disciplinary book, offering at once a reading of *Paradise Lost* in the context of 17th-century Puritan culture, and a reading of 18th- and 19th-century New England culture (both religious and secular) in the light of *Paradise Lost*. Stavely calls his approach a "combination of literary criticism and sociocultural history" (p. x). In practice, this means close, attentive reading of Milton's text (Stavely is a product of the "old" Yale) on the one hand, and a politically-engaged account of Puritan culture based on a study of literary materials—an 18th-century preacher's diary and the writings of a 19th-century newspaperman—on the other. His models are Christopher Hill and Raymond Williams; like them he seeks to find representations in literature of the "structure of feeling" in a culture. For Stavely the relevant context for understanding *Paradise Lost* is the turmoil of religious, economic, and political debate of mid-17th century England. And because Milton and 17th-century New Englanders arose "from the same set of cultural circumstances" (p. 3), Stavely posits that the great Puritan poem, *Paradise Lost*, will reflect the concerns, debates, and divisions within the Puritan Commonwealth established in Massachusetts. He goes further, however, and argues that since the "New England Tradition" is the dominant cultural tradition in American, *Paradise Lost* is a kind of record not only of the origins of American culture but (proleptically and prophetically) of its later phases—down to late-19th century apostles of material and moral progress and late-20th century imperial self-righteousness. Thus Milton's "influence" is to be charted not in American literature—Stavely is not concerned with the "relatively innocuous question of the ways in which Milton was explicitly known by Colonial Americans" (p. 2)—but on the culture as a whole.

This is a tall order, unattempted yet in prose or rhyme, and it requires of its executor (and of the reader) an interest both in the psychological details of the fall of Adam and Eve and in the quotidian details of mundane (and sometimes tedious) disputes and controversies in the lives of an 18th-century clergyman and a 19th-century editor, the "representative" figures Stavely has chosen to stand in for their culture. It also requires the author to paint his picture with a very broad brush, seeing essential continuity in New England culture from 1630 to 1890, and regularly finding "similarities" between the "situation" of Adam and Eve or of Satan, and the "comparable" situations of later American Puritans embroiled in disputes or engaged in ambitious projects. Even if readers aren't persuaded that the "similarities" are especially significant, they will still find profitable accounts in Stavely's book of both the Puritan poem and the Puritan culture. In some ways those accounts can stand independently, though it is clearly the author's intention that the accounts reinforce each other.

Stavely reads *Paradise Lost* as a kind of allegory of the tensions within revolutionary Puritanism and of its subsequent political failure and ambiguous

cultural legacy. The relationship between Adam and Eve reflects Puritan "ambivalence" concerning the proper relation of man to woman, and of master to servant. More generally, Milton's fall narrative articulates a debate between the radical and the conservative camps within Puritanism, between "enthusiasm" and "order." Here Stavely argues that Milton's "central concern" is in representing "the profound ambiguities and instabilities that Puritanism introduced into the traditional relations of superiors and inferiors" (p. 7). Satan, for his part, is an examplar of the "vulnerability" of Puritanism to various kinds of "deformation," from "sheer bellicosity" (p. 87), to the denial of all authority, religious and civil, and to the "secularization of the Puritan commitment to sanctification" (p. 91)—that is, to unrestrained capitalism. Stavely thus builds on the Weber-Tawney thesis about "the Protestant ethic" and "the spirit of capitalism." He follows Hill in seeking to link Milton with the left wing of Puritanism in the 1640's and 1650's. Whereas Hill sees Milton's Satan in the context of the heroics and degeneration of the English Revolution, Stavely wants to extend the context, and see Satan as a reflection of the triumphant "capitalist revolution" and the "self-interest, jealousy, and ambition" (p. 63) it fostered for centuries after 1649. Although Milton is usually regarded as wary of radicalism, even elitist in his sympathies, and a defender of bourgeois order, Stavely parts from Hill in arguing that Milton greeted the emergence of the "capitalist spirit" not with implicit endorsement but with warnings against "avarice, ambition, and luxury" (p. 69).

