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## The Ideology of Imagination: Subject and Society in the Discourse of Romanticism

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**Forest Pyle, *The Ideology of Imagination:  
Subject and Society in the Discourse of Romanticism*  
(Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1997). £12.95 paper. ISBN 0 8047 2862 3.**

A first reaction to the title of this book might be to wonder that it has apparently not been used before: *ideology*, *imagination*, *subject*, *society*, *discourse*, *Romanticism* – a compendium of weighty terms elegantly linked. Another might be to sigh at their familiarity and abstraction: are we in for a strenuously theoretical restatement of some well-worn themes? Readers of George Eliot might have a third reaction: is this a book about Romanticism with a chapter about Eliot tacked on at the end? To answer all these questions simply, let me say that this is a valuable book and recommend it to anyone interested in Eliot's thinking about her art.

The scope is large: there are chapters on Wordsworth, Coleridge, Shelley, Keats and Eliot and a strong, even grand, overall narrative. Pyle argues for a deep continuity between Romanticism and the social imagination of George Eliot, but this continuity has a conceptual break at its heart, a break he locates in Shelley's 'The Triumph of Life'. Up to this point Romantic poetry celebrates imagination as a means of reconciling subject and society in enduring cultural forms. For Wordsworth, imagination is a poetics of 'enshrinement'; for Coleridge it is a figure of the institutionalization of knowledge. In Shelley's *Prometheus Unbound* an act of imagination, Prometheus's recantation of his curse on Jupiter, ushers in a Utopian state which is the end and fulfilment of history, but later in 'The Triumph of Life' Shelley offers us 'no "imagination" to lead us from tyranny to freedom' (115), acknowledging the ideological nature of language itself. As De Man and Hillis Miller have shown, the poem is extraordinarily hospitable to what Abrams called 'the deconstructive angel'; building on their analyses, Pyle writes of 'imagination's eclipse' and the 'permanent pressure of history inscribed in Shelley's final, materialist poem' (122). There follows an enigmatic chapter on 'the materialism of poetic resistance' in Keats, and finally a discussion of George Eliot that drives a firm wedge between imagination – with its potentially destructive powers – and sympathy, the key to social consciousness and indeed its artistic medium. Pyle has interesting things to say about Eliot's exploration of the narrative voice.

The intellectual centre of the book is Marxist and historicist, but Pyle is dissatisfied with what he takes to be the simplified Marxism in dominant New Historical accounts of Romanticism and imagination, such as Jerome McGann's. A central dispute, as ever in Marxism, is over the meaning of 'ideology'. Pyle follows Althusser in stressing that ideology is unavoidable, not a 'false consciousness' that historical research can get behind, as it were, to find the truth, but a permanent condition, a permanent site of struggle. The very term 'false consciousness' seems to imply, erroneously, that a true one is available. McGann's version of the New Historicism is flawed, in fact contradictory, he argues, because it appeals to 'experience' as some sort of historical bedrock, data that can be retrieved with the right kind of historical attention and used as a basis for reading Romantic texts. McGann writes in *Toward a Literature of Knowledge*, '[t]he cognitive dynamic played out through poetic discourse is not confined, however, to the closed circle of Hegelian, or Socratic, reflection. The dynamic involves real, objective knowledge because the poetic field remains, finally, under the dominion of experience and not con-

sciousness'. Pyle is surely right in noting that 'it is far from clear why the "the dominion of experience" is... the privileged locus of *poetry*; nor is it clear that the "dominions" of "experience" and "consciousness" can be rigorously separated; nor, for that matter is it at all clear that "experience" might not be but another name for ideology' (15). Pyle is a fastidious Marxist, suspicious of loose appeals to history. He positively boasts about *not* using Foucault. There is no doubt that epistemes flourish in the discourse of New Historicism, and that Foucault is routinely invoked to validate the most myopically or fancifully conceived generalizations. Pyle notes some honourable exceptions such as Nancy Armstrong, whose *Desire and Domestic Fiction* he makes good use of in his chapter on Eliot. His Marxist fundamentalism has the practical advantage for his readers that, since he locates ideology *within* (and not behind) the textual peculiarities of the poems and novels he studies, we get some very attentive discussion of style and tone. The ideologue turns out to be a stimulating close-reader.

