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Book Reviews

Romanticism and Contemporary Criticism edited by Morris Eaves and Michael Fischer. Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1986. Pp. 248. \$29.95, cloth; \$8.95, paper.

"Without Contraries is no progression," or so Blake believed. Romantic criticism has turned to advantage this axiom, acting out its dramatic possibilities. Many of the earlier attempts to define Romanticism struggled with oppositions such as static vs. dynamic, diversitarian vs. organic, etc. Morse Peckham, among others, offered to reconcile Lovejoy's "heterogeneous, logically independent, and sometimes essentially antithetic" views of Romanticism in a blanket metaphor that still divided the kingdom between "positive" and "negative," successful and failed Romantics. More recently the locus of the debate shifted from terminology to a structural and epistemological confrontation between "organic" and "deconstructive" critiques of Romanticism.

The present collection of five essays and discussion transcripts, originating in a series of lectures held at the University of New Mexico in 1982-1983, belongs to the latter move in the critical debate. It appropriately features Northrop Frye and M. H. Abrams at one end of the picture, and J. Hillis Miller with Stanley Cavell at the other. A predictable starting point in this book is "the simple observation that English Romanticism" (why "English" only?) "is important to contemporary literary theory" (Preface, p. 9). This we already knew from Abrams's formulation at the beginning of *The Mirror and the Lamp* that made Romanticism a respectable subject again: "The development of literary theory in the lifetime of Coleridge was to a surprising extent the making of the modern critical mind." The underlying theme, gradually developed in these essays, is that the current critical debate in many ways reenacts the Romantic tensions, with one contrary pulling toward organic unity and the other towards skeptical fragmentation. This second thesis succeeds in partly unifying the five essays, weaving a possible narrative thread through Frye's recapitulation of the erotic and cosmological models handed down to Romanticism, and his critical references to a side of poststructuralism that misreads Romantic theory; through W. J. T. Mitchell's use of Blake as a "corrective" to Derridean deconstruction, but also as a model of "visual language" that places the contrary trends of logocentrism and textuality in an interesting relation; or through Miller's deconstructive reading of Wordsworth and his subsequent exchange with Abrams over the crucial issue: organicist unity or deconstructive dialectics? Finally, Stanley Cavell restates the theme from a new angle, examining the contribution of English and American Romantics to a post-Kantian crisis of knowledge.

This confrontation of "strikingly different theories of literature" derived from, or brought to bear upon Romanticism, becomes the main *critical story* in this book. In Frye's case, the exegetic narrative is a little more "relaxed" or "sociable" than usual, as if to illustrate the "secular" type of story in his classification. Nevertheless, it still retains elements of the first-order "sacred story": a certain didacticism, emphasis on ideas illustrated through quotes, a tight argument towards "general principles" and theses, a thorough ground-

ing in a critical theory and religion derived from Blake, though "much fuzzier around the edges, much less certain of /its/ certainties than Blake was" (p. 32). A similar demonstrative intent animates not only Abrams's review of deconstruction, but surprisingly also Miller's essay that caused that polemical response, "On Edge: The Crossways of Contemporary Criticism." Starting with the title, echoing Derrida, Miller's text argues that: there are two opposed modes of critical interpretation, one metaphysical, imprisoned in its own assumptions, the other anti-metaphysical, simultaneously affirming and subverting; that the battle between these divergent pulls is well illustrated in Wordsworth's "A Slumber Did My Spirit Seal" or any other text, for that matter; that "this particular text . . . forbids the successful completion" of traditional critical procedures (p. 102); finally, that "Wordsworth's poetry, in particular . . . 'A Slumber Did My Spirit Seal'" foregrounds a basic deconstructive theme: "the loss of the radiance of the logos, along with the experience of that loss" (p. 110). Unlike other of Miller's essays on Wordsworth, this one moves the critical conclusions to the beginning, constraining an otherwise ingenious analysis to follow from such premises.

This older essay, first published in 1979, may have confirmed part of the audience (and certainly Abrams) in their notion that deconstruction pursues a predictable, "invariable plot," substituting its own logic to the "text-as-constructed" by others according to the "old-fashioned" methods of reading. Abrams, in his attempt to dismantle Miller's reading tries to keep "Construing and Deconstructing" as separate as possible, describing the latter as a form of parasitical "over-reading." But just as Miller cannot keep the "metaphysical" entirely out of his "anti-metaphysical" reading, Abrams cannot avoid his own contamination with deconstructive rhetoric: his text admittedly "marshall/s/ rhetorical resources such as irony and *reductio* to highlight and exaggerate such features" of deconstruction and weave a story with one unwelcome personage: "over-reading."

