
REVIEWS

British Romanticism

James Chandler. *England in 1819: The Politics of Literary Culture and the Case of Romantic Historicism*. Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, 1998. 584p.

Stephen Gill. *Wordsworth and the Victorians*. Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1998. 346p.

Tom Paulin. *The Day-Star Of Liberty: William Hazlitt's Radical Style*. London: Faber & Faber, 1998. 382p.

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To study Romanticism in the English-speaking world in the late 1990s is, by a broad but not all-inclusive consensus, to historicize, “to make the category of the historical situation,” which, James Chandler notes, means “to produce historical situations.” All three of these works consider and construct, or produce, “historical situations” and yet they are very different books.

Chandler’s *England in 1819* grew out of a graduate seminar that focused on the historical situation in England this year when so many significant literary works were written and published. Chandler later came to see that the rationale (or the genealogy of the rationale) of the seminar, like the practice of so much of the scholarly criticism of the 1980s and 1990s, was not exactly transparent. His book aims not only to look at the historical situation of 1819 — the year of the “Peterloo” massacre, and the year, according to E. P. Thompson and other left-leaning historians, when Britain came as close to revolution as it had since the 1640s — but also “to ask about this academic habit of restoring works to the historical situation in which they were produced” (37). Part of Chandler’s thesis is that this habit of mind got started in the period we call Romanticism, and that the academic historicism of our own time repeats a mode of public thinking that first came into its own post-Waterloo. The second generation of British Roman-

tics came of age at a time in which “the practices of literary and political representation were [being] transformed”; it was “the age of the spirit of the age.”

The phrase was popularized by Hazlitt, who gave that name to a collection of essays (published in 1825) on a number of the major literary figures of the day. Chandler’s claim is that Hazlitt’s book, along with other major Romantic works, engages in a kind of representation different from works of the previous century, such as Hume’s history of England, or Johnson’s *Lives of the Poets*. In contrast to Hazlitt’s *The Spirit of the Age*, Chandler says, Johnson’s work “does not conspicuously offer the subjects of its biographies as representatives or types of the times in which they lived” (174).

Chandler argues that Walter Scott’s novels were the pioneering works of Romantic historicism: “[his novels] provided ... a new ‘model’ of a dated historiographical and ethnographical representation of action-in-society, a new form for specifying cultural-historical typologies of character and agency” (96). Chandler points here to two assumptions common to the historicism of then and now: that a date belongs to a “period,” and can lead us to a “historical situation”; and that there is some basic analogy between the kinds of cultural situations investigated by the historian and the anthropologist.

A third assumption is that the historical “case” is a sound and useful concept. Chandler claims that the traditional Catholic practice of moral casuistry was transformed and reinvented in the post-Waterloo years. Casuistry, popularly associated with the Jesuit order, was a quasi-logical practice that involved making judgments about the rightness of actions not easily subsumed to a moral rule (as in the case of poor man who steals bread because he is starving). According to Camille Wells Slight, “Casuits ... are sought by men who are torn between conflicting loyalties” (qtd. in Chandler 244). Traditional casuistry dealt with questions of agency and will. Historicist casuistry, Chandler argues, rethinks those basic terms:

the reinvention of casuistry in this period must be understood as part of a more general altering of the case — an altering of the *conception* of the case, in which the new notion of the “historical situation” becomes operative.... The “historical situation” is not just an ethical or juridical situation writ large. For part of what it means to alter the concept of the case in this way is to alter the concept of the cause. That is to say, altering the concept of the case means forming a new understanding of human motivation.... (527-28)

Examples of Romantic casuistry can be found, Chandler says, in Scott’s novels and in Shelley’s drama *The Cenci* (which not only takes traditional Catholic casuistry as its subject, but demands a historicizing casuistry of its audience). Why does this “altering the concept of the case” matter? “To be able to make a case of one’s

own time,” he says, “is to be able to imagine it otherwise” (227). Shelley’s sonnet, “England in 1819,” for which Chandler’s study is named, is exemplary of the political thrust of such historicizing.

It is clear to me how representation (in the political sense) changed, or started to change, in Britain in these years. I am less persuaded that at this same moment the nature of literary or historiographic representation also changed. Did Edmund Burke, one wonders, write prior to this altered sense of the historical situation? Much of Chandler’s argument about “the case” turns, implicitly, on the seemingly deep-rooted semantic doubleness of the word “representation.” But perhaps the two kinds of representation are not as closely calibrated as Chandler suggests. What about the English republicans of the seventeenth century, for instance, who quite possibly lacked an anthropological sense of their own historical situation, but were most emphatically able to “imagine it otherwise”?