Paraphrasing Hegel, Pyle characterizes Romanticism as the moment when 'the imagination, now "subjectively independent," becomes visible as both the agent and the object of artistic representation' (65), and his aim is to reconsider the dialectics of internalization, the strain that results from commitment to both subjectivity and representation. This is the locus he returns to throughout the book, but the various chapters develop it in distinct ways. There is not room to paraphrase them all, so I will look briefly at the chapters on Wordsworth and Keats – both interesting, and both problematic – before passing to Eliot.

Taking a hint from the 'spots of time' passage in *The Prelude*, he argues that the essential work of imagination in Wordsworth is to 'enshrin[e] . . . the spirit of the Past / For future restoration', but that enshrinement in fact often converges with entombment: he is thinking of the 'Essays upon Epitaphs' and the many potent images of death in the poetry. This argument is familiar in a number of versions (strangely, David Ferry's *The Limits of Mortality*, which made a similar point and was highly controversial in the early 1960s, is not mentioned) but is developed in a new direction here when Pyle writes of Wordsworth's ways of effacing 'otherness' in the climactic passage of the last book of *The Prelude*, and of his orientalism. At the beginning of Book 5 of *The Prelude* Wordsworth's narrator reads *Don Quixote*, falls asleep and dreams of an Arab horseman, but at the end of the episode the Arab is ousted from the text, supplanted by 'Shakespeare and Milton, labourers divine!'. Pyle notes that *Don Quixote*, though regarded as the founding novel of a European tradition, in fact presents itself as a 'questionable translation of an Arabic text': in both cases the oriental 'other' is excluded and a European tradition consolidated. It is impossible to do justice here to Pyle's detailed reading of the episode: though the argument may seem strange or merely trendy, it is in fact made with logic and vigour and, in its own terms it is persuasive. Hegel's orientalism is in the background – his characterization of oriental art as one in which 'individual consciousness does not disclose itself'.

Keats is read as a poet who, following Shelley (historically), is radically aware of the dangers of imagination and committed to a kind of materialism. The central question is what is Keats's 'materialism', and I must confess I do not understand Pyle's definition of it. He begins by reading in 'Sleep and Poetry' a distrust of poetic language, or rather of poetic 'strength', which, 'though of the muses born/Is like a fallen angel', delighting in destruction and

...forgetting the great end  
Of poesy, that it should be a friend  
To sooth the cares, and lift the thought of man.

Poetry always needs the supplement of an ethical aim, or else it becomes 'a sheerly disruptive force' (133). Pyle backs up this idea by referring – rather arbitrarily, as it seems to me – to De Man's idea of the inhumanness of language, the 'possibilities which are inherent in language – independently of any intent or any drive or any wish we might have'. Poetry does not coincide with the human; in 'The Fall of Hyperion' there is a persistent contrast between 'the ethical longings of a human world and the "barren noise" and "blank splendour" of poetic language' (135). The work of imagination is to attempt to reconcile the two, but Keats is fully aware of the perpetual pull of negative forces. In a move that surprises me, Pyle claims Keats's famous 'negative capability' is precisely this recognition and this constitutes Keats's materialism. To do Pyle justice, he does acknowledge that negative capability 'may seem an unlikely candidate for convergence with a "historical materialism".' After a third reading of this chapter I still find the word 'unlikely' resonant.

The problem is not just local to the Keats chapter but part of the overall narrative of the book. Keats fits into Pyle's scheme as coming *after* the decisive move toward materialism he sees in the late Shelley – after it logically as well as chronologically – so the terms of his discussion of Keats are to a large extent set in the Shelley chapter. We may wonder if this analysis plausibly represents the experience of language and poetic creativity we find in his poetry. And it would clearly be possible to think about Keats's materialism in quite different ways, for example in relation to his political allegiances and leanings, matters which have been much explored lately. Nicholas Roe's *Keats and the Culture of Dissent* appeared too late for Pyle's attention, but there are clear lines to be followed in, say, Marjorie Levinson's *Keats's Life of Allegory*. Still, his strength lies in the way he resists easy historical generalizations (some of Levinson's have not worn well), and if the price of that is occasional over-ingenuity, it is not a bad bargain.