Especially this part of the exchange, opposing "oldreading" to deconstruction, follows a recognizable course. The contentions are not new, they have often been summoned to rationalize our anxieties, our "edginess" about a criticism standing "on the edge." What is perhaps new is a certain weariness on both sides, a search for a closing (and enclosing) argument. In "Construing and Deconstructing," Abrams begins by reading Derrida and David Hume in parallel, makes a few perceptive remarks about their intersections, but then builds his refutation of deconstruction on a surprisingly simplistic view of language (tributary to the Saussurian dichotomy "parole" - "langue") and on a critical theory that keeps "construal" separate from "explication," or texts apart from their "supervenient" context (biographical, intertextual, etc.). In a typical pirouette across complexities, he concedes to Derrida that "there's always a discrepancy, which he calls a 'surplus', or 'excess', between a metaphor and its application. What I don't agree, however, is that this discrepancy, or excess in the vehicle of a metaphor is uncontrollable by a user of the metaphor . . . that excess . . . runs wild" (p. 176). Or he translates Fish's concept of the interpretive community as follows: "In construing the sentences of Milton's text, we have excellent grounds for the assurance . . . that he belongs to our interpretive community, which is no less extensive than all those who speak, write, and understand English" (p. 173). Exactly

this notion of language as "extraterritorial to history" and cultural evolution is at the root of what George Steiner calls "lazy translation" in *After Babel*. Fortunately, Abrams's own readings in Romanticism have followed a much more complex method.

J. Hillis Miller in a "Postscript" decries the "fundamental misunderstanding" in Abrams's critique, or the latter's self-confessed hesitancy between distrust or deconstruction, and occasional recollection of his "principles as a pluralist . . . in a more genial humor" (p. 165). One regrets, however, that Miller has traded his subtle strategies of indirection from a previous essay apropos of Abrams, "The Critic as Host" (1979), for a more frontal approach here. We also begin to suspect that Miller may have had an unwanted contribution to Abrams's "excessively fragile foundation" in critiquing deconstruction. Witness some of Miller's "postscriptural" reflections; his announcement that deconstruction as a form of "good reading" has moved from the limbo into the pantheon, exchanging an untractable "edge," for a pedagogical "bridge"; or the frank confession of a conservative bias in deconstruction "as far as the canon goes" (feminist critics have known this for some time), or as far as modernist writers "with whom you can spend too much time studying" go. Poems are credited with a much stronger "coercive power" over the reader; a passage from Paul de Man is read in support of the same idea that "the text imposes its own understanding and shapes the reader's evasions" (p. 122). Finally, the deconstructive impulse is relegated to the "safe area" of literature: "That is one of the things we need novels for, to assuage our anxiety about a subject by allowing questions to be raised about it and perhaps to lead us, as *The Egoist* does, to a happy ending, hereby calming our fears" (p. 125).

Miller himself draws the conclusion: "The danger now is that deconstruction might petrify, harden into a dogma, or into a rigid set of prescriptions of reading, become some kind of fixed method rather than a set of examples, very different from one another, of good reading" (p. 126). The question to be asked, then, is whether this confrontation between "oldreading" and "newreading" constitutes the whole critical story, whether this antithetical drama is the only kind of scenario Romanticism can inspire? Both the essays and the discussions suggest that this may be only part of the story, that "poststructuralism thrives more as kind of philosophizing itch in the critical community than as a method for getting results" (Mitchell, p. 92). We certainly recognize this "philosophizing itch" in Stanley Cavell's "Quest of the Ordinary: Texts of Recovery." His main theme (the role of Romanticism in redefining our "ordinary" habitat and dramatizing the problematics of skepticism) is appropriately developed through circular, constantly qualified textual moves. The reticence of this author in following through his speculative manoeuvres, is quite welcome after the argumentative aplomb of some of the previous pages. One can further appreciate the philosophic (Kantian) perspective which is brought to bear on the Romantic problematics, as well as Cavell's reading of Coleridge and Wordsworth in parallel with Emerson and Thoreau, the two figures still "basically unknown to the culture they founded" (p. 236). Especially Cavell's appended commentaries on Poe's "imp-words," are an excellent demonstration of how literature can serve contemporary philosophy, by setting in motion that "impish," speculative energy of language.