To think about the poem in these terms is to historicize and politicize. In so doing, Stavely goes far beyond the familiar suggestion that Milton's disappointed revolutionary hopes are reflected both in the poem at large (not a national epic but an epic of fallen man) and in the debate in hell, where Milton, so it is said, dramatizes the vanity and failure of revolutionary Puritan rhetoric. Stavely wants us constantly to bear in mind, as we read the poem, the political and economic implications of mid-17th century Puritanism. Inevitably he scants the literary contexts of the poem—Satan's epic ancestors and Milton's own complicated relationship to his literary inheritance. He overstates—perhaps polemically—the significance of his chosen context. Is the socioeconomic debate over protocapitalism really "the most relevant context for understanding Milton's presentation of the character of Satan" (p. 7)? Sometimes he labors, as in a strained attempt to demonstrate, with evidence from Milton's epic similes and the account of Satan's approach to Eden, Milton's attraction to antinomianism (the affirmation of inner experience) and arminianism (the affirmation of free will and choice). The wind that drives the Chinese "cany wagons light" (III. 439) is, *pace* Stavely, not necessarily a hint at the antinomian Holy Spirit, commonly imaged as wind (cf. the quite different "violent cross wind" in the Paradise of Fools, III. 487, not mentioned by Stavely). His central argument—that in the fall story Milton represents "Puritan relational dynamics" (p. 59)—is highly suggestive, but one still wonders whether the "dynamics" are not primarily those of a generalized Christian situation, in which the claims of self and God, obedience and freedom, are dramatically represented. In order to support his theme, Stavely must see the fall primarily not as a revolt against God but as a contention between Eve and Adam. Still, much is gained by bringing out what for me is still only one aspect of the fall. Stavely seeks out antecedents in the poem for

the divisions and tensions that surface in the separation scene (Bk. IX), and he is effective in detecting "psychic friction" (p. 36) between Adam and Eve as nearly as Bk. IV, and extremely acute in his reading of the long separation scene itself. Sometimes, however, he presses too far, as in his claim that Eve weeps in Book V not out of pious fear but "in frustration and vexation at the complacency about himself and hovering anxiety about her conveyed by Adam's tone and manner" (p. 42).

Satan, in Stavely's reading, transforms himself from "heroic, disciplined Protestant saint to heroic, enterprising secularized sinner" (p. 78). Lest any reader think, however, that this is bringing back the old "Satanist" readings of the poem, Stavely makes it clear that Satan embodies an *abuse* and a *deformation* of Puritanism—"outwardly pious, inwardly grasping and conniving" (p. 78). What is new here is not that Satanic evil is a parody of good, but that his kind of evil points to the historically particular phenomenon of fallen Puritanism, and to the results, throughout American history, when Puritan energy is secularized. Again, Stavely's suggestive generalization is more persuasive than some of his supporting claims, e.g., that Mammon's advice to avoid war and build an empire in hell "refers (as it evidently does) to the post-Restoration Non-Conformist and Quaker attempts to combine political quietism with industrious commercial behavior" (p. 85). *Evidently*? Or that the "demonic temple" in hell is a "remarkably accurate premonition" of 19th century mills (p. 84.).

The idea that Milton provided a kind of predictive "paradigm" for the development of Puritan society may be useful as a kind of metaphor. But Stavely wants to do more; he argues that Milton in effect predicts or foresees the course of American Puritan cultural history. Satan "anticipates" the results of secularization (p. 91); Milton provides a "prophetic tracing of our protracted and continuing fall" (p. 97). Milton may have still believed the poet to be a prophet, but a mere literary critic must try to verify the claim by means of a close comparison between the specific language of the prophecy and the subsequent event. Though Stavely repeatedly (and very casually, pp. 136, 149, 179, 256, 270) points to alleged "similarities" between moments in *Paradise Lost* and moments in the lives of New England Puritans, the reader will probably not be impressed with any specific parallel. Some humanist readers may well conclude once again that Milton simply understood "human nature." Others will object that Stavely treats Adam and Eve in the poem not as literary constructs designed to achieve certain authorial ends but as real people with inner lives, whose motives can be guessed, whose silent reactions can be intuited, and whose "sincerity" (p. 47) can be measured.

