Shadowing the Lyric: Tilottama Rajan Reads Romantic Narrative

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Tilottama Rajan's *Romantic Narrative: Shelley, Hays, Godwin, Wollstonecraft* (Johns Hopkins, 2010) explores forms of narrative in British Romanticism, though one hastens to add that it is not simply a book *about* narrative but about the conceptual, formal-aesthetic, and ideological spaces in which Romantic narrative positions itself—sometimes agonistically, at others in more dialectical fashion—and especially vis-à-vis the lyric. For the established valorization of the lyric as the consummate embodiment of Romantic literariness has, among other things, caused the period's body of prose fiction to be assimilated to the sober and socio-political work supposedly performed by the Victorian novel. Rajan's objectives for *Romantic Narrative* are thus both interpretive and metacritical in that she means to "question the association of narrative with what Peter Brooks calls 'reading for plot'," as well as the consequent "unigeneric reduction of narrative to the (Victorian) novel" (xii). A related objective of *Romantic Narrative* is to rethink the axioms that prompted literary studies to "absorb 'Romanticism' into a Victorianized 'nineteenth century' which divides the cultural field of the novel between the nation-building of Scott's historical novels, and a private sphere disciplined by the Austenian novel of manners" (xiv). Opposing the premise that "the turn to prose metonymizes a turn to culture and responsibility" (xiv), Rajan challenges us to abandon the assumptions which a long-standing, uncritical privileging of the novel has itself licensed. Instead, the hermeneutic challenge posed by *Romantic Narrative* is to think of the period's prose fiction in terms that do not preemptively assimilate Romanticism's prose production to subsequent aesthetic and historical constellations.

While displaying an extraordinarily wide-ranging and scrupulous grasp of diverse theoretical models (Paul Ricoeur, Hayden White, D. A. Miller, Algirdas Julien Greimas, Vladimir Propp, Slavoj Žižek, Walter Benjamin, Giorgio Agamben, et al.), Rajan's study fundamentally adheres to a deconstructive approach. Yet she does so not dogmatically (let alone by professional default) but because

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its resistance to generic formal-aesthetic or conceptual binarisms seems particularly called for if we are to understand the novel as an instance of *poiësis* that is not simply *after* the lyric, nor merely *opposed* to it. For Rajan, one of narrative's distinguishing features is how it positions itself diacritically vis-à-vis the phantasmatic and imagistic splendor of the lyric, a point brought out with great cogency in Rajan's discussion of Agamben (28f). It would be hard to think of another study of Romanticism that succeeds better in putting deconstruction to such profound critical purposes. The introduction itself is a magisterial achievement, showing as it does how (for example, in P. B. Shelley) "the ineffability of lyric is not really lyric, but a trauma cathected with lyric: the trauma of the foreclosure of poetry" and how, consequently, "poetry as the vehicle of 'romantic ideology' always exists in the shadow of its novelization" (48). Rajan's insistence that we read Romantic narrative in conjunction with the literary and aesthetic programs of its own time, and that we resist its anachronistic absorption into a critical agenda (of sober, prosaic reflection) seems sensible indeed, not least because too often those extraneous or post-Romantic agendas turn out to have been premised on a misconstrued or simplified account of the "Romantic Ideology" to begin with. Unsurprisingly, *Romantic Narrative* emphasizes how its principal works—Percy Shelley's early Gothic Romances, and novels by Mary Hays, William Godwin, and Mary Wollstonecraft—present themselves as highly reflexive statements. Thus P. B. Shelley's early fictions function as "texts almost entirely reducible to their form" and consequently are being read as "parodies of a narratology whose structural mechanisms they defamiliarize" (xx).

In Rajan's sophisticated account of Percy Shelley's *Alastor* (1816), the poem's characteristic vacillation between lyric and narrative shows it to be a consummate instance of *Romantic Narrative*'s overall thesis. Shelley's voice here "stands on the threshold between poetry and a prose held off in the Preface, just outside the protected space of the text" (2). Uncomfortably perched "between poetry and an emergent Peacockian world of utility" (3), Shelley's romance offers something of a "dissipation rather than concentration of lyric affect." The Shelley of *Alastor* has "yet to work through the place of 'poetry' in the modern world" (5)—the most magnificent result of which will be his later *Prometheus Unbound* (1820). Yet to argue, convincingly, that Shelley's *Alastor* remains as yet undecided about the relation of poetry to the world—a corollary of the longstanding dispute as to whether to read Shelley as a Platonist or Skeptic—would implicitly raise doubts as to whether his earlier prose narratives (*St. Irvyne* [1811] and *Zastrozzi* [1810]) can be legitimately read as "parodies of a narratology whose structural mechanisms they defamiliarize so as to unbind the *narrativity* that exists within the novels and between the novels and Shelley's poetry" (xx). For to do so risks investing these juvenilia with a kind of lucidity that may be more the result of critical hindsight and difficult to locate in texts that often appear poorly written and constructed. Can we really invest these first literary efforts the kind of reflexive, indeed meta-poetic awareness that

