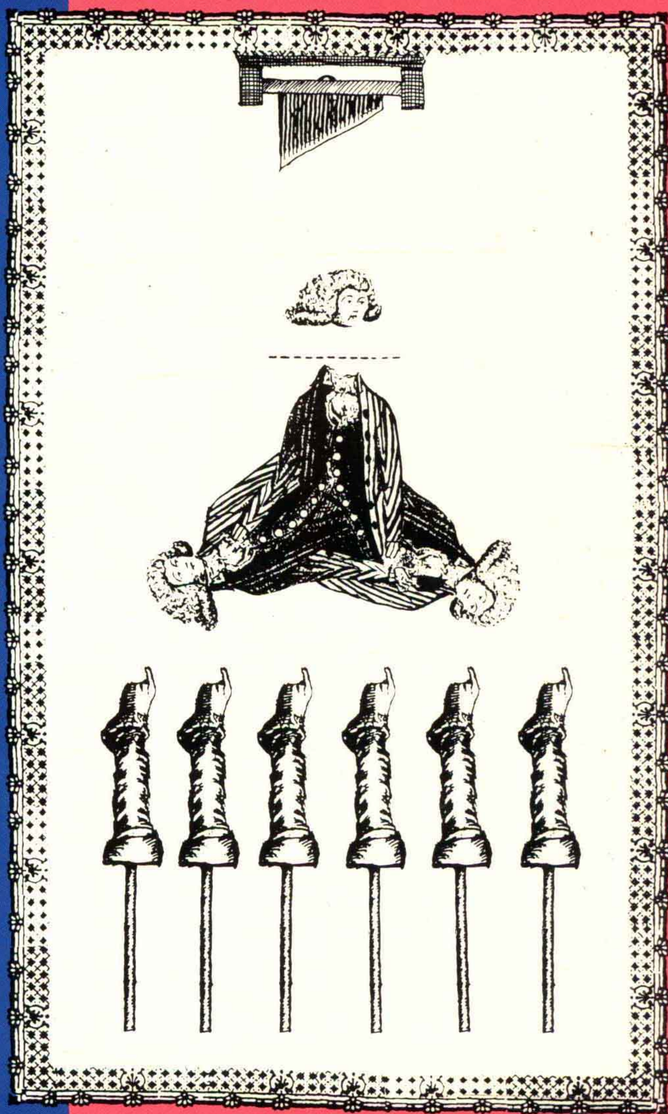
Ideas + Production

Revolution in writing

British literary responses to the French Revolution



Edited by Kelvin Everest

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1

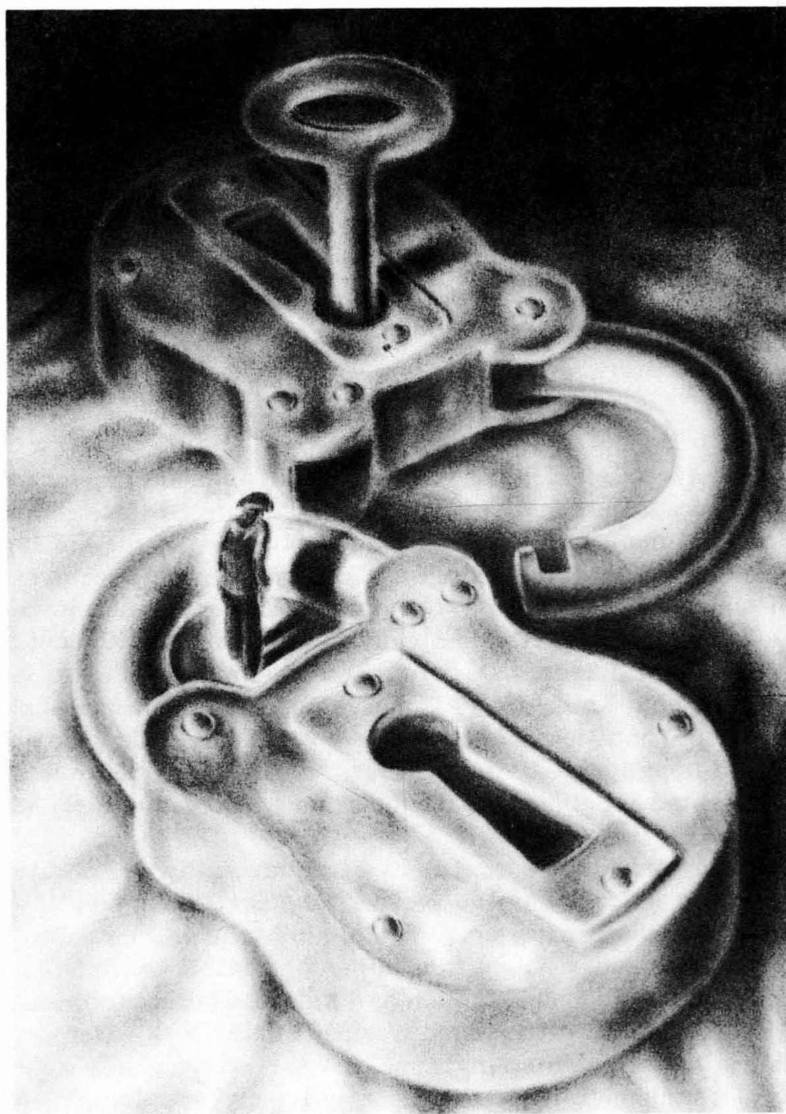
Introduction

Kelvin Everest

The essays collected in this volume were all originally generated by the academic conferences and events organised throughout Britain to mark the two hundredth anniversary of the French Revolution. These conferences in 1989 were diverse in their style, thematic organisation, and scale but they shared an energy and enthusiasm which testified vividly to the vitality of Romantic studies in this country. The main conferences took place in Winchester at King Alfred's College, and at the Universities of Leicester, Lancaster and Leeds. There was also a conference on related topics at Glasgow University early in 1990, which represented a continuation and development of themes that had emerged in 1989.

Discussion at these conferences was always lively, always diverse in its positions and perspectives, and dominated by a pleasingly constructive and friendly atmosphere. This atmosphere embraced scholars from different disciplines, different kinds of educational institution and indeed different countries (North American participation was particularly high). Many of the participants were young, or at least at a relatively early stage in their academic careers. The papers which make up the present volume are all by younger academics. This relative youth, combined with the friendliness, variety and intellectual vigour of the conferences, produced a marked sense of celebration; a kind of measured delight in the intellectual contemplation of an historical event of such devastating complexity, richness and weight of implication.

Certain themes, inevitably, appeared again and again throughout the papers and debates, and those themes are reflected in the



Patrick Preston

arguments of the essays that are collected here. At the centre of much debate, whether explicitly or implicitly, is a continually recurring problem: how, in our account of the past, its ideas and its art, are we to negotiate between texts, history and theory? This problem of negotiation is of course by now extremely familiar, indeed inescapable, in its taxing combination of self-reflexivity, instrumentality and politically charged polemic. Its most influential, or at least most controversial form in current debate is that of the 'new historicism', a mainly American theoretical idiom typified for Romantic studies in the work of Marjorie Levinson. Philip Martin's discussion, which opens this volume, addresses some striking features and problems of the new historicism, and offers a characterisation of its capacities and limitations. Those capacities are undeniably powerful in