In Parts II and III, Stavely turns from *Paradise Lost* to two stages of the Puritan culture in New England that it allegedly limns, as represented by Ebenezer Parkman, a mid-18th century preacher in Westborough, Massachusetts, and Charles F. Morse, a late-19th century editor in the nearby town of Marlborough. Here Stavely turns socio-historian, and examines in detail the largely unpublished Parkman diary and the files of Morse's *Marlborough Times*. In his view, 18th-century Puritanism in America is no monolith. Instead, it is riven by a split between "conservative" and "radical" tendencies. Stavely quotes from the diary to illustrate the struggles between "order" and "enthusiasm" in the career of a small-town minister as he directs his flock.

Parkman faces dissent but he himself also embodies the "contradictions inherent in Puritan ideology" (p. 141). It quickly becomes clear that the characteristic Puritan dispute concerns a struggle between authority and individual will, as 18th-century Americans continually replay the debate between Adam and Eve in Bk. IX. Stavely joins those cultural historians who argue that hierarchical relations (between man and wife, master and servant) in 18th-century New England were not marked by "deferential harmony," as in some Golden Age before the onslaught on the modern world. Instead, Puritanism from the beginning marked those relationships with "chronic ambivalence, uneasiness, and conflict" (p. 196).

It should be noted that Stavely's analysis is based on two conscious assumptions that some historians will challenge. First, that "literary evidence" is not only useful to the social historian, but is distinctive and even central. Parkman's diary, Stavely implies, will "portray the life of the community as it truly was" (p. 12). But can we always be confident that a diary presents an unmediated account of reality, even if the diarist is a "highly articulate observer" (p. 12)? Second, that we can found an account of "the whole society of New England" on evidence drawn from two "individual histories," his "representative figures." To be sure, Stavely takes some time to examine and defend his assumptions, and he correlates the conclusions he draws from his archival research with the broad-gauge arguments of recent social historians, on whom he relies for the big picture.

The economic consequences of secularized Puritanism are traced into the late 19th-century. Again Stavely finds conflict rather than harmony. Many descendants of the Puritans rationalize and justify private material gain not as a sign of spiritual grace but as a benefit for the community in which they work. Yet doubts about the morality of commerce persisted. But in his detailed study of Morse and the *Marlborough Times* Stavely in fact finds few doubters. His own political sympathies show when as he assumes that the secularized Puritans of 19th-century New England, whether moralists, reformers, founders of schools and libraries, or boosters, are in in effect apologists for, and mystifiers of, the bourgeois economic order. They engage in "self-deception" (p. 242) or in a "flight from reality" (p. 264), and their effect or function is to hide or obscure ugly economic realities. Morse, for example, supports the principle of organized labor, but still insists on the "right to work." To some extent Stavely himself is unhistorical, complaining that late 19th-century liberals don't act like 20th-century social democrats. Little is heard of Milton or of *Paradise Lost* in chapters on the worlds of Parkman and Morse, though Stavely provocatively observes that Satan, "stiffly transcendental" and "compulsively competitive," would have been "at home in the culture of nineteenth-century New England" (p. 219). Milton might have observed that Satan is "at home" anywhere except in Heaven and Eden.

