in which to "translate" that interaction for her American audience, Fuller printed her article on Güntherode as a gloss for her relationship with Emerson, itself an allegory for the model of literary influence and pedagogy that she was attempting to describe for herself and her American readers.

In the end, Goethe gave Fuller a way to translate her father's extraordinary gift to her, his gift of a classical education. Timothy Fuller's gesture was unusual in "democratic" America, and Fuller was eager to show the advantages of that bequest. It was this gift, after all, that enabled her to have an intimate and productive relationship with the primary literary figure of America. But Goethe also gave Fuller a way to show how easily such a "gift" could be recuperated by the rigid structures of privilege and tradition which had "commonly" educated its women. Women traditionally given the gift of a classical education were inevitably, like the Princess, restrained by the very structures of nobility affording that "gift." Yet, as Fuller well understood, somewhere within those structures, momentary resistances were created, resistances not unlike the resistances encoded in the paradoxical rhetoric of American democracy. Translation becomes for Fuller, a vehicle for expanding and developing the space of that resistance. By bringing into conversation two cultural subsets, and refusing to force them into imperial conquests of the other, by allowing translation itself to become the pedagogical allegory, the model for the rudderless interaction where both mastery and tragedy are displaced, the issue becomes for Fuller one of anticipation, growth and a search for joyous carolling.

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Book Reviews


Marjorie Levinson is best known for Wordsworth's Great Period Poems (1986, but advertised considerably earlier to good effect in McGann's Romantic Ideology). In the introduction she identifies herself with the method of historicist critique, to be distinguished from old-line intellectual history (Abrams), historical scholarship (Erdman), and Yale-school deconstruction (de Man). The phrase that best describes historicist critique, especially as found in Wordsworth's Great Period Poems, is perhaps "deconstructive materialism" (WCPP 10), which—so I thought four years ago—put Levinson in the new-historicist wing of British-romantic studies with David Simpson, Jerome McGann, and John Barrell. Certainly that's where anyone would locate the best known chapter of the Wordsworth book. Levinson's essay on what is not present in Wordsworth's "Tintern Abbey" meditation—a bold undertaking if a difficult kind of argument to make stick. Along with David Simpson, Marjorie Levinson has in my opinion done the most satisfying work on Wordsworth in the historicist vein. Although her insularity has run into some institutional resistance from mainline Wordsworthians (Jonathan Wordsworth and all that) and she has occasionally provoked them into combat (Abrams's frequent lectures on the wrongheadedness of political approaches to Wordsworth have targeted Levinson and McGann), in the long run she will have played a considerable role in revising even the orthodox understanding of Wordsworth. The Romantic Fragment Poem (also 1986), which seems to have begun as Levinson's dissertation but was then rewritten over several years, is as contentious and challenging as the Wordsworth book. It is more rewarding than the nearest competitors (such as Thomas McFarland's Romanticism and the Forms of Ruin) and deserving of more sustained attention than it's ever likely to get, since the nature of the subject will unfortunately allow Levinson's messages to drop through the institutional cracks.

With Keats's Life of Allegory, Levinson has once again aimed her arguments as much at the institutionally established traditions of criti-
cism as at the poetry being criticized (if I may be permitted that shady distinction). Keats’s Life of Allegory tries singlehandedly to push Keats studies out of some of its deepest ruts. She doesn’t come to fill gaps or to add to the accumulation: she comes looking for controversy with a thoroughly provocative book.

Though the method of this latest study grows recognizably out of the earlier ones, Levinson seems to have moved out into heavier theoretical weather. The demotion of sociohistorical evidence in favor of increased emphasis on the theoretical narratives used to marshal and structure that evidence, along with the noticeably greater prominence given to deconstruction and psychoanalysis, mark a new direction. Precisely what direction is not yet apparent to me. She experiments with an often intriguing if often vexing coalition of arguments driven by a “progressive-regressive” principle she claims to have picked up from Sartre, of all people. And she grants herself the new license to construct a “totalizing critique” (44 n. 34). “Critique” is perhaps not the best word, however, since Levinson is ultimately kind to Keats in a way that the earliest critics—such as Byron, from whose homosexual slanders of Keats’s work Levinson takes her cue—were not. Ultimately Levinson’s book comes off as a kind of appreciation that may strengthen Keats’s place in the conventional canon. Strength could come too soon to a poet whose market share has been down for several years. Levinson has in effect found a way to appreciate him in terms that may (eventually) be heard in the contemporary critical climate, unlike, say, Helen Vendler, whose book on the odes has become in some professional circles a routine object of abuse (“Vendler’s critique,” says Levinson characteristically—though “critique” seems a slip—is “a most academic enterprise, leaves no rift unfilled... suave and seamless: end-stopped think” (30)).

