

Timothy Michael, *British Romanticism and the Critique of Political Reason*. Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2016. Pp. 283. \$54.95. ISBN 9781421418032.

Concluding his radical Spenserian epic, *Salisbury Plain* (1793-94), a young William Wordsworth threw caution to the wind, launching into a rousing paean to the 'Heroes of Truth' remaking the world with 'Reason':

Heroes of Truth pursue your march, uptear
Th' Oppressor's dungeon from its deepest base;
High o'er the towers of Pride undaunted rear
Resistless in your might the herculean mace
Of Reason

By decade's end, however, after the Terror and with Europe embroiled in conflict, a number of writers we now call Romantic appeared to lose their faith in Reason, turning instead to examine what Timothy Michael describes as the 'governing idea' of this fascinating, philosophically accomplished, and beautifully produced book: 'the promise of enlightenment after revolution and terror – that is, the idea that one can impose some small measure of order on an often violent and chaotic world through the assertion of human reason' (1).

Subjecting this 'promise' to searching critique, these writers were likewise putting 'Reason' on trial, a process Michael identifies as key to 'much of the literature at the heart of British Romanticism [...] a critique of reason in its political capacities and of the kinds of knowledge available to it' (2), an important modification of the still-influential narrative of Romanticism as the product of political apostasy and despair. Rather than despair, Michael discerns in this inward turn a 'critique' in the Kantian sense ('the self-grounding of reason, the determination of its own scope and limits'), proposing 'a revitalized version of Kantian Romanticism [...] as an extension of transcendental self-criticism: an assessment of what can be rescued from Enlightenment models of rationality' (3). Romanticism, Michael claims, is the combined result of Kant's 'Copernican' revolution interacting with the spectacularly dashed hopes of the French Revolution.

The book is broken into three distinct sections. Part one, 'The Rhetoric of Hurly-Burly Innovation', examines the status of 'political reason' and *a priori* political knowledge in the Pamphlet Wars of the early 1790s. In a series of bravado readings of Edmund Burke, Mary Wollstonecraft, and William Godwin, Michael works to demonstrate that the rhetoric of these writers is at least as telling as their opinions. So it is that, in a sympathetic and intelligent reading of Burke's speech on Fox's East India Bill, perhaps the book's best, Michael persuasively outlines Burke's use of *hypotaxis* as performing 'the principle of subordination at the root of his social, political, and philosophical thought' (63), a subordination, in this case, to experience rather than reason. The account of *paradox* in Burke's infamous *Reflections* is less convincing, but neatly sets up the subsequent chapter on Wollstonecraft's 'association of reason with emancipation' in *A Vindication of the Rights of Men*, rescuing language and political thought from slavish, gothic accretion, and championing 'rational freedom' through *rationation* (85).

Godwin inevitably follows, recommending, in *Political Justice*, 'the power of discourse' and free intellectual inquiry as the 'proper and becoming methods of operating changes in human society' (104), a position he defends in his intervention in the Treason Trials of 1794, *Cursory Strictures*. Curiously, Michael makes little mention of Godwin's next pamphlet, *Considerations on Lord Grenville's and Mr. Pitt's Bills, Concerning Treasonable and Seditious Practices, and Unlawful Assemblies*. In it, Godwin distances his own properly

‘philosophical’ activities from the London Corresponding Society and the lectures of John Thelwall, both ‘well deserving the attention of the members of the government of Great Britain.’ Just how a commitment to individual judgement translates into the suppression of collective education would have made a fascinating and challenging contribution to Michael’s central thesis.

Indeed, the absence of Thelwall and other radical, *democratical* thinkers is one of several odd gaps in the book. In part two, ‘The Literature of Justice and Justification’, after a lively discussion of Kant’s influence on Coleridge, Michael’s otherwise excellent account of Wordsworth’s radical prose is limited by the absence of Thomas Paine, and an over-reliance on Godwin as the source of Wordsworth’s radical politics. Michael sometimes fails adequately to justify his parameters; his choice of texts can seem curiously arbitrary. It is strange, for instance, to read a study on Wordsworth and political reason that makes no mention of *The Borderers*. In part three, ‘Poetry and the Poetics of the Excursive and Unbound Mind’, discussions of Wordsworth’s *Recluse* and Shelley’s *Prometheus Unbound*, while competent and often illuminating, struggle to connect with the book’s central thesis. I mention these flaws not to discourage potential readers, but rather because, armed with this knowledge, the reader is best placed to appreciate Michael’s real strengths, which seem to me to lie in his wonderfully responsive readings of political prose. *British Romanticism and the Critique of Political Reason* is a partial achievement, but nonetheless a brilliant one.

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