Stavely's socially and politically committed stance is apparent throughout this book. Some readers, accustomed to cool academic neutrality, may be put off. But Stavely's engagement gives him a kind of authority. He consciously writes both as an admirer of Milton and as a New Englander, concerned initially to chart his own Puritan legacy and subsequently to understand the way Puritanism has colored all of American history. He also writes with a note of urgency, finding that just as Milton once offered warnings to his own

contemporaries, so he speaks to the "successor Puritan empire" that still harbors a myth of "transcendent exceptionalism" (p. 15), convinced of its uniqueness and righteousness. In his brief conclusion, dealing primarily with Bks. X–XII of *Paradise Lost* and the departure from Eden, Stavely suggests that the poem "points our way forward" too (p. 273). But, perhaps wisely, he finds no more specific direction than that, like Adam and Eve, we too must "labor on in good faith" and "put one foot before the other" (p. 283).

New York University Dustin Griffin

The New Eighteenth Century: Theory, Politics, English Literature edited by Felicity Nussbaum and Laura Brown. New York and London: Methuen, 1987. Pp. vi + 320. $35.00 (cloth), $13.95 (paper).

The New Eighteenth Century is not simply an excellent collection of essays, but a significant event in the transformation of eighteenth-century studies. In their introductory essay, "Revising Critical Practices," Felicity Nussbaum and Laura Brown provide the historical context for this transformation when they attempt to explain why eighteenth-century English studies has proven so recalcitrant in responding to new theoretical approaches. In reviewing the major critics in the field from the middle of the twentieth century, the scholarly journals that disseminated their views, and the professional organizations—particularly ASECS—that institutionalized their conception of the relationship between literary and historical study, Nussbaum and Brown demonstrate the ways in which "the eighteenth century has fostered a criticism whose ultimate concern is the preservation and elucidation of canonical masterpieces of cultural stability" (p. 5).

For those of us who went to graduate school during the 1970s—and the publication dates provided in the list of contributors suggest that this includes many of the scholars included in this collection—one of the most exciting aspects of this volume will be its transgression of those traditional canonical boundaries in which we were schooled. The canonical texts are certainly well represented here: Michael McKeon's excellent contribution focuses on "Absalom and Achitophel"; John Richetti provides an intriguing account of the under class in Fielding's *Joseph Andrews* and *Tom Jones*, and Smollett's *Humphry Clinker;* John Bender deals with *The Vicar of Wakefield*, John Barrell and Harriet Guest with Pope's *Epistle to Bathurst*. At the same time, however, the volume explores works and genres either scanted, or completely ignored, by traditional scholarship. Donna Landry's admirable essay contends with the problems of writing a feminist literary history by exploring the working-class poetry of Mary Collier. Felicity Nussbaum delineates the difficulties of defining female character during the eighteenth century by using the scandalous memoirs of Laetitia Pilkington, Charlotte Charke, and Teresa Constantia Phillips. Fredric Bogel reads the canonical Johnsonian texts from the perspective of the "Grub Street" productions, while Carole Fabricant provides a powerful reading of the literature of domestic tourism.

The essays collected in this volume are also exciting because, whether

dealing with canonical or non-canonical texts, all employ methodologies that are not simply different from traditional New Critical perspectives, but explicitly at odds with them. The crux of this difference lies in the apprehension of unity and contradiction; Barrell and Guest, in writing about the long poem in the eighteenth century, provide the most explicit statement of this opposition:

> The article of faith in much twentieth-century criticism that the value of a poem is a function of the unity it exhibits, produced a considerable volume of writing about Pope and Thomson which argues that such contradictions are only apparent. We want to suggest that these efforts may be as misconceived as they have been unsuccessful, insofar as they are predicated upon the assumption that the concern with unity and consistency, was as important to Pope and Thomson as it was (for example) to Wasserman. We are arguing that the concern for method and unity in eighteenth-century poetry was accompanied by a tacit permission for long poems of mixed genre to contradict themselves.
>
> (p. 135).

