Introduction

Paul Hamilton

How should we repossess the past? Applied to academic writing now about Romantic-period writing, this is a disingenuous question. It presupposes a scholarly field in which antagonistic critical positions are already drawn up in unignorable fashion. New work on British Romanticism is often characterized as much by its conscious difference from preceding positions as it is by its take on or choice of material. As a result, writing neglected or marginalized in one account will be restored to prominence in another. In fact, for some, such difference has become the point of the critical exercise itself. The past as we construct it becomes nothing more than a history of the present.

The quality of possession, though, is as important as its novelty. Quality of historical recovery, the chapters in this volume suggest, comes both from the critic's ability to respond to the particularity of a piece of Romantic writing and from her awareness of not one but several overarching contexts to which it could have belonged. The historical prism through which these essays view Barbauld, Edgeworth, Scott, Hazlitt, Coleridge, Godwin, and others is consciously chosen, certainly, but in a spirit of dialogue which allows the reader to judge if another angle of approach might have revealed more. Thus the critical conversation continues.

Marilyn Butler possesses this dialogic ability in full, and her work makes sense of the quality of historical sympathy required to repossess the Romantic past in a more than critically opportunistic sense. Butler's work takes the question of historical recovery to be ever-present and never conclusively decided. That is why a book written in honour of Marilyn Butler ought not to be in any way retrospective. That has never been her style. She has always been suspicious of traditional academic expectations and uncomfortable with pure, philosophically unmixed explanations. Her work has always been original, critical, and self-critical, testing disciplinary boundaries, commenting on and revising current historical verdicts by attending to neglected literary possibility – Malthus rather than Burke; Southey rather

than Coleridge; the expatriate, liberal Edgeworth rather than Scott; Jane Austen, but in her underestimated role as a contributor to the contemporary 'war of ideas'. But her generosity of interest and her creative eclecticism should not be confused with an undiscriminating latitude. Her historical critique of Romanticism is a sharply intelligent and highly sophisticated one.

The essays in this volume show how her work is being continued. Each is characteristic of its author. Each in different ways addresses itself to issues that have often taken centre stage in Butler's work. They examine the ways in which Enlightenment and Romantic writing could be critical of its own times; they place non-canonical alongside canonical writing in order to illuminate each; they challenge the certainties of established literary history. There is a strenuous tradition of historiography behind a focus like this, and it needs to be acknowledged that Butler's work has been a precursor and stimulator of initiatives in the history of the period too. If I dwell for a while on historical writing in these introductory remarks, it is in order to emphasize a breadth and grounding in Butler's work – the degree to which its historical positioning is thought out – that often goes unnoticed.

Marilyn Butler's work has characteristically avoided the extremes of immanent critique, in which to evaluate a great piece of writing's complex, internal difference from its own project provides sufficient judgement, and sociological reduction, in which literature's complicity with power (or 'the police', as Hazlitt would have said) sanctions a wholesale scepticism concerning its aesthetic value. Instead, it has sought to explore the immediate literary context within which a given work was shaped, and the relation of that context to a number of other larger contexts. It has kept 'major' and 'minor' works simultaneously in focus, troubling their canonical status in interesting and enhancing ways, and enabling them to appear in brighter historical relief by showing how their literary struggle (as Butler put it in her Cambridge inaugural lecture) 'models an intricate, diverse, stressful community, not a bland monolith'.

Butler's sympathetic intimacy with Romantic writing has enabled her sharply to identify its literary ambitions. Her work displays an unusual historical sensitivity to the specific literary choices open to writers at a particular moment. Although it does not take the Romantics entirely at their own evaluation, it is nonetheless inspired by a historically learned realization of their creative departure from other contemporary possibilities, other, equally legitimate ways of writing at the time. It co-opts and re-orchestrates the methods Butler inherited and experienced in her own career: impressionism, formalism, Oxford bibliography, Leavisite moralism, feminism,

new historicism of the European and American varieties, post-colonialism. In Marjorie Levinson's best diagnosis, a unifying theory is replaced in her work by the act of showing 'one historical fact . . . *produced* by another'.[1] The canon shines in contradistinction to the archive from which it has emerged, but in that archive must reside the alternatives that made the canon a choice, a risk, an election, a political act, ascriptions that at once acknowledge orthodox achievement while refusing it an absolute authority. Official literary history is shadowed, in Butler's work, by other possible literary choices and histories.