the hands of sophisticated practitioners. Professor Levinson's readings of Wordsworth and Keats, for example, accomplish a most searching and subtle engagement with the discursive formations into which we are ushered by Romantic poetry. Such engagements are defining of new historicist practice; what we are obliged to confront is the extent to which modes and goals of critical reading are functions of the texts under consideration. The new historicist project seeks a self-consciousness in reading which heightens awareness of this function in texts. The power of the text to shape the way we read it is countered by a heightened consciousness of those contemporary discursive formations which form our own modes and goals as critics, situated in our own, utterly different historical moment. We are urged to consciousness of the 'historicity' of the discourses addressed in critical reading, and thus to a properly critical awareness of the ideological nature of the world view predicated by Romanticism.

The preoccupation with discursive formations produces its own problems, however. Marxists in particular, but also critics in a broader British tradition of Left-radical social history and contextual literary-historical commentary, are doubtful about the real political efficacy of an interpretive mode which consigns all history to a function of the discursive configurations obtaining at the moment of interpretation. The new historicism appears in a fundamental sense post-structuralist, in its commitment to the idea of meaning as a product of synchronically existing signifying systems. History has no depth, and no form of material continuity; it is a purely mental construction. Paradoxically, this enables new historicist practice to credit texts from the past with

great, even coercive power, because they can draw us into their own discursive formations and create the illusion of a real continuity between their historical moment and our own.

There are, needless to say, powerful alternative theoretical positions available, and Philip Martin shows that there are even virtually opposite positions. Tony Bennett, for example, argues persuasively for texts as 'strategic sites for the contestation of dominant subject identities' (see p. 25), so that, in Dr Martin's words, 'subjects [that is, readers, *users* of texts] are not interpellated by texts, but conduct an active interest in them, and that interest – in the broadest sense – is political'. Escape from the bewildering hall-of-mirrors effect of new historicist reading is arguable by such a route. The clash of discrete discursive formations which is necessarily involved in any reading of the past may yet be preserved for actual political purposes. But this has to be done by acknowledging the continuities which enable us to make sense of our radical difference from the past.