Where New Criticism looks to resolve apparent contradiction by appealing to the privileged figure of the author, the "new criticism" represented here seeks to exploit contradiction, to problematize texts by attending to the tensions between what a work "says" and what it "cannot say." The considerable hostility that now exists between these two approaches can be explained by the language that Barrell and Guest employ, which insists that the traditional methodology has not simply failed, but has been "misconceived." In Carole Fabricant's more radical version of this critical manifesto, which appropriately concludes the volume, the attempt to read "subversively and deconstructively rather than passively accepting [the sacred text] at face value . . . is not only desirable but imperative: not as a matter of theoretical sophistication or trendiness, but as a political act no less liberating for our existence in the present as it is revolutionary in its implications for our understanding of the past" (p. 275).

For some the current struggle between competing critical modes constitutes a morality play, the stern, conservative forces of good, represented by a venerable New Criticism, ranged against the satanic evil of foreign foes like poststructuralism, deconstruction, and feminism. For others, Allan Bloom for instance, this struggle represents a tragedy, traditional, civilized values about to fall prey to barbaric, anarchic impulses that would suppress reason and deny the possibility of truth. For me, the publication of *The New Eighteenth Century* inevitably suggests the comic nature of this conflict, as one critical orthodoxy begins to replace another. The very title of this collection, in appropriating the "new" of New Criticism, suggests the comic plot, the desire to convert or expel, but, most significantly, to supplant, the blocking characters who must inevitably yield their place and power: "Walk sober off; before a sprightlier Age/Comes titt'ring on, and shoves you from the stage."

University of Alabama Harold Weber

John Dryden and His World by James Anderson Winn, New Haven: Yale University Press, 1987. Pp. xviii + 651. $29.95.

Frustratingly for his own epic ambitions of a lifetime, Dryden's career gives beautiful proof of Mikhail Bakhtin's insight into the dialectic and transformation of genre. Dryden was drawn into the theatre as a marketplace where a man with a tiny fortune and no "place" could make a name for himself. The strain of the epic against the dramatic genre showed itself in his earliest attempts at the new "heroic plays." A more aberrant strain appeared in his *Annus Mirabilis*, which conferred the luster of epic language on a sort of annual chronicle or state of the union report. During the ensuing formative decade, Dryden's epic/heroic foray had its greatest marketplace success with *The Conquest of Granada*, only to meet its marketplace fate of obscene laughter, along with its author and his heroics, in *The Rehearsal*—the two biggest hits of the Restoration. Dryden's revenge, his political satires, proved to be his best marketplace commodity. It's interesting that couplet verse, a form Dryden perfected to mingle epic with drama, should have served him best of all for political satire, in a quite innovative way, so as to put the newer genre on the literary map just when the heroic play was fading out.

There is plenty of food for critical thought in Mr. Winn's biography, even though he avoids going into Dryden's important work as a critic. What he does do is gather what is known and what has been conjectured about the poet, give it at least a preliminary and at times an exhaustive sifting, and relay it (I should say) ably and very serviceably to anyone at all who is interested in "Glorious John," the "Father" (dire word!) of English Criticism, he who "found our verse brick and left it marble," in Dr. Johnson's sepulchral phrase. Mr. Winn seems to have a soft spot in his heart for today's bright students who find themselves in a survey course. His many explications speak, if not their language, the language they gobble up in social science texts. He has an eye for the poem that can "make" a class—see him on Dryden's Stonehenge piece, if only as a counter-image to Johnson's epitaph. In a remarkably few years of hard labor (though it must have seemed longer) Mr. Winn has given us the first and only modern biography of Dryden that is factually complete. (Professor Ward's was far too cautious, and gave a quite inadequate picture.)

What is more, this Dryden book has benefited from the munificence of Yale (personified in the late James M. Osborn and illustrated by many fine editions of Restoration and eighteenth century texts). Librarians should find it not only a necessity but a bargain. It seems a bigger book even than Leon Edel's one-volume abridgment of his *Henry James*.