“Vendler’s hagiography” (31) can make no new mark because her saint is just more of the same old thing, the odal arch-virtuoso of new-critical legend. Creating Levinson’s Keats requires forceful and even uncivil intervention, leaving suavity and seamlessness out of the question. While this may seem to some extent a paradox—strengthening Keats’s position in the old canon by providing a new way of appreciating him—the changes will be in their ultimate effect more additive than otherwise: Vendler gives us the odes, which we already had anyway, and Levinson gives us the romances instead, but the predictable effect will be to leave the odes in place while giving the romances a more secure place. For maximum effect, Levinson’s complex and unmemorable arguments will first have to be digested into simpler, more memorable forms—but that is not inconceivable when and if Keats’s Life of Allegory gets under the skin of some Keatsians.

Levinson wants to account for “the poetics of a marginally middle-class, professionally unequipped, nineteenth-century male adolescent” (76). This is not the boy wonder of our canonical myth. She locates her Keats through the services of some early readers, whose responses she groups as “the early response to Keats’s poetry,” an unreliable but useful generalization. By far the best of the early responses for Levinson’s case turns out to be Byron’s (rather than, to name only one other, Shelley’s Adonais, never mentioned), which comes to stand for everything she needs to say about Keats’s psychosocial positioning. That in turn comes down to masturbation, which becomes the dominant metaphor in such formulations as this: “Keats’s poetry was characterized as a species of masturbatory exhibitionism, an offensiveness further associated with the self-fashioning gestures of the petty bourgeoisie” (4).

Self-abuse and self-fashioning give Levinson the sociopsychosexual cross-combinations she needs to launch her basic argument that “throughout his poetry, Keats encodes idealized images of the early nineteenth-century bourgeois situation” (84)—idealized because bourgeois is not what he was but what he aspired to be. This isn’t the stolid middle class that has to be épatered later in the century but the dangerously unmade and unlegitimated and watchful middlers, squeezing out for themselves an undefined space between the legitimate lower and privileged classes who have nature and culture, respectively, on their side. Masturbation, as sex but not really, figures the middle-class attention to self from the middling position that creates itself by copying the real thing (owned by the legitimate classes above and below)—etc.

Keats’s poetry reflects the uneasiness and contradicioriness of that position:

a competitive dyadic economy where resolution is counterproductive, where contradiction between functionally differentiated elements... is the condition of productivity, and insatiable appetite for the value of things an institutionalized subversiveness. Because so often in Keats’s poetry these forms of dissonance materialize as discursive styles, it is crucial that we cultivate a social ear for his verse. Thus do we translate the richness of his tones into its original form: contradiction. Thus do we come to appreciate Keats’s style as that which contains, idealizes, and exists by contradiction. (85)

Keats’s style, as criticized by Byron and others, is thus redeemed under the sign of “bad writing” that has a “virtuous badness” (106).

By a perverse necessity everybody seems driven to tell stories about Keats’s stylistic development, the shortest major poetic career reported out in some of the longest narratives. Levinson is no exception. As she tells it in chapter 5, Keats’s early poems are “embarrassingly fetishistic”
(235), that is, bad-bad. "I stood tip-toe upon a little hill" demonstrates how it is that "Keats, the effect of a bourgeois formation, enacts in the style of his wishes both the actual and the ideological project of that class: its substitution of signs for things, and difference for authorized, immanent meaning." (240). The later poetry learns to think about the poetic badness so enacted, and in doing so becomes more virtuously bad. Lamia, for example, is read in chapter 6 as an analysis of the money system of exchange. As the comfy old narratives of Keats's development found him getting his wisdom in the ways of life and art, Levinson finds him finally wise in the ways of the money system. Since Keats has made himself into a commodity in that system—a "demented property and an element of exchange" (291)—Lamia is an exercise in self-understanding ("As Lycius takes Lamia to market, so Keats takes himself" 292). To explain the "money form," as Lamia does, is to explain "Keats's literary practice" (261).