Mitchell's comments on "Visible Language: Blake's Wond'rous Art of Writing" further enrich this dialogue with Romantic texts, reinscribing in it a dimension absent from the other essays. In his interpretation, Blake's "graphocentrism" translates into an "ideology of writing," in certain ways more "scandalous" and controversial than "the subtle punning of Monsieur Texte." Blake and Derrida become allies in a post-revolutionary artistic and social culture. We begin to appreciate the extent to which textualism and deconstruction could participate in a cultural critique of those shared "regularities" invoked by Abrams in support of his "oldreading."

One important aspect, however, is still left out of the picture: the relevance of Romanticism to the larger phenomenon of postmodernism. William Spanos, Ihab Hassan and others have seen in certain formulations of Romanticism, or in its transition from a "rigid deterministic plot" to the counter-paradigm of subjectivity, a step towards postmodernism. More recently Virgil Nemoianu describes in *The Taming of Romanticism: European Literature and the Age of Biedermeier* (1984) a later phase of Romanticism that resembles our own "Biedermeierzeit": its characteristics are self-mirroring, substitution of allegory for symbol, irony, extensive borrowing, pluralism of styles, pragmatism. This later trend subverted from the inside "core Romanticism," calling to question its very existence. It is tempting to see this development as the natural outcome of the Romantic "secularization plot" described by Abrams; carried to its ultimate consequences, it resulted in a "secularization of secularization" (Nemoianu, p. 29), reducing the Romantic Weltanschauung to human scale and extending the original scenario into a "supplementary" plot that present-day criticism needs to examine further.

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Contemporary Literary Criticism: Modernism Through Post-Structuralism by Robert Con Davis. New York Longman, 1986. Pp. xiii + 511. \$24.95.

In his introduction to *Contemporary Literary Criticism*, Robert Con Davis repeatedly uses the word "paradigm" to communicate his sense that we are involved in a radical shift in the perspective from which we look at literature. This anthology illustrates that point powerfully, in its presentation of unsettling thinkers like Derrida, Kristeva, Jameson, etc. Davis's use of "paradigm," a word made current of course by Thomas Kuhn's *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions*, brings to mind Kuhn's distinction between normal science and those breakthrough moments when a new paradigm emerges. The very existence of this anthology suggests that the paradigm shift in literary theory has already happened, that it is now time for the new paradigm to be set in place as the normal condition which guides critical investigations. To some this process might seem melancholy—a signal that the age of theoretical discovery is over. But to me it means that the insights of contemporary theory can now be disseminated to a wider audience. *Contemporary Literary Criticism* is part of the process by which the infrastructure—the curriculum, the textbook, the syllabus—of literary studies is being revised in the light of new theory.

Robert Con Davis is a professor of American literature and critical theory at the University of Oklahoma who has previously edited and contributed to *The Fictional Father: Lacanian Readings of the Text* (1981), *Lacan and Narration: The Psychoanalytic Difference in Narrative Theory* (1984), and *Rhetoric and Form: Deconstruction at Yale* (1985). In this new anthology he has assembled a collection of essays which represent the main schools of theory that have emerged since the New Criticism. The anthology is intended for use in the literary criticism course, where it would be a logical complement to more historical collections like Hazard Adams's *Critical Theory Since Plato*, which is very rich up through modernist formalism but only briefly touches on more recent developments. Davis begins with essays by such figures as Eliot and Hulme, Shklovsky and Brooks, which illustrate the modernist urge behind formal analysis. The rest of the anthology, which thoroughly represents more recent theory, sees it as a series of responses to, denials or revisions of, formalism. In this view, formalism represents a point of contraction, with its tight focus on "the work itself," while recent theory expands the concern of literary study to include questions of history, gender, psychology, semiology, reading, and philosophical critique—which are the topics of chapters in this text. The anthology succeeds admirably at representing these movements; it will serve well in the criticism class as a balanced introduction to contemporary theory.

In most literature departments it is the criticism class that introduces recent theory to students. Other courses may make explicit the theoretical questions they engage, but the criticism course situates theory historically and ideologically, forcing students to examine concepts that in other courses they might just use. The great advantage of an anthology like Davis's is that it brings together a representative variety of recent theorists in an easily usable format. As a result, it is more likely that criticism courses will engage theoretical questions in contemporary terms. And that's all to the good. Undergraduate students need theory as part of their literary training. It brings them in touch with the questions that criticism is asking in their own time, questions they have often already half-formulated out of their own experience of post-modern culture. And seeing the variety of theoretical positions that the anthology presents is also good for students, making the complexity of the literary experience clear, showing that how you read is how you look at the world. From this diversity students can see how answers to questions in literary theory imply ideological and philosophical commitments. For example, reading Barthes's "The Structuralist Activity" over against Poulet's "Phenomenology of Reading" can become a way for students to consider questions of self-formation and identify that their lives in a media-soaked environment pose anyway. Attending to theory and seeing it come to terms with all kinds of texts show students in a new way that literary study is connected with their lives. Students who take criticism courses seriously learn to take reading and interpretation seriously, recognizing their professors' commitments and staking out their own. Davis makes recent theory more available for use in the classroom, and as such the anthology makes a real contribution.