Lest the reader be shocked at the mention in one breath of The Master and the Man of Marble, all it takes is a few centuries' perspective to see that James and Dryden belong on the same level as masters of language—and especially of its critical mastery. James's prefaces and Dryden's prologues, epilogues, and dedications brilliantly served the same function of creating audiences for new ventures in the art, and both were mentors to generations of writers who followed. In one of his own few ventures into criticism, Mr. Winn comments that Dryden's view of literary history was generational, as from father to son. Even more, perhaps, it was traditional in the simultane-

ous sense of T.S. Eliot, which Dryden claimed when he spoke of pulling Shakespeare's own bow in *All For Love*, and proved it by writing the first real blank verse in fifty years, excepting only Milton's.

If Mr. Winn only had a fascinating stock of letters to draw upon like the one Professor Edel showers upon us, all would be well with his big book. There must have been such a stock of Dryden letters; the few that we have point to many, many more, all lost. Mr. Winn is not the first inquirer who deserved to find them; but in their absence he does not seem to have gained a view of the man that, as James would say, "makes him stand on his own feet." He might have built upon the evidence of repeated personal images instead of ambiguously noting "recycled familiar images." He might have constituted something like a "Dryden circle," and even successive ones, for they surely existed. After a questionable assay of the poet's infancy and childhood in the biographical vein of Erik Erikson, he seems to abandon biographical method, except the honorable one of providing the facts and weighing scholars' opinions in the full view of the reader. Mr. Winn's best revenge might be to do a solid literary-biographical essay on his man in about one-twentieth of the space of this book. Before this book, it could not have been done by anyone.

There are many fine insights, like the citation from Erasmus to the effect that praise may be used as a rhetorical pretext for advice or admonition, which is a rubric that explains Dryden's reputation for "fulsome flattery" of people like Sunderland or James II. Best of all is one that, sadly, is not followed up enough: the importance of the theater in "the reinvention of English culture" through a native tradition vitalized by influences from abroad. In the 1660s (especially during the Plague year at the Howard estate at Charlton) Dryden engaged in "voracious reading of plays and dramatic theory" in literally all the major European and classical languages (his job as assistant foreign secretary to Milton had been no sinecure). It's a well-known fact that the theater is the school of manners; but if we think about it, attacking, defending, and theorizing about the drama is the origin of the theory and vocabulary of literary criticism. To a considerable extent it provides us with the language with which we discuss human feelings themselves. From Aristotle on, most great criticism has come out of the drama, and even James's prefaces stress the dramatic side of his fiction. In its anti-dramatic rejection of closure, and preference for interminability and anticlimax, deconstruction has merely run true to countercultural strategy.

But if the book hardly hints at Dryden's international sources (or at his influence abroad), it is excellent on his literary relations with Settle and especially Milton, so important at a time when Dryden desperately needed to grow in a new direction. On the social side, Mr. Winn is alert to questions of class and provides ample leads for anyone who wants to follow up the suggestion that Dryden, the only one of four brothers who failed to become a successful London bourgeois, was a patriarchic throwback. Against that, however, he might have done more with Dryden's favorable treatment of women and the success of his relations with them, as a writer and friend. Instead there is a somewhat ridiculous inflation of the Anne Reeves business into the grand passion of a long lifetime. For that, let all Mr. Winn's unrewarded hours in the Records Office atone!

Mr. Winn has successfully completed an important scholarly task that no one should cavil at as deficient in certain respects of critical maturity and linguistic ease. This book is a very substantial one. With a chance to catch his breath, and some added critical perspective, he is in a position to make a long series of contributions to Dryden studies. He has certainly made it easier for the rest of us.

Temple University (English, emeritus) George McFadden

Wordsworth's Historical Imagination: The Poetry of Displacement by David Simpson. New York and London: Methuen, 1987. Pp. x + 239. $33.00.

