

Mark Sandy, *Romanticism, Memory, and Mourning*. Farnham: Ashgate, 2013. Pp. 188. £55. ISBN 9781409405931.

At once informed by and departing from the recent spate of studies on Romantic and Victorian elegiac literatures, Mark Sandy's book takes a refreshingly direct, meticulous, and accessible look at the 'self-questioning' (11) nature of Romantic mourning procedures. Readers familiar with the works of Esther Schor, Andrew Bennett, and Samantha Matthews will doubtless find echoes in this latest addition to the body of criticisms devoted to 'death, grief, memory, and posterity' (12). However, despite its ostensible connection to these 'cultural materialist discourses of history' (13), Sandy opts for a formalist approach in 'a bid to resist those readings that lock Romanticism too rigidly within its own historical moment' (10). To his credit, the study is unencumbered with theoretical speculations and psychoanalytic reductionisms, even though Nietzsche's meditations on memory and forgetting underpin his central argument that the Romantic discourse of grief 'reveals and conceals the realities of its own point of origin' (8). The affiliated processes of consolation and disconsolation – posthumous life and nothingness – in Romantic elegiac poetry are undeniably tragic in the Nietzschean frame, but, as Sandy's survey intimates at every turn, they also evince a highly symptomatic case of Romantic irony (even 'bad faith').

Comprised of nine chapters, the book is comprehensive in its array of authors and works. The first chapter reflects on the cosmic sense of bereavement which accompanies humanity's fall from innocence to experience in Blake's *Songs of Innocence and Experience*, *The Song of Los*, and *The First Book of Urizen*. Pertinently, Sandy concludes that, for Blake, neither imagination, nor reason, nor abundance of emotions can adequately restore humanity's lost spiritual innocence. But how this conclusion translates into the actual form and procedure, success and failure, of Blake's mourning praxis remains frustratingly obscure. The second chapter charts the embedded disruptions and contingencies in Wordsworth's 'consolatory vision of a circulation of grief' (34). Sandy's astute analysis of the lyrical ballads and *The Ruined Cottage* uncovers a profound disconnection between 'the spheres of natural and human activity' (41) and a lurking anxiety about the viability of 'a shared compensatory vision' built on 'the successful communication of suffering' (46). The third chapter explores how Coleridge negotiates his grief through an imagined, self-enclosed communion with the outside world in his conversation poems; disquietingly, it also exposes the poet's spiritual involutions as 'a carefully staged series of figural substitutions' which only ends in 'an increased realisation of isolation, absence, and death' (60). This movement from overstated consolation to tacit disconsolation appears to be the structural programme for much of the book, effectively replicating the very 'linguistic predicament' of Romantic irony.

Considered together, Chapters 4 and 6 are perhaps the most provocative and resonant sections of the study. Sandy's discussion of seascape in Charlotte Smith's and Felicia Hemans's poetry and his intertextual probing of the evocative 'frail bark' in Shelley's 'To Wordsworth', *Alastor*, and *Adonais* attest to the enduring presence of maritime imagination in the poetics of grief. Indeed, the book proves most rewarding whenever he performs such focused, almost surgical, treatment of elegiac figures (sea, bark, birds, snow, etc.). In the fourth chapter, Sandy rightly asserts that the poetics of Smith and Hemans 'both transcend questions of gender' and are preoccupied, no less than the poetics of their male counterparts, with 'artistic bequest, cultural legacy, and posthumous reputation' (77). Still, one cannot help but wonder if they are the exceptions or the rule among Romantic women writers.

The fifth chapter on Byron's poetic ruins in *Childe Harold's Pilgrimage* offers by far the most pensive – and Nietzschean – engagement with chronicle and biography, record and fiction, historical authority and poetic license. According to Sandy, Byron 'fantasises about surviving a-historically beyond those recorded figures and events [...] monumentalised as public history' (86), but his desire to forget 'paradoxically produces an imaginative capacity to remember' (82). Ironically, poetic forgetting, however wilful and creative, becomes another 'act of remembering' (90). In Chapter 8, this pervasive sense of Romantic irony seems to darken even Clare's supposedly stalwart faith in the 'endurance of the natural order' (148), as his vernal 'landscapes of love' descend nightmarishly into wintry 'landscapes of mourning' (132). In the end, only Keats's 'To Autumn' emerges somewhat unscathed by the angst-ridden and doubt-laden duplicities associated with Romantic irony. Sandy claims, in Chapter 7, that Keats's 'To Autumn' is 'perfectly poised between states of living and dying' because his 'negatively capable self' (130) simultaneously embraces the light of Apollonian dream and the darkness of Dionysian reality, no doubt a hard-won equipoise between consolation and disconsolation.

Although Sandy's book, for all its range of poets and coverage of forms, is limited by a visible underrepresentation of women writers (only Smith and Hemans) and a palpable silence on the fraught junctions between poetic forms and poetics of grief, it is nevertheless a valuable companion to general-purpose elegy study and a useful index to the continuities between Romantic and Victorian works of mourning.

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