Not surprisingly, I have some reservations about the anthology's selections, format, and structure, but they are just that—reservations about a generally successful effort. Overall, the organization of the anthology into a

series of responses to formalism works well, giving the selection a believable historical context, one which contemporary theory has itself constructed. But Davis could make it clearer that there is nothing sacred about this historical reconstruction, that it is *one* account of the history of recent theory. The selection of essays for the anthology also makes sense, though with some surprising omissions and inclusions. There is nothing from Foucault or from Bloom, Frye or Lacan, even though all are mentioned in Davis's introductions. The most puzzling weakness is in the section called "Depth Psychology and 'The Scene of Writing': Jung and Freud," which is evidently the area of Davis's own work, but which is very thin, not at all adequately representing the legacy of Jung and Freud in archetypal studies and Lacanian analysis. There is nothing wrong with the essays included, but the section does not feature any of the major psychoanalytic critics comparable to those who represent other approaches.

Davis's introductions to the chapters of the text and to the individual essays are clear and informative. Particularly the introductions to each essay will be helpful to students, providing a crisp summary which will give students a purchase on some difficult material. Davis makes very good use of George Steiner's categorization of kinds of difficulty—contingent, modal, tactical, and ontological—in dealing with the question "Why *should* the reading of contemporary criticism be so difficult?" One of the pitfalls of criticism class is clearly the challenging style of contemporary theory, not so much in any given essay but in a semester's worth of theoretical reading. Students can simply become worn down by the different but always stringent demands that these texts impose, until all of theory can come to seem unnecessarily complicated and arcane. Davis forestalls this response by explaining that the difficulty of recent theory is truly ontological, that it derives from theory's intention to displace our commonsensical assumptions about literature. If unity and wholeness and even clarity itself are to be examined rather than simply pursued, the reader must be willing to move, as Davis says, "from a world that already made sense to a world that is just now making sense." Further, Davis makes the point that recent theory has demolished simple distinctions between literature and criticism, especially in that criticism has realized its own textuality, its own openness to the instabilities of language and interpretation. I would only add that students need to know from the beginning that they will not totally master these theoretical texts. There will always be moments of confusion and ambiguity, and these experiences are part of what contemporary theory has to offer. They are not to be overcome but rather to be recognized as inevitable and even enjoyable as an experience of euphoric discourse.

One point that Davis makes in his preface, in a section called "How to Do Things with Criticism," seems to me to contradict the lessons of his own text: "For literary criticism is not intrinsically a discipline to isolate and study; it is an activity, a *doing*, in the human sciences, and one of the most important things a literate person can do." Sound as this may seem, surely a criticism class is the time to "isolate and study" criticism in addition to doing it. The criticism class is an opportunity for metacriticism, for self-awareness. It allows students to focus on what they do to a text, or to use Davis's term, to recognize the paradigm that guides their thought. For if we have experienced

a paradigm shift, the new paradigm is constituted precisely by an awareness of paradigms. We can no longer simply do criticism, we have to consider what makes the activity possible, and that can only happen by a disciplined observation of the critical act and a rigorous consideration of its guiding principles. Of course criticism is an activity we learn by doing, but doing without reflecting can lead to a belief in the self-evidence of the system of interpretation we develop. Davis needs to do more to bring out how the essays in his collection contribute to this critical self-awareness.

And of course they do contribute powerfully. The anthology reinforces one's sense of the richness of our era in theory. Essays like Derrida's "Structure, Sign, and Play in the Discourse of the Human Sciences," de Man's "Semiology and Rhetoric," Eco's "The Myth of Superman," and Fish's "Interpreting the Variorum" are simply great texts, whether or not we accept all of their conclusions. To read them is to be challenged at every step, to learn through the experience itself the complexity and even undecidability that the essays describe. Ultimately, students need to be introduced to theory not just because it makes them better readers of literature, but because reading theory is satisfying in itself. In contemporary theory the great questions of our time and culture are asked, and theory therefore deserves attention as text rather than as commentary. Davis's anthology presents us with much of that richness in a thoughtfully packaged form, and students can only benefit from the experience of his collection.

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