Another, more basic problem is with the overly broad concept of “the case,” which takes in all of the legal realm, as well as the medical (not to mention the psychoanalytic!). It threatens, in fact, to swallow every conceivable instance of judgment. Chandler, of course, does not mean that in the post-Waterloo years judges and lawyers and doctors and ordinary folk began to use the word “case” in a different way. Clearly they didn’t. But in some “cases,” i.e. historiographical and literary accounts of actions, it became permissible, preferable even, to take into account the “historical situation” of the actors or agents. How does one decide when it is appropriate to apply this special kind of judgment to a “case”? You will not find the answer to that question in this very sober and learned book, which nevertheless suggests — almost mischievously, really, given the history of the word’s use — that academic historicists practice a sort of casuistry.

Chandler is a self-conscious, careful practitioner of the interpretive practice of “historically situating” texts. It is his intent that *England in 1819* could also be called *English since 1981*. As he is well aware, the dialectic of historicism depends on a “redoubling of the historical situation.” Historicizing, that is, can involve complicated transferential relations (e.g., one can read the situation of revolutionary France in light of the period of the Vietnam war in the U.S.; or, inversely, one can read the situation of the Thatcher years in Britain as a repeat of the oppressive post-Waterloo years in the same country; etc.). Seeing this, I understand better my own difficulty in taking up the work of well-known New Historicists like Marjorie Levinson or Alan Liu. It’s not so much that I don’t recognize their 1798 or their 1819 as that I don’t entirely recognize their present.

But this school certainly has no monopoly on the notion of a “historical situation.” Stephen Gill’s *Wordsworth and the Victorians* includes studies in reception

and influence, two quite different kinds of literary and cultural history. Several chapters attempt to document the steadily-growing “cultural significance” of Wordsworth’s work from the 1830s through to the end of the century. Fame came slowly for this poet. *Lyrical Ballads* did go through four editions between 1798 and 1805, but when a new collection in 1807 was harshly attacked by *The Edinburgh Review*, Wordsworth did not publish another book of poetry for seven years. Wordsworth in these decades had only a cult following; he was, Gill says, “the property of a coterie” (16). *The Excursion*, printed in 1815, was by no means a success; twenty years later it had not even sold out its 500-copy print run. Then, sometime during the 1830s, the public response to Wordsworth’s poetry changed. “No doubt sheer survival was an important factor,” Gill dryly notes, “as it is in the recuperation of nearly all writers who live long enough and continue to produce” (18).

A measure of this sea-change was that, thirty years after his most important work had been written, hundreds of eminent and not-so-eminent Victorians began making pilgrimages to Wordsworth’s home at Rydal Mount. Many of these visitors were “Wordsworthians”: people who believed their lives had been touched by what Gill calls Wordsworth’s “spiritually active, empowering force.” The most famous Wordsworthian was John Stuart Mill, who credited Wordsworth’s poetry with pulling him back from the brink of a nervous breakdown. The poems, Mill wrote, were “a medicine for my state of mind . . . they seemed to be the very culture of the feelings which I was in quest of” (qtd. in Gill 47).

After the death of Wordsworth the man, a flood of new editions of his poetry appeared, and the work was disseminated (sometimes copyright-protected, but more often not) throughout the English-speaking world. For Victorian writers and intellectuals, the biggest problem with inheriting Wordsworth’s poetry was in accommodating its grand, metaphysical claims. “Faced with poetry of such palpable design,” Gill writes, “readers adopted (and still adopt) various strategies” (170). One was to dwell on Wordsworth’s “poetry of humble life” (i.e., its egalitarian aspects); another was “to confront the philosophical pretension head on — and dismiss or contain it”; another (our preferred option) was to historicize it. But the most common Victorian response was to interpret Wordsworth’s “philosophy” in the light of orthodox Christianity.