The reality of women's historical experience poses the political question sharply. There can be little advantage in thinking of our understanding of women's experience in the French Revolutionary period, for example, merely as the ghostly backward projection of present discursive formations. Such a position is at once to relativise, in a hopelessly compromising way, the moral grounds of present political commitment, and offensively to appropriate the actual experience of other people. The real complexity of women's emergence into conscious social identity, in the last years of the eighteenth century, and under the pressures of the dramatic revolutionary situation, can be immensely illuminating in the context of current social experience and the effort to understand it. Mary Wollstonecraft is obviously a crucial and central figure here, and her work and life form a major preoccupation in this volume, as they did throughout the bicentenary conferences.

And yet the studies which attend to her achievement here repeatedly return us to the paradoxes and entrapments of discursive formations. Wollstonecraft's ability to encounter and deal with the crises of her life and historical moment was limited and shaped by the styles of representation available to her. She, like the rest of us, was constrained to represent and account for her experience and ideas by the dominant representational and theoretical idioms of her community. The resultant strains and contradictions are intriguingly brought out and developed by

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several of the discussions in this volume. In particular, her efforts to elaborate a rationalist feminism, in the context of pro-revolutionary polemic, are constantly driven to embrace representations of the female governed by the assumptions of her opponents. A number of the essays collected here share a very specific concern with one particular site of contention in the debates of the Romantic period about the significance of events in France: the crisis of the 'October Days' of 5–6 October 1789, when the French royal family were threatened by a revolutionary mob at Versailles, and were subsequently removed to Paris together with the National Assembly. These events are given crucial prominence in Burke's account, and they therefore become crucial too for Wollstonecraft, and indeed for Paine. But they are more than simply a common site of interpretation. Interpretations of these events draw on fundamentally similar assumptions which eerily merge the positions of ostensibly opposed commentators.

This tendency to take on the guise of the enemy is exactly the danger about which the new historicism has succeeded in making us so vigilant, with respect to our general encounter with the texts of Romanticism. Romantic texts seek to constrain us to read as Romantics. Frequently, their internal structures mirror the external relations between text and reader: Caleb and Falkland, in Godwin's *Caleb Williams*, or Frankenstein and his monster in Mary Shelley's novel, provide archetypal instances of such structures, in their modelling of an antithetical relation whose ostensibly opposed terms mirror and feed upon each other.

But as readers we need not in practice simply succumb to the allure of such strategies. It remains possible to read against, as well as under, the influence of complex discursive formations. In feminist terms, for example, it is arrestingly demonstrated by Kathryn Sutherland's essay in this volume that the representations of our own cultural politics, just as those of Wollstonecraft's revolutionary politics, can be shown to elide and conceal still recoverable alternative representations. Thus the Christian conservatism of Hannah More's pamphlet propaganda emerges as more immediate and telling, in its address to real female experience in the 1790s, than the overt radical-rationalist feminism of Wollstonecraft's work, with its clear affinities with the characteristically left-wing feminist politics of our own epoch.

Kathryn Sutherland's essay demonstrates the power of history

to surprise and confound our expectations; to tell us what we do not perhaps necessarily wish to hear, so to speak. The most powerful discursive formations are susceptible of fracture, and not only under the weight of internal contradiction. The past may emerge as altogether more various and unmanageable than any account can allow for. Harriet Devine Jump's essay on Wollstonecraft's *Historical and Moral View . . . of the French Revolution* shows how, in Wollstonecraft's own case, her direct observation of events in France in the early nineties served not to endorse, but worryingly to enter questions about the validity and the practical consequences of a theoretical position. Radicals in the revolutionary period found themselves compelled to elaborate an explanation for the wild and dangerous potentialities unleashed in a populace newly out of state control. History unfolded – at the level of event and reaction and counter-reaction from day to day – too quickly, too unpredictably. And this meant too that the intellectuals of revolution, its propheciers and schemers and advocates, found themselves suddenly unable to escape responsibility for terrible consequences which had been quite unforeseen, and indeed unforeseeable. The dilemma – anticipated in Wollstonecraft's dawning nervousness and uncertainty as an observer of the early revolutionary days – is brilliantly realised and dramatised in Shelley's representation of Beatrice Cenci, as Michael Rossington's essay demonstrates. Beatrice comes to stand as an image of the liberal intellectual whose idealism cannot in the end transcend the grim actuality of events which she has helped to set in train.

