
Jerome Christensen. *Romanticism at the End of History*. Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 2000. 236p.

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Scholars of Romanticism find themselves facing a “climate of anti-Romantic ideology” (177) that ranges from a critique of the ideas of Romanticism and the methods formerly used to analyze Romantic texts to a denial of the field of Romanticism altogether. Arguing that a definition of Romanticism is almost impossible to agree on, scholars have begun to redefine their area as the long eighteenth century and to explore the assumptions inherent in criticism of Romantic texts. Leading this charge are the New Historicists, such as Alan Liu and Marjorie Levinson, who have been profoundly affected by the publication of Jerome McGann’s *Romantic Ideology*. At the same time, studies of rediscovered texts written by women have complicated our view of Romanticism. Emerging from this dynamic restructuring of the field, Jerome Christensen’s *Romanticism at the End of History* provides a refreshingly new discussion of Romanticism that focuses on the use of Romantic texts and Romantic ideas instead of on their critique.

Structuring his argument around the dates 1798, 1802, and 1815, Jerome Christensen discusses how English Romantic male writers defined their relationship to the social events occurring at the turn of the century, which appeared to mark the end of history. These dates, significant because they represent times of war, truce, and peace, allow the author to discuss the construction of new world pictures at times of transition and social crisis. Christensen argues that wartime produces writing that reports incidents in episodic structures that “implicates the noncombatant auditor or reader in its narrative unfolding” (5), such as Coleridge’s “Fears in Solitude” and “Christabel” or Wordsworth’s “Salisbury Plain” and “Ruined Cottage.” Truce brings about the publication of the “Immortality Ode” and Coleridge’s reporting of the seduction of the Maid of Buttermere, showing both the hope for a new future and the suspicion of intrigue present during a time of suspended hostilities. Finally, peace time allows Coleridge, Scott, Wordsworth, and Byron to “think the posthistorical” (7). In this way, Christensen connects the Romantics to us today, living at the end of the Cold War, in a time of technological innovation and fragmenting, dislocating change.

Building on his earlier work about Byron, *Lord Byron’s Strength: Romantic Writing and Commercial Society*, which explores the importance of Romantic anachronism, Christensen argues against critics like Jerome McGann who believe that the Romantics refuse to “recognize history,” instead insisting on the Romantics’ “will-

ful commission of anachronism” (25). Through close, provocative readings of Wordsworth’s poetry, Coleridge’s journalism, De Quincey’s *Confessions*, and Scott’s *Waverley*, Christensen provides a new path for Romantic studies, one which does not attempt to condemn Romanticism as a denial of history and social injustice.

His fresh take on the “color of imagination” provides new insights into the connection between the lives and works of Wordsworth and Coleridge. Christensen argues that Wordsworth understands the stabilizing power of meter. The bringing forth of a new and strange language suitable for the future is dependent both on Wordsworth’s poetry and Coleridge’s criticism.

Perhaps the most interesting part of the book is Chapter Four’s discussion of “dark Romanticism.” Christensen clearly illustrates how dark Romanticism is neither a negation nor an antithesis of Romantic idealism. Instead he argues for the essential conspiratorial nature of Romanticism, providing a framework in which to fit the most difficult and perplexing pieces of the Romantic canon. By exploring the Maid of Buttermere scandal, Christensen demonstrates that Romanticism “requires a conspiracy view of history in order to do justice to its keen sense of the intimate analogy of the person with the political” (152). In addition, he analyzes the contradictory sides of Romantic hope.

The first six chapters lay the groundwork for the last chapter, which attempts to address the particular problems of the humanities in the modern university. He describes a Romantic ethics that provides a touchstone for the transition of the university from an hierarchical world of false oppositions to a “humane world of collaborative labor” (192). He wishes to use the conspiratorial nature of Romanticism to restore the common world and envisions this as the future of the humanities through the use of poetry and computers.

Although Frank McConnell calls this work “the most brilliant, comprehensive, and humanizing discussion of Romanticism” (book jacket), the entire book is centered on a Romanticism defined by Wordsworth and Coleridge. All of the new research being completed on women writers is completely ignored by the author. His view of a new way to study the humanities in the university also seems primarily focused around a project he was involved with at Johns Hopkins Center for Digital Media Research and Development. Thus, in the end, he provides an interesting but disappointingly narrow view of Romanticism and its usefulness for the world of academe today.