How to characterize Keats's Life of Allegory? I am forced into oppositions—challenging and strenuous, but tiresome and obscure, fascinating but uneven. It is impertinent with an ambitious impertinence. It deserves impertinent answers but they'll have to be ambitious. There is much to welcome but much to resist. Only a partisan enthusiast would swallow these arguments whole, but only a blockhead would dismiss them outright or refuse their intellectual energy.

The book is less mature in its rhetorical craft. Levinson leaves herself wide open to dismissive reactions by writing the way she does. She wastes little effort in constructing clear, carefully documented and illustrated explanations, leaving readers to fend for themselves in a nasty soup of jargons shamelessly ripped off, it seems, from every cryptic book she ever read. She relies too much on exhausted poststructuralist mannerisms: pedantic and portentous wordplay, fetishized binary oppositions (one trembles at the approach of a slash or a parenthesis), the fetishized fetish (I stopped counting fetishizations), and the bottomless pit of supplements, projects (as in "the Romantic project"), inscriptions, representations, deconstructions, and discourses spiced with the prosaic rhetorical violence of lawlessness (110), murderoussness (194), and perverseness (214). Whatever communicative power such wordslinging ever had has long since faded, and at worst the effect is now unintentionally Shandean, or Uncle Toby: "how fruitfully Keats frigs his Imagination" (194).

Keats's Life of Allegory is thus the kind of book that tries one's patience. But we can—and must, to estimate the true power here—rephrase these criticisms more positively. Levinson is attempting to forge new combinations of argument and rhetoric that will pry open the sealed boxes that academic treatments of the British romantics are always tending to become. (This isn't to say that Levinson's approach is anti-academic. Despite her comment about Vendler's "academic enterprise," her own is hyper-academic if anything.) Levinson chooses hard jobs for herself, and she deserves full credit and admiration for that. Although the overall obscurity of the argumentation seems to me the principal defect of the book, it is not, for the future, an irredeemable one.

As for the substance of the arguments, I confess that I'll need more time with them. It does strike me that the rich mixture of psychoanalysis, deconstruction, and political theory, though ostensibly used in the service of a more satisfactory historicism, has a way of crowding out the powerful documentation that the study needs to be thoroughly persuasive. While she pays considerable lip service to Keats's "particular sector of nineteenth-century life" (261, my emphasis), Levinson too seldom finds space in her arguments for the particulars of his historical situation or of the petty-bourgeoisie with which she identifies him. Hence the "allegory" of her title threatens to become ahistorical. She gets lots of mileage from the "middle" in middle class, relying so extensively on its metaphorical properties for significant points that "middle" seems to describe a Platonic rather than a historical position. Its reliability as a historical term, a name so true to its named that it can be interpreted for its metaphorical implications in lieu of historical documentation, is questionable, but Levinson never questions it.

Finally, however, Keats's Life of Allegory's reserve of strength reminds me of something Levinson says about Keats: "Ultimately, I think, these failures give his work a critical power not available to us in the more accomplished poetry of Wordsworth, Coleridge, and Byron" (231). The virtuoso scholarly performances, seamless and unruffled, staged year after year by the best academic presses are often flawless because they are written in obedience to well-rehearsed institutional scripts. I do not mean to suggest that Levinson's script is unrehearsed—or uninstitutional. Its interest in "psychically enacted class conflicts" (200) has become familiar to American academics, largely via feminism and British "cultural studies." It is nonetheless true that Levinson's way of thinking about Keats is new and different in its chosen field and as such retains some shock value for some romanticists who can use a good shock. However powerful Levinson's explanations are ultimately judged to be, the critics closer to the institutional center—and I include myself here—need to get into a position to offer assessments of her kind of work that are as trenchant as her assessments of theirs. Her work has offered healthy provocations, and it demands healthy answers.

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