These reflections derive from the discussions carried on within and across the essays which follow. But they do not derive exclusively from them. The conference season of 1989 was exciting, and it takes its place in the memory now as the academic inflection of more general and more boisterous celebrations, involving the whole French nation and its admirers across the world. The excitement merged, as that year drew on, into far more momentous and moving excitements, with the extraordinary acceleration of political change in Eastern Europe, the collapse of the Berlin wall, the climactic Christmas revolution in Romania. Bliss was it . . .

It is tremendously hard to make an effective leap of historical imagination, and to try seriously to understand what the experiences of the early 1790s can actually have meant to contemporaries; what they can have meant, that is, absolutely

without the foreknowledge of a Terror, of Napoleon, of a quarter-century of European conflict, without the whole agenda of post-Napoleonic international politics which was implicitly set over a few short months, and which took a century or more in the working out. But that leap of historical imagination has turned out a little easier for our generation than anyone could have anticipated. Once the political agenda is torn up, a lot can change in thirteen months.

Andrew Gregory

2

Romanticism, history, historicisms

Philip W. Martin

The new historicism, to some the latest and most spectacular *ignis fatuus* of critical movements, was rightly at the forefront of our thoughts during the French Revolution's bi-centenary. Rightly, because the historicity it is bent on affirming is that which centres the conceptualising of the past within the historically realised moment of the present. And since new historicism (without permission, so it seems) had pitched its mansion in a place fundamental to the current anatomy of Romanticism – that is, Wordsworth studies – there was sharp sensitivity to its claims. Yet despite a general alertness, there has also been a remarkable silence about new historicism in Romantic Studies, most readily evinced in Alan Liu's recent article in *ELH* (1989), wherein Liu, a Romanticist, argues volubly on the issue of new historicism in Renaissance studies, but says very little about its effects in the province of his own scholarship.

One of the most striking features of Romantic new historicism is that few self-conscious proponents exist. It is a belated labelling which structures the movement, and critics are interpellated into its folds. Marjorie Levinson is the central figure in this activity (hence this paper's concentration on her work) and her introduction to *Re-thinking Historicism* (and her essay therein) offers striking instances of this, as she hails her contributors and others in the name of the new methodology (Levinson *et al.* 1989). She conducted a similar roll-call at the beginning of her book on Wordsworth (Levinson 1986). Possibly many of the names invoked were oblivious of their practice as new or proto-historicists as they wrote, and yet this offers no difficulty to the historicising mind. For in its latest manifestation it sees historical

process not as a continuum, an accumulation of fixed forms or events on a historical record, there to be reconstituted by archival research. Rather, it sees history as of the present, in that so far as it is a process, this process is a configuration of history or histories constantly forming and reforming through the belated knowledge of the here and now. History has long been seen as existing only in the moment of its realisation, but this is different, for the emphasis is not on cognition as such but on what can be seen in the past through the informed, or misinformed, slanted views of the present, which has its own historicity. The new historicism is, in a sense, a 'perpetual weaving and unweaving of ourselves'.

One large interference for new historicism within Romantic studies is the work going on under that title in the Renaissance, where it made its first establishment. There the new movement declares itself against the old as exemplified in the work of E.M.W. Tillyard, but Romanticism identifies its old historicism in a very different politics, the work of E.P. Thompson or David Erdman. This difference might be more striking in England than America, so much more so that the theoretical commonality might not be perceived. Where Tillyard asserts an ordered stability of social context, Erdman and Thompson find one riven with dispute and strife, reclaiming for their contemporary readers submerged class interest and repressed cultures. While it may be the case that Tillyard and Thompson share a very broad methodological base (Hegelian, Zeitgeist, a history wherein cultural artefacts such as literary texts reflect, express or provide analogues of an essential social history) I believe it is new historicism's constant liability to forget its effects by being absorbed in its methods, to underestimate political difference and the varied purpose of old historicist analysis in its haste to declare its new coherence against the methods of the past. This political confusion – or at least its impending presence – is something to which I will return at the end of this paper.

Romantic new historicism then, is distinct from Renaissance new historicism partly because of the difference of its difference. It is perhaps more mindful of its predicates in the history of the left, and it moves out from these bases to conduct its new project. Broadly, that old historicist ambition was archival and contextualising, the uncovering of a historical record into which texts fitted so that their meanings could be fixed. Such contextual work continues within that variety of writing that Marjorie Levinson has ushered into the new historicist fold, so much so that this

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