From the earliest notices readers of Wordsworth have recorded a sense of unresolved contradictions in a poet whose most famous manifesto had led them to expect only "elementary feelings" generated by the "permanent forms of nature" and described in the unadorned "very language of men." In the *Biographia Literaria* Coleridge singled out as characteristic the "*inconstancy* of the style" resulting from Wordsworth's veering from a "natural *tendency* . . . to great objects and elevated conceptions" to a laborious "*matter-of-factness*." Subsequent formulations have shifted the terms while preserving the oppositions: one thinks of Geoffrey Hartman's Wordsworth, divided between apocalypse and *akedah*, of Kenneth Johnston's, repeatedly oscillating between the public project of *The Recluse* and restorative returns to the autobiographical *Prelude*.

In *Wordsworth's Historical Imagination* David Simpson offers the most powerful case yet for reading these constitutive tensions as signs of Wordsworth's unsettled social position, or, more accurately, for reading Wordsworth as the sensitive and eloquent register of the conflicts of an English society disrupted by the agrarian, French, and Industrial Revolutions. The "Introduction: writing in history and theory" forcefully argues that "there is . . . no such thing as a private or individual imagination" in Wordsworth's writings (p. 1), setting forth instead a Wordsworth always displaced from the comfortable position of authority Coleridge urged his fellow poet to adopt, for whom the self is only "a medium in which the world is already *there*, and open to inspection" (pp. 7–8), whose spiritual and organicist aspirations are always enmeshed in material event. "The significantly historical aspect of the Wordsworthian selfhood," Simpson declares, "does not then so much reside in its coherence as in its incoherence," but incoherence raised to representative status by Wordsworth's critical awareness of his own mind as the site of uncertainties shared by the culture at large: "his genius enables him to discover for his personal anxieties the very language that renders them objects of public inspection and subjects of public concern" (p. 4).

The complexity Simpson addresses he explicitly distinguishes as not that "of 'poetry', or art, but that of language in history; or better, particular languages in history" (p. 11). The drawbacks to this program I will come to below, but the subtlety with which Simpson conceives of both "languages" and "history" significantly advances the current understanding of historical

method in criticism of the Romantics. Suspicious of the totalizing proclivities of ideological criticism, Simpson undertakes rather to recover the multiple, mutually modifying languages and contingencies transecting each particular utterance. This end requires that history be grasped in detail, from the daily circumstances of Wordsworth's life to the patterns of landholding in the Lake District, from economic facts to the discourses of contemporary social debates. Throughout *Wordsworth's Historical Imagination* Simpson's command of primary information impresses, and he has no peer in revealing how these contexts inflect Wordsworth's poetry. In just those poems which a largely aesthetic critical heritage had dismissed as blank failures Simpson discloses the animating problems of Wordsworth's enterprise, demonstrating, for example, the historically specifiable echoes of current controversy over aid to the poor in the description of the heroine of "Alice Fell" as "one past all relief" (Chapter 6), or disengaging from the notorious condescension to his subjects of the speaker of "Gipsies" Wordsworth's own uncertainty about vocation and the economic worth of poetic labor (Chapter 1).

The intrinsically contested quality of Wordsworth's affirmations means that for Simpson Wordsworth's "agrarian idealism is more coherent when seen as a *negative* critique of urbanization, than it becomes when we try to imagine its implementation as a *positive* alternative" (p. 62). By apprehending the discussion of poetic diction in the Preface to the *Lyrical Ballads* as part of this critique, Simpson shows that Coleridge's attack proceeds from assumptions about the priority of educated speakers repugnant to Wordsworth's socially inclusive language theory. Chapters 2 and 3 of *Wordsworth's Historical Imagination* nicely place Wordsworth's portrayal of the statesmen in the context of the traditional attacks on luxury on one hand and the realities of the Lowthers on the other. Simpson makes good use of the still under-appreciated *Two Addresses to the Freeholders of Westmorland* which Wordsworth contributed to their 1818 election campaign to highlight the ambiguities of his position, alienated from the growing urban world and dependent on a patron who could not be acknowledged within his vision of a society of small-scale owner-occupiers. Where other critics have recuperated Wordsworth's more tonally unstable poems, like "Simon Lee," as cunning rhetorical traps, Simpson's strategy of reading such typical poems of encounter as "richly inscribed with the symptoms of [the poet's] own displacement" (p. 139) yields a new weight. It is provocative to consider that Wordsworth composed this tale of the decline of the manor Simon served while he himself was renting the manor house at Alfoxden, and to ponder why Wordsworth might then have transferred a local story to Wales (Chapter 6).

