

Chris Townsend, *George Berkeley and Romanticism: Ghostly Language*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2022. £60. Pp. 228. ISBN 9780192846785.

‘I refute it *thus!*’ cried Dr. Johnson, immortalising the philosophical reputation of George Berkeley with one kick of a stone. George Berkeley suffers more than most at the hands of the potted summaries that most introductory histories of ideas provide, and it is among the foremost merits of Chris Townsend’s illuminating study that it not only provides an intriguing set of readings on key Romantic figures, but likewise introduces us to a refreshingly three-dimensional Berkeley, one whose full philosophical sophistication is carefully brought forth and placed on clear display.

This process of de-caricaturing is a key focus of the first part of the study, which adeptly shifts focus away from Berkeley’s infamous doctrine of immaterialism to demonstrate the remarkably rich and suggestive theory of language accompanying it. One of the section’s subtitles, ‘The Language of Philosophy’, is a felicitous inversion of the standard framing, drawing out Berkeley’s fascination not only with the more conceptual questions of the relation between language, thought, and reality, but also with the formal matter of how philosophy ought to be written. The crux of this account concerns Berkeley’s effort to get beyond the restrictions of Lockean nominalism, whereby words are thought of as little more than empty vessels for ferrying mental content between minds. Drawing on a wide range of sources and scholarship, Townsend charts how Berkeley’s view of language complicates a conventional Enlightenment desire for ‘clarity’ and ‘distinctness’, opening up a whole array of expressive, emotional, and rhetorical dimensions, which he identifies as crucial supports for quintessential Romantic motifs such as the valorisation of poetic form and the lived experience of nature as a form of divine language. By placing emphasis on words as possessing not only representational ‘content’, but a whole array of expressive ‘powers’, Townsend draws out a range of possibilities for thinking about language that sets the upcoming dialogue with Romanticism on a considerably more substantive footing. In addition to the theory, we are also shown an intriguingly literary Berkeley in his own right, actively experimenting with the potential to convey his own ideas through the medium of verse and fully aware ‘that the activity of writing cannot be disentangled from the activity of thinking’ (54).

The second part of the study turns its attention to tracing the various philosophical considerations unpacked in the first through four canonical Romantic figures: William Blake, Samuel Taylor Coleridge, William Wordsworth, and Percy Shelley, and concludes by offering reflections on how Berkeleian thought can inform thinking about Romanticism more broadly. A distinctive quality of all four of these sections is that Townsend is careful to measure the weight of his claims to influence, showing a healthy awareness both for where the relevant similarities begin and end, and for situating each figure’s engagement with Berkeley within a complex wider context of reading and thinking. Each section addresses a slightly different philosophical problematic: Blake’s effort to articulate ‘a spiritualized approach to material bodies and embodiment’ (56), Coleridge’s preoccupation with perpetual objectivity and the development of a ‘spiritualized symbology’ (118), Wordsworth’s ‘critique of abstract reason’ (139) and fascination with nature as a body of divine language, and Shelley’s ‘subject-centred understanding of self and world’ (175) that struggles against solipsistic skepticism. In each case, Townsend identifies how particular elements of Berkeleian thinking insert themselves into each figure’s negotiation of the problems at hand, charting each engagement through a combination of poetry and prose in a compelling and lucid manner. What is perhaps most striking is how Berkeley never emerges as the master-key standing to fully unlock the Romantics, but always as one thread within a weave, exerting subtle and individualised pressures on the poets’ thoughts and works. Indeed, in almost every case the analysis is framed in terms of how Berkeley helps the Romantics to intellectually triangulate themselves in

relation to other philosophical influences: Blake to John Locke, Coleridge to Immanuel Kant, Wordsworth to William Godwin, and Shelley to David Hume. It is noteworthy that Townsend's broader thinking in the conclusion draws openly on the aesthetics of Theodor Adorno, and one can sense the interpretive strategy of *Dialectic of Enlightenment* operating throughout. Berkeley's various doctrines are never quite accepted wholesale, but instead grappled with as ideas that cannot be satisfactorily jettisoned until their kernel has been extracted and woven back into each thinker's distinctive philosophical outlook.

Townsend's study is essential reading for any scholar with an interest in the philosophy of the Romantic period, its reception of Enlightenment, and its thinking about poetic form. Berkeley's philosophical significance for Romanticism is drawn out in a manner that goes well beyond piecemeal affinities, presenting a bold and convincing case that reminds us that literature and philosophy not only interact constantly within the period, but also actively and creatively question each other's conceptual boundaries.

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