

**Bo Earle, *Post-Personal Romanticism: Democratic Terror, Prosthetic Poetics, and the Comedy of Modern Ethical Life*. Columbus, Ohio: Ohio University Press, 2017. Pp. xiii + 212. £65.00. ISBN 9780814213520.**

Bo Earle's book discusses some major Romantic poems in relation to the current state of literary theory. Both the interpretation of the poetry and the exposition of the theory are interestingly problematized by their need, as Earle sees it, to take account of the uncertainties of the contemporary environment in which both take place. He begins with a shout of protest against the debasement of American public discourse, in which comedy TV is a more reliable source of news than official networks or Presidential pronouncements. He then extrapolates backwards historically to suggest that comedy is the form taken by tragedy in modern mass society. Such comedy is not the theodicy of Dante or the dystopia of Balzac; it is more a cosmic comic reversal. Insofar as Romanticism anticipates, it secretes a post-personal understanding of the fragility of ideas of the individual, and so a re-functioning of the crowd or masses' own delusion of personal agency. This is Tim Morton's environmental subject of Romanticism put to work in deconstructive mode.

This densely-written, sometimes dazzling book, eschews insight to provide a raft for the inadvertent. There are different ways of getting round Romantic ideology. One is systematically to dissolve the particularity essential to aesthetic experience in a general discursive context. The trick is to preserve the connection that makes the translation plausible. Earle, contrarily, highlights the arbitrariness involved. Another is to stress the unrestricted metaphoricity of poetry, defined by post-Kantian philosophers, which allows it to reposition itself in non-aesthetic discourses. Poetry becomes a transferrable *Poesie*, whose idea, as Benjamin saw, was prose. Earle's book is a version of the former, systems solution, but one whose introduction of the contemporary wild card of the Anthropocene recomposes our world as a comedy in which every salvific move, since wrong, is necessarily comic.

This kind of reading of poetry continues the tradition of being against interpretation; it is a repetitive drama of continual abstinence from textual consumption within an eschatological ecology in which more is always less. Earle's work is housed within the comfortable hotel of American academic Romantic commentary on a selection of canonical texts. When other protagonists grow too definite, their untruth to an 'irreducible contingency' pays Earle's critical bills, giving him something to say. This means that he mustn't say too much himself if he is to remain professionally solvent. He must be the official receiver of the critical businesses of the others his reading claims to bankrupt. The results, it must be said, are often entertaining, instructive in spotting blindness, and never attempt to trump. The tenacious virtuosity in reading others is as absorbing as anything in the heady days of deconstructive play, but also is loaded with ultimate seriousness – for what has more gravity than the end of the world?

Like Hegel's unhappy consciousness, though, one longs for the real world and resists the idea that the Anthropocene has so queered reality that to want anything that is other than a nature without nature is nostalgia. The Reason with which Hegel replaced the individuals of master, stoic, sceptic and beautiful soul is now lodged in a discourse of loss obliged to mourn its own 'depletion'. The only consolation is the companionship of the bankrupt and bereaved. The book keeps unwavering faith with its premise. Earle systematically pulls the plug on everyone under the rubrics of Blake, Byron, Shelley and Keats. All are read in part to produce a compulsive bafflement of their larger projects, defeats that must never themselves achieve a compensatory certainty but must continually empty themselves of their own content. Adorno is occasionally allowed to shadow such negativity, but even his rescue of a minimal freedom goes under the sea of contingency like all the rest.

Maybe this is the kind of criticism we deserve, given the mess we've got ourselves into globally? In the age of an intensified consciousness of the Anthropocene, we can – must – only see that we cannot see clearly, with the rider that this incoherence itself limns a position of incoherence not a diagnosis. The discipline required to press every example of this critique to its (non-) conclusion is perhaps the only thing that undeniably survives in such a critical end-game. Nothing to say, but on we go, saying it for this not to signify failure. The reader alternates between thinking this book Beckettian, or decadent. We are left taking pleasure in the pictures of themselves that each shipwreck of an author's work and its reception throw up. Blake's 'infant smile', like Rilke's, is ineffable. Byron's 'sad eye' is as astonishingly vagrant as Bataille's. Shelley's 'viral prophecy' means that the 'one great poem' looks like a rhizomatic literary blight. As Keats's 'lame flock' suggests, as in all Earle's case-studies, Romantic introspection is shown actually to negotiate the crowd that rushes in to fill its solipsistic expansions. But these chapters are pictures, not theses, and so preserve their unreliability as rigorously as did Paul de Man's Schlegelian *Schwebung*, or hovering, between the literal and the figurative. So we can all get post-personal, but only to produce the latest person's highly personal criticism.

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