Alexander Dick, *Romanticism and the Gold Standard: Money, Literature, and Economic Debate in Britain 1790-1830*. Basingstoke and New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2013. Pp. 264. £53. ISBN 9781137292919.

David E. Latané, *William Maginn and the British Press: A Critical Biography*. Farnham: Ashgate, 2013. Pp. 362. £63. ISBN 9781409449416.

The Romantics were never terribly interested in debates about money, judging by some of our most entrenched views of them. Or so we used to think, but in recent years a number of scholars have revised this impression by demonstrating just how engaged Romantic writers were with debates about commerce and how deeply integrated these monetary issues were with more profound metaphysical questions about emerging forms of individual and social identity. Alexander Dick's *Romanticism and the Gold Standard* tackles these issues by exploring the ways that ideas about Romanticism were bound up with a set of debates that circulated in the opening decades of the nineteenth century in the wake of the government's 1797 decision to suspend cash payments after that year's invasion scare had triggered a run on the banks. The turmoil that followed this decision culminated in the government's eventual decision to adopt the gold standard in 1816. The idea never really worked. Market crises and jarring social inequalities remained familiar aspects of British life, but as a result of these debates, 'the idea that Britain had a standard became one of the keystones of nineteenth-century economic, social, and even religious thought' (ix). These ongoing problems may have suggested the darker truth that the ideal of a standard, whether based on gold or anything else, was at best a necessary fiction, but this did little to diminish the strength of the idea's appeal.

This tension constitutes Dick's historical and theoretical starting point: 'How did an economic principle that everyone knew did not really work come to play such a central role in British national identity and intellectual culture?' (2-3). Giving this question its full weight, Dick sets out to explore not just "the networks of exchange and information that made up the standard" in the Romantic period, but even more ambitiously, the way that what we now think of as Romanticism became a means of engaging with these questions without subscribing to the illusion of any final answers. In other words, Romanticism emerged as a set of cultural dynamics that enabled people 'to accept as a fundamental standard that there are no standards.' Or to put this more radically, 'Romanticism *is* the standard' (ix, 9).

Having set out the cultural landscape by exploring 'The Bullion Controversy' which raged between 1810 when the Select Committee on Bullion issued its report, and 1812 when its recommendations were rejected by the House of Commons, delineating the main lines of contention and developing the more theoretical issues at stake, Dick turns his focus to the ways that Coleridge's ongoing pronouncements on economic issues, from questions about the national debt and taxation to debates about paper money, reflected his sense of the profoundly metaphysical dimension of these issues – a theologically inflected perspective that marks Dick's turn to a more direct focus on the ways that these various economic debates helped to foster the idea of Romanticism. From the series of six editorials he published in the *Courier* in 1811-12 entitled 'The Bullion Controversy' to his 1809 article on taxation in *The Friend* to his economic reflections in the Lay Sermons, Coleridge's analyses were driven by a fundamental recognition of the need to forge 'an ethics for a world without standards' – a world where the very idea of 'the standard' could, like his theory of the symbol, only be realized as something that was

forever in process: a concept that retained its persuasive force and stabilizing power to the extent that it remained something evermore about to be (102).

Shelley and Coleridge may have agreed on little else when it came to politics, but, as Dick points out, they shared an antipathy towards the heartless calculations of political economy and, more positively, an emphasis on 'the poetic spirit' as 'a unifying force that exists through and in the mutual respect of individuals' and which 'represents in this perspective a fairly straightforward call for a universal standard of value' (111). Their shared understanding of the inherently contradictory but philosophically necessary nature of this position would eventually 'become the basis for a new mode of late Romantic poetics, one that in its engagement with economic debates and its experiments with self-conscious modes of poetic failure and collapse, reformulates Shelleyan confidence into a new dynamic of aesthetic embarrassment' or acute self-consciousness and perplexity (111). In this contradictory state, literature 'does not simply represent the standard of value: it *is* the standard' (130).

Having extended his argument about literature's paradoxical role in a world without standards to readings of Keats and Byron, as well to more topical works such as Thomas Moore's *Odes on Cash, Corn and Catholics* (1828) and Thomas Love Peacock's *Paper Money Lyrics* (1825-26), Dick's argument culminates in a final chapter on the ways that the early nineteenth-century novelists, and particularly Jane Austen and Walter Scott, responded by reframing the debate in terms of the ongoing power of nationalism, not as a means of insisting on the availability of a standard but, picking up the central theoretical trope that runs through the book, by constructing the genre of the novel as a site of 'embarrassment' or intense self-consciousness that articulates a 'new kind of standard' by performing the contradictions of the age (175). Dick's ability to combine careful attention to the age's debates about monetary issues with a more speculative sense of the broader theoretical possibilities generated by the idea of the standard in its various forms constitutes an important addition to these discussions.

David Latané's biography of William Maginn offers an equally fresh perspective on Romantic literature by zeroing in on one of the age's most elusive but influential writers. Maginn's highly allusive style, love of pseudonyms and collaborative writing, and increasing debauchery as his exuberant socializing and weakness for drink took their toll, all make him a challenging target for any biographer, but Latané does an impressive job of balancing an appraisal of Maginn's extraordinary achievements with an honest sense of his shortcomings. Maginn was an uncompromising ultra-Tory from the beginning, immersing himself in the literary coteries that gathered around various conservative periodicals and newspapers, especially *Blackwood's Edinburgh Magazine*, whose freewheeling tone suited him perfectly. He quickly became a prominent contributor, most notably to *Noctes Ambrosianæ* which featured 'Ensign Morgan Odoherty.' O'Doherty's description of Maga, as *Blackwood's* was known, 'doing all that ever these folks could do in one Number, and then undoing it in the next, -- puffing, deriding, sneering, jeering, prosing, piping, and so forth,' was a perfect description of Maginn's relentlessly ironic style generally (42).

A prominent figure at both ends of the journalistic spectrum, from the most respectable periodicals of the day to more scurrilous rags, Maginn made a career of sailing dangerously close to the wind, relentlessly lampooning powerful figures though he was always in demand by editors and publishers. His reputation for '360° satire' had its price though (132). At one time or another he knew just about every literary figure of the age, though few of them knew quite what to make of Maginn. With a young family to support, Maginn had hoped to land a stable government appointment but no offer arrived. Instead, his next important opportunity came with

the 1830 launch of the monthly periodical *Fraser's Magazine* in which he played a leading role on both the literary and business sides. The magazine's spirit of playful erudition suited Maginn perfectly (124). So too did its collaborative approach. 'From the beginning the Fraserians gathered around a large roundtable in the back of Fraser's shop […] where the magazine was created in a masculine spirit of bonhomie, fun, and a haze of alcohol' (125). Literary success was never free of personal difficulties though. While early colleagues were aging into sedate dignity, Maginn was carousing with an increasingly mixed group in Fraser's back parlour and hiding from bailiffs in the Irish slums of St. Giles, but Latané's study does a fine job of balancing a careful assessment of Maginn's excesses with an appreciation of his immense productivity. Latané has offered an extraordinary picture of the bustling world of literary London that, like Dick's study of monetary debates, runs against the grain of Romantic stereotypes of creative genius. In doing so, both books offer compelling accounts for the importance of Romantic literature.

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