

**Daniel M. Stout, *Corporate Romanticism: Liberalism, Justice, and the Novel*. New York: Fordham University Press, 2017. Pp. viii + 256. £95.00. ISBN: 9780823272235.**

‘Corporations are people, my friend’ declared Mitt Romney during the run-up to the 2012 Presidential election, an event that feels like a very long time ago. According to Daniel Stout, though, we need to see the tensions between corporations, individuals, peoples, and friends in an even longer view. The legal fiction of the corporate person, Stout recalls, dates from the mid-nineteenth century, but it derives from concepts of collective action and ‘material assemblages’ current before the Enlightenment (3). Indeed, historians and philosophers (from Jürgen Habermas and Charles Taylor to E. P. Thompson and Eric Hobsbawm to Ian Watt and Nancy Armstrong) who define modernity as the age of the individual have, in Stout’s view, paid insufficient mind to collective, corporate entities. The early nineteenth-century novel, Stout contends, embodies even as it diagnosis the corporate condition of modern individuals.

Following a succinct introduction, Stout reviews in chapter 1 the important role that ideas of ‘corporation’ have played not only in British business, law, and politics, but also in the ideas and writings that circulated through the philosophical edifice that we call (and usually associate with the individual) liberalism. Space does not allow a full summary of the case Stout presents here: suffice to say that the argument that eighteenth- and nineteenth-century law had to respond to the increased efficiency of mechanized industrial and financial systems by creating a non-human entity that it could ‘blame’ is very convincing. Equally, suggestive is Stout’s claim that the same logic of supra-human responsibility is evident in the Romantic theory of the symbol. Chapter 2 reads Jane Austen’s *Mansfield Park* against the backdrop of the long history of Manorial law (dating back to the twelfth century) and the indifference of the ‘structure’ to any individual action or responsibility outside of its insistence that all property debts be paid. Stout’s point is not that *Mansfield Park*—or *Mansfield Park*—represent some moral code to which the characters must (or fail to) oblige themselves individually but rather that the estate (a corporate entity) is that code and her characters, as Austen realizes, have little choice other than to obey.

On James Hogg’s *Confessions of a Justified Sinner*, Stout challenges those critics of (in particular Scottish) Romanticism, who have a tendency to distinguish between so-called “native” traditions and modern British values. Hogg’s exploration of Calvinism (a theology that straddles protestant individualism and collective adoption), Stout argues, ‘comes out against the viability of this model of cultural identity not by asserting the absolutely discontinuity between past and present but by seeing the very notion of continuity as necessarily involving forms of change and evolution’ (98). Rather than merely look to the past for a ‘standard of cultural value’ to set against the decay wrought by modern institutions on traditional ways of living, Hogg looks ahead ‘to emphasize the processes of transmission and co-option by which things get handed down—and without which nothing does’ (103). Stout then leaps ahead to Charles Dickens’s *A Tale of Two Cities* (1859) to note that during the heyday of liberal hyper-individuality, this novel was making a claim for the representationality of persons for corporate bodies and for the symbolic capital of characters. There is, Stout insists, no decision to be made between aristocratic continuity and rational egalitarianism because, as he puts it, the two ideologies are really the same. As an aristocratic heir embodies his family and its values, so the individual stands for the revolution and its ideals—even (or perhaps especially) at the supreme moment of execution. ‘The French Revolution’s prioritization of the general over the particular is so thorough that Dickens will formulate death—the erasure of particularity—as a kind of national

ideal' (119). Characters become mere representative numbers, such as 'twenty-three' (Sydney Carton's place in the execution order), of a relentless bio-political program that the novel itself formally reproduces.

Chapter 5 explores Willian Godwin's *Caleb Williams* to show that the wild 'swinging' in the novel between private ownership and public property (156) diagnoses a problem in English property law that during the Romantic period was increasingly resolved through the use of easements (by which private property could be publically protected and public land privately developed). But Stout also senses that Godwin's diagnosis could also apply to contemporary politics, a communistic suspicion of all privacy or ownership being a characteristic position of environmental thought from Coleridge and Spence through to Romantic studies today. Stout explains that he placed the chapters on *Caleb Williams* and *Frankenstein* at the end of the book because their ecological subject matter seems most pertinent to today. He is right, but I still found myself flipping back to chapter 1 more while reading chapter 5 than any other chapter: it could easily have followed it directly. Still, this is a small quibble about what is, in my mind, a breathtakingly original and important study.

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