Marilyn Butler's writing is deceptively un-theoretical and accessible. As a result, the force, the subtlety, and the seriousness of her interventions in intellectual debate about Enlightenment and Romantic-period history can sometimes go unobserved. In recent years the more obviously grand narratives of Jonathan Israel, Linda Colley, and Roy Porter have been influential in gripping and shaping non-specialized attention to the British cultural heritage. Butler's work assimilates and already qualifies and questions the large ambitions of such narratives. Like them, it conjures up a British self-image that won't stay still, that is knowing about its difference from Europe, that is interestingly in transition, and that changes with the subtle re-alignments of class and social expression produced by mutating historical circumstance. But in its attention to local, writerly detail it subsumes and refines upon grand narrative, and foregrounds the power of individual agency within history.

The historical presuppositions that Butler's work shares with the major historians from whom she differs can perhaps be summarized as follows. Dissent in the long eighteenth century is both oppositional and conservative: it resists an establishment that it believes has excluded it, and is eager to achieve the establishment of its own tradition that it was disappointed in expecting from the settlement of 1688–9. The new, more tolerant consensus following from the Glorious Revolution was primarily religious but was forged at a time when religious and political sentiments and language were still fairly interchangeable. Nevertheless, they were not the same, and subsequent exclusions of Dissenters from dominant educational institutions, Parliament, the judiciary, hegemonic culture generally, had probably two main effects. The first was recognition of a pressing need for secularization if religious toleration was to be turned into a political franchise: Dissent had to become dissent. The second was the desire to keep up anyway with the dominant state apparatuses by shadowing them with an equally supportive Dissenting establishment. The Dissenting academies at Warrington, Northampton, Tewkesbury, and elsewhere are the obvious

formal example of success here, but the informal support for Dissent hosted by clubs, associations, meetings of lobby groups, reviews, correspondence societies, and other groupings has a long tail that, as was shown by gagging acts from the mid 1790s until 1819, was difficult to monitor, never mind police.[2]

Add to this unmanageability the secularizing imperative first mentioned, and the picture of creative dissidence towards orthodoxy in all its inherited forms becomes one of energies working across a very broad front. And the breadth of this front can bring out unusual versatility in the critical writing attempting to understand and record it now. Secularism, in fact, is only a name for the variety of modes of justification replacing that of monolithic religious authority. Secularism belongs with that continuing crisis of the European mind of which Jonathan Israel has provided the most exhaustive account. At its best, interdisciplinary history like Butler's puts aside the limited binary axes of explanation articulating single subject areas, as if itself opposing academically a theological model of doctrinal uniformity with a secular latitudinarianism. It challenges the completeness of sweeping separations into ancients and moderns or traditionalists and radicals because it shows that the same people belong to different sides in different contexts. Israel, for example, argues that 'what was ultimately at stake was what kind of belief-system should prevail in Europe's politics, social order, and institutions, as well as in high culture and, no less, in popular attitudes'.[3] Butler shows that the grand narrative of secularization is actually made up of contested local stories and different time-scales, which can be allowed centre stage without sacrificing an overall idea of progressiveness.

Butler's replacement of the 'bland monolith' with a more difficult 'diverse and stressful community' positions her interestingly in relation to the historiography of her period. The prevailing nostrum of the moment on the long eighteenth century is in all likelihood one deriving from Linda Colley's *Britons*, according to which the egregious event for historians to explain from the early modern period onwards becomes the forging of the nation, not the variety or consistency of competing views suppressed by the national story, the non-conformism of which major historians (Hill, Thomas, Thompson) preceding Colley established so influential a school of study.[4] Whereas J. C. D. Clark had excavated an often cryptic persistence of an authentic ecclesiastical communion in unlikely places in order to ground national continuity, Colley stressed the diversification of establishment positions required to make people sufficiently patriotic about public order to believe in the value of exporting it and to enlist in that colonial