The major Victorian poets, almost without exception, rejected Wordsworth the sage and seer, while mounting rescue operations on one or another aspect of the poetry. Gerard Manley Hopkins, though, was convinced of Wordsworth’s charisma. In a remarkable 1886 letter to his friend Richard Dixon (who had slighted the Immortality Ode), he defended the “Wordsworthians”:

There have been in all history a few, a very few men, whom common repute, even where it did not trust them, has treated as having had something happen to them that does not happen to other men, as having *seen something*, whatever that really was.... [H]uman nature in these men saw something; wavers in opinion, looking back, whether there was anything in it or no; but is in a tremble ever since. Now what Wordsworthians mean is, what would seem to be the growing mind of the English speaking world and may perhaps come to be that of the world at large is that in Wordsworth when he wrote that ode human nature got another of those shocks, and the tremble from it is spreading. (qtd. in Gill 173)

William Hazlitt's writing has not fared as well in time as Wordsworth's. Doing research at the Bodleian library, Tom Paulin says, he had to borrow a paper-knife to cut pages in a scholarly edition of Hazlitt's work that had sat unread for more than fifty years.

"History begins for Hazlitt with the big bang of the Reformation" (19). So Paulin declares, offering another sort of account of revolutionary transformation. In the winter of 1819, Hazlitt was giving lectures in London on Elizabethan literature and the spirit of that age. In these lectures he declared that "the vernacular Bible was the 'chief engine' of the Reformation" (19). Hazlitt elsewhere says that the translated Bible was the "one great lever" of English freedom; and that the French revolution was a "'remote but inevitable' result of the invention of printing" (22). Hazlitt was himself raised in the culture of Dissent — what Edmund Burke called the "*hortus siccus* (dried herb garden) of dissent"; his father was a Unitarian preacher who, like his son, was said to have a "radical incapacity [for] disguising what he felt" (qtd. in Paulin 3).

Paulin, the editor of a new Blackwell edition of *The Plain Speaker*, is especially interested in what Hazlitt had to say about the relation between poetry and prose. If Wordsworth's famous Preface started to break down the poetry-prose opposition from the side of verse, Hazlitt's numerous essays worried at what prose could be from the other. Paulin scours Hazlitt's essays for pronouncements on, and enactments of, "prose beauty": "What he offers — *en passant*, in true prose vein — is a series of aesthetic terms that help to structure the idea of prose beauty" (188). Those terms are not (now) so unfamiliar: they include an emphasis on spontaneity and playfulness (Hazlitt reportedly preferred to compose his essays, after meditating on their content, in a single draft); an identification of prose virtue with the qualities of the mobile human body; and a grounding of good prose in the flexibility and "indolence" of conversation. All of these qualities, rather like the unhistoricized instant itself, run up against, and break upon, the fixity of a printed text.

Hazlitt found that poets, who seek more permanent forms, did not write the best prose. In his famous essay on *Coriolanus*, written soon after the defeat of Napoleon, Hazlitt was bitter about the defeat of radical prose, and about the seeming defection of poetry to the side of absolutism: "The principle of poetry is a very anti-levelling principle. It aims at effect, it exists by contrast. It admits of no medium. It is every thing by excess. It rises above the ordinary standard of sufferings and crimes. It presents a dazzling appearance. It shows its head turretted, crowned, and crested" (39). In "On Poetry in General," Hazlitt writes of "the jerks, the breaks, the inequalities, and harshnesses of prose"; these disturb the poetic imagination as "a jolting road or a stumbling horse disturbs the reverie of an absent man" (92). Paulin comments, self-reflexively: "there is something gauche, thrawn, lumpish, dissonant — even downright annoying — about prose" (92).

He is not, unfortunately, speaking of the "professional" prose currently favored by British and American literary scholars. Paulin is himself a poet and essayist, and a critic who does not shy away from polemic. A native of Ulster, in northern Ireland, he's both Protestant *and* republican. Paulin has very consciously chosen Hazlitt as a heroic predecessor: chosen him in his role as radical journalist, Non-Conformist public intellectual, and master of English prose (and not, presumably, for the tenor of his notoriously disastrous personal life). Paulin identifies a tradition to which Hazlitt and other radical Unitarians belonged, and it does not begin with the French Revolution: "Intellectually, they were the descendants of the Commonwealth men who briefly made England a republic in the middle of the seventeenth century" (4).

Paulin writes: "Usually, we think of liberty as a value argued for in polemics against an oppressive government, but one of the distinctive features of English radical journalism is the way writers like [William] Cobbett and Hazlitt give liberty an aesthetic dimension by displaying an absolute confidence in the range and vigour, the sheer pull, of their prose styles" (51-52). No tenure-seeking Romanticist in this country would dare to yoke the words "aesthetic" and "liberty" in print, except perhaps in a sentence that also mentioned "ideology." Paulin, like Hazlitt, writes a "direct, passionately intelligent prose style" that does more than give lip-service to the fashionable notions of the day. ✱