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Rajan herself finds only partially developed in *Alastor*, written some four years later? Though carried out with unfailing attention to textual and historical detail, Rajan may be over-burdening Shelley's Gothic novels when reading them as "an experiment with the pre-texts and leitmotifs of a revolutionary Romanticism that is replayed in his later poetry as part of a self-conscious resumption of the structural and ideological problems in which the early work is caught" (52).

Ultimately, the question of whether we may legitimately frame the "pastiche" of these early efforts as "serious attempts to question both the cultural stereotypes in which they are caught and their own reinvention of these stereotypes" (56) raises the old distinction between "use" and "mention" that John Searle had marshaled in his debate with Jacques Derrida concerning the nature of performative utterances.[1] It might help if Rajan were to tackle the implicit question more directly: viz., what allows us to frame Percy Shelley's Gothic novels—whose sputtering aesthetic and formal status Rajan often acknowledges—as achieving a reflexive ("mention") outlook on their underlying conventions, rather than simply "using" the codified grammar of the Gothic unreflexively? As Rajan herself clearly recognizes, this very question is endemic to the narrative sub-genre of the Gothic and of Romance more generally. Ultimately, it may be impossible to answer, in part because the lurking suspicion that many examples of these genres might be simply poorly constructed and burdened with clichés and other stylistic infelicities rests itself on a high-brow notion of literature as lyric expressivism that Rajan's account identifies as the implicit target of these productions.

A key concept for Rajan's study is the idea of *autonarration*—"a psychoanalysis in which characters function as part-objects through whom the narrating subject tries to constitute himself, but which yields only inadequate self-representations" (21). In a scrupulous reading of Hays's *Memoirs of Emma Courtney* (1796), Rajan offers a fuller definition of the concept and convincingly characterizes it as a "larger tendency of Romanticism" (95–107, 93). Reading against the grain of a long-standing critical consensus ranging "from Eliot to poststructuralism," Rajan notes that the presence of the author in the text need by no means entail some "egotistical sublimity" of the kind John Keats had flagged in William Wordsworth. Rather, the "author's self-representation through a textual figure" effectively puts the very notion of an intact and autonomous subjectivity under suspension, if not outright erasure (95). Aside from enabling us to read Hays's fiction much more productively than has been the case until now, Rajan's concept of auto-narration effectively moves us beyond the hardened opposition between "autobiographical" and "deconstructive" readings by showing texts like Hays's *Memoirs of Emma Courtney* and various of Mary Shelley's novels to be keenly reflexive writings that "consciously raise the question of the relationship between experience and its narrativization" (96); it is a question that clearly "implicat[es] the reader in the continuation of [the text's] semiosis" and thus attests to "Romanticism's construction of itself as incomplete *à venir*" (107).

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It might have been helpful to have the notion of "textually self-conscious" (82) writing more explicitly connected with German Idealism and Jena Romanticism, which had explored the conceptual difficulties of self-consciousness *qua* self-reference as the supposed ground of rational agency. The point, of course, was famously raised by Novalis's *Fichte-Studien* (1795–96), Hölderlin's "Urteil und Seyn" (1795), and in Schelling's 1820 *Initia Philosophiae Universae*—a critical genealogy exhaustively retraced by Dieter Henrich, as well as in earlier work by Manfred Frank, Ulrich Pothast, and Gerhard Kurz.[2] If the initially Kantian dilemma is that self-consciousness can only ever *presuppose* but never *possess* the ground that is to enable its re-cognition of the being with which it claims to coincide, then how much of a cognitive advance is it to ascribe "self-consciousness" to a literary text? Notably and convincingly, Rajan herself understands the semiotic and semantic economies of Hays and other Romantic (auto-) narratives to be far more open and provisional than, say, Fichte's closed economy of reflexive self-constitution that had drawn pointedly critical readings from Hölderlin and Novalis. Eschewing a logical for a hermeneutic conception of the self-conscious text, Rajan acknowledges "the fact that the author is and is not represented by her textual surrogate" and that the "reading process involves a series of (mis)recognitions" (97).