To interpret silences and omissions is a delicate task; the compelling thesis which has made them speak needs not only the support of evidence, which Simpson possesses, but also the check of a lucid and tactful awareness that the procedure is, if anything, too fruitful. In the midst of an otherwise illuminating account of the effects of Wordsworth's deliberate vagueness about the rural economy in "Michael" and his locating of the story safely in the past Simpson observes: "in making the family tragedy largely self-incurred, as he does again in 'The Brothers', there is no doubt that Wordsworth is avoiding mention of a number of other and perhaps more likely possibilities" (pp. 148–49). The use of "likely" here seems to me to confuse the facts of Cum-

berland life in 1800 with the created world of a poem: though smallholders were in fact endangered more by aristocratic (and merchant) encroachment than by defaulting relatives, there is no "likely" causality in "Michael" other than what happens. By bringing to the forefront of our consciousness the choices that Wordsworth excludes Simpson importantly emphasizes the nature of the world Wordsworth presents, but his commitment to a material explanation requires that Wordsworth be seen not as imagining human behavior in an alternate, perhaps equally valuable way, but only as "avoiding" the presence of lordly neighbours and enclosing landlords. "[I]n both 'Michael' and 'The Brothers'," Simpson argues, "the economic complexity of Lakeland society is pared down in order to locate the two families in a free space wherein their respective declines are the result of a high degree of self-determination" (p. 144). No one has more succinctly or persuasively specified the perspective by which Wordsworth endows his frugal, enduring, yet finally broken figures with immense dignity—but such examples of individual heroism, such nodes of lived coherence, are inevitably diminished by a critical mode centered on the ceaseless struggle of competing authorities in the wider theatre of culture.

Wordsworth's Historical Imagination anticipates such disagreement and renders it instructive because of the clarity with which Simpson enunciates his principles. Yet in choosing to focus not on the complexity "of 'poetry', or art, but that of . . . languages in history" (p. 11), to return to the key statement quoted above, Simpson always risks missing the effects of the ensemble of language as worked in a single poem. The argument of *Wordsworth's Historical Imagination* is more persuasive on the general plan than in the particular instance; the readings offered are sometimes not merely inconclusive, as they must programmatically be, but inadequate to other features of the poems selected which would in turn alter one's perception of the strands Simpson unweaves. The (predictable) gap between the theory and the text is most apparent when Simpson turns to the long poems: Chapter 4, on *The Prelude* and *Home at Grasmere*, does not approach the nuances that accumulate about the notions of politics and economy, its subject, over the course of the works, and Chapter 7 and the postscript, devoted to *The Excursion*, restate the problems of education and industrial society with which Wordsworth was grappling, but scarcely engage with the experience of confronting that massive and puzzling poem.

To lodge this criticism is in one sense to do no more than repeat Simpson's avowed renunciation of "a 'total' vision of Wordsworth's career" in favor of "writing in detail about a few poems" (p. 212), but the question is not merely whether the specimen readings can be extrapolated. Rejecting the fetishizing of the autonomous literary object, Simpson too quickly assumes its incoherence, thus bypassing questions of the effects engendered by the seeming articulation—not unity—of the language of a poem, and of how to assess those extended works where Wordsworth seeks to bring the oppositions which give the short poems their potently dramatic unfinishedness to discursive resolution. If those questions are to be framed in non-trivial fashion, however, they will have to encompass the arguments of *Wordsworth's Historical Imagination:* Simpson's study recovers the buried contemporary urgencies of Wordsworth's language, and points a trail that future study of Wordsworth will do well to follow.

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