George Eliot is an essentially Romantic, not merely post-Romantic, writer, because, according to Pyle, the 'epistemological break' in Shelley's work remained on-going as the 'condition of social and cultural discourse' (147), and she inherited it. Her aesthetic and moral ideal of 'the extension of our sympathies' is, he says, at odds with imagination, though the two are sometimes thought of as convergent, as they had been in Wordsworth and the early Shelley. Imagination can indeed 'compel the characters . . . to engage the world, to read, to judge, to act', but 'at the same time imagination is inseparable from the compulsions that cause these characters to misread, to misjudge, to err' (154). It is 'disruptive', while sympathy 'bridges the epistemological and ethical gap between self and world' (150). Imagination mystifies; sympathy demystifies. Pyle regards Eliot's thinking about sympathy as a central manifestation of her intellectual independence, a creative and persistent attempt to redefine dangerous terms:

What gives Eliot's project its power and distinguishes it from other conservative Victorian responses [to Romanticism], those of Arnold or Carlyle for

instance, is her deployment of a Romantic figure, of sympathy, as the very means by which the rupture introduced by Romanticism could be overcome (149).

The work of sympathy is to represent or create genuine community, but this is problematic in the novels. Pyle draws on Raymond Williams's view in *The Country and the City* that there is a fundamental aesthetic problem in Eliot's novels, a 'paradox of language and community'. The narrators speak of sympathy and community, but Eliot's realism prevents her from embodying them in utopian novels. Sympathy exists as a moral quality embodied in characters but also as a quality of Eliot's writing, especially in her narratorial reflections, and the latter is more important in the novels than the former: '[w]e should . . . understand the deployment of sympathy to be the narrative principle and performative work of her novels' (149). Although it is true that a character might learn sympathy as a moral quality, as Maggie Tulliver does when she rejects Stephen Guest, and although a character might seem to embody sympathy, as Dinah does when contemplating Hetty Sorrel, nevertheless in each case, Pyle argues, there is the problem that these moments remain unfulfilled in the novel as a whole. In *Dinah* sympathy is an 'allegorical presence', not 'an activity or process that incorporates the individual self within the community' (156), and what happens at the narrative level between her and Hetty is in fact a failure of sympathy. Maggie's renunciation presents a slightly different problem. Though for her it is a moment of moral growth, it is *read* by the community as transgression, as 'acquiescence to the "Romantic" "natural law" she has renounced, and consequently as "treacherous and cruel".' In both cases we are forced to look for sympathy in the telling, not the story, in the *discours*, not the *recit*, and we become aware of a split between the two. Eliot is aware that the 'community' she aims to represent is not given but imagined. Her

'aesthetic teaching' would teach 'community' into existence. . . . [A] fully coherent community governed by the principle of sympathy . . . can only be the effect of an aesthetics of sympathy that, as we read, is in the process of unfolding and extending its connections (169).

The fate of Maggie also directs us to the question of gender in Eliot's novels. Pyle approves Nancy Armstrong's discussion of the 'double bind' that condemns Maggie whether she sinks or swims but he has little to add to it, seeing gender as merely one aspect of the overarching problem of social division and the ideal of community. His real subject is Eliot's 'rhetoric of community', her recognition that community is a 'complex and perpetually unfinished ideological project' (170) and its embodiment in her uniquely powerful narrative voice.

This is a timely book with a powerful argument for intellectual honesty and coherence, qualities the author evidently admires in Eliot and the poets he discusses. I found it stimulating and endearing, though I do not share his conclusions or indeed his points of departure: a book, in fact, haunted by its own sense of the need for intellectual community.

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