The later chapters of *Romantic Narrative* explore Godwin who, more than any other writer embodies the *sui generis* quality of Romantic narrative that Rajan seeks to reclaim. Her principal texts—*Caleb Williams* (1794), *St. Leon* (1799), and Godwin's editorship of Wollstonecraft's *The Wrongs of Woman* (1798)—embody the peculiar temporal, conceptual, and stylistic involutions that show Romantic narrative, and indeed Romanticism's overall idea of "literature," to be continually (indeed dialectically) suspended between the lyric and the discursive, the noumenal aspirations of the symbolic and the deceptively forthright culture of quotidian prose. Literature for Godwin "is a form of in-tension that makes the 'enjambment' we found in poetry part of the legacy of prose: a legacy paradoxically inscribed in the very realism and sobriety of the novel" (124). As Rajan shows, Godwin disrupts the linear temporality and rational notions of "character" hermeneutic confidence that had only recently led to the valorization of novel and its express splitting from early and mid-eighteenth-century ideas of romance and adventure narrative. Both in *Caleb Williams* and, at the editorial level, in Godwin's persistent attenuation of Wollstonecraft's authorial, affective, and intellectual persona, the idea of character emerges as a central hermeneutic conundrum, rather than as a source of stable and readily attributable meaning. Particular in the case of *St. Leon*, it often appears as though Godwin's narratives had been written with the kind of theoretical exegesis in mind that Rajan's study belatedly affords them.

Overall, then, *Romantic Narrative* powerfully extends a model of interpretation and, indeed, a template for responsible and cogent literary criticism in general that Rajan had first begun to articulate in *The Supplement of Reading*

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(1990). In her chapter on *Caleb Williams*, a key text to which she here returns in a compelling and meticulously argued account, it once again becomes clear how richly Romantic (and specifically, Godwinian) narrative conspires against linear "reading for plot"—at least in part because of Godwin's seemingly post-modern view of the subject as mired in a web of inextricable and insistent motives and compulsions. His dystopic conception of character and the human intellect denies us all the interpretive comforts extended with such abundance in the fiction of Charles Dickens, W. M. Thackeray, or Anthony Trollope. Godwin's virtually Pyrrhonist view of narrative and the figuration of character not only comes across in the two existing and obviously incommensurable endings to *Caleb Williams*, but also in the way that either one fundamentally compromises any straightforward, realistic response to the preceding story. As Rajan points out, "perhaps Caleb's confession and entire tale . . . is a form of sophistry that produces truth as the auto-affection of one's own voice" (131).

Naturally, one may always wish to have more from a book that offers such lucid and thorough accounts of Romanticism's distinctive narrative models. Some readers will wonder why the obvious eminences of Romantic narrative—Walter Scott and Jane Austen—are not treated in a book on Romantic narrative. While Rajan does not speak much to their exclusion, her decision to set her sights on other authors is not without a deeper rationale. First, the narratives on which she concentrates have been marginalized precisely because they do not easily conform to the socio-political, "nation-building" plot that literary and (more typically) cultural study has posited as the hermeneutic frame for thinking through questions of narrative. Second, the tilt towards Romance in Austen (however brilliantly executed) lacks the dense inter-textual dimension of the prose works on which Rajan's study is focused; consequently, the diacritical exploration of *poiësis* as a matrix circumscribing both the lyric and narrative is really not a significant feature in either Austen or Scott. Making a compelling, erudite, and richly layered case for the unique hermeneutic lucidity of Romantic prose fiction—many of whose formal and conceptual innovations would only be recovered by high Modernist novel—*Romantic Narrative* is a remarkable achievement and bound to become a major point of critical reference for scholars in the field of the novel, literary theory, and Romantic Studies.

NOTES

1. See John Searle, *Speech Acts: An Essay in the Philosophy of Language* (Cambridge, 1969), and "Reiterating the Differences: A Reply to Derrida," *Glyph* 2 (1977), 198–207; Jacques Derrida, *Limited Inc* (Chicago, 1988).

2. See, for example, Dieter Henrich, *Selbstverhältnisse: Gedanken und Auslegungen zu den Grundlagen der klassischen deutschen Philosophie* (Stuttgart, 2001); Manfred Frank, *Ansichten von Subjektivität* (Frankfurt, 2011); Ulrich Pothast, *Über einige Fragen der Selbstbeziehung* (Frankfurt, 1971).

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