enterprise.[5] The moral case for Empire, far from merely euphemizing its commercial gains, actually justified them; they set the standard for good use and equitable practice in an expandable British society. Warren Hastings, for example, was arraigned for allegedly compromising these standards, and Burke's moral victory in his failed prosecution of Hastings was still measured commercially in its impoverishment of the eventually acquitted Nabob. The moral obligation to extrapolate domestic standards to the colonies, after all, is the same argument we still find, carried to extremes, in Wordsworth's *Excursion*. Butler's resistance to literary parochialism lets her criticism alert us to these wider historical debates that texts like *The Excursion* were, in their own way, settling.

Colley's overwhelming case for concentrating on explaining how the national self-consciousness driving the extraordinary British Imperial successes of the Victorian age was produced understandably tends to leave languishing any radical, enlightened dissent. Butler's work, however, encourages us to highlight the importance of accounting for another equally obvious phenomenon, that of progress. It is equally arguable, a story as compelling as the national story of the long eighteenth century, that people typically sensed that things could get better for the species as a whole (another Wordsworthian theme, as he too changes sides),[6] and that advances in medicine, technology, and agriculture applied indifferently to everyone and therefore helped establish ideas of political equality. If we are the same as each other in such formative matters, then why should barriers of birth and class prevail socially? The sentimental impulse in literary culture fed off this scientific indifference; its sympathies were licensed further by ever more comprehensive scientific analyses of our common condition; encouraged to neglect social distinctions, the sentimentalist's range of appropriate sympathetic objects increased correspondingly. (Later attempts to redescribe the burgeoning life-sciences so as to recover the modes of discrimination they had undermined fascinated Butler in her editing of *Frankenstein*.) The discovery of still more material for empathy, and more reliable material at that, powered writings as varied as those of Shaftesbury and Hutcheson, Richardson and Sterne. More than this, as Roy Porter's tableaux of the Enlightenment cumulatively ascertain, sentimentalism softened the commercial impulse, but it did so significantly by lending it an emotional surround capable of replacing religious prescriptions of how to behave with an affectivity just as morally reliable. Porter's interest in 'men devoted to the promotion of a new material well-being and leisure; aspiring provincials, Dissenters, sceptics and political realists resentful at the traditional authority imbued in Church and State' sits happily with his depiction of

the effects of a symptomatic transition from good sense to sensibility, when 'the personal became the political', or, less anachronistically, 'what Hazlitt meant by the "cant of religion" yielding to "the cant of sentimentality" . . . spelt a new and crucial phase in the dynamic enlightened quest for truth and freedom'. Commerce and sensibility share the same headlines, and Porter's breadth of example, significantly, outflanks the mediating adjective 'polite' required by Paul Langford's contrasting account of English commercialism.[7] This broadly progressive front held people together by holding up the possibility of change for the better and by implying the entitlement of any member of the species to represent the rest. All manner of possible enfranchisements, including the abolition of slavery, now heave into sight. Again, Porter's work represents a changing body of historical speculation with which Butler's criticism constantly interacts. But her early interest in the progressive core of eighteenth-century social diversity and her grasp of the variety of its transformations within Romanticism were quite distinctive.

Butler's own work pioneered, and the canonical series *Cambridge Studies in Romanticism* she has edited with James Chandler has helped foster, this richer view of things. We have come to see that 'the production of social order', to quote a recent sub-title from the series, was far more complex in this period than the production of legitimacy. Founded on conflicted notions, the social order that survived the challenge of the French Revolution poses the question of how it was that a certain kind of conformity, a sense of national belonging, was what actually changed things most effectively for the better. Our book therefore begins with this question at its most general, with one of the most casual ways of belonging to a company, that of 'conversation'. Conversation is not synonymous with argument, although a relatively uninhibited public sphere, as Habermas famously showed, can prefigure and so make a case for political possibility. But conversation clearly manages potential conflict or dispute between people towards productive ends. Jon Mee deepens our understanding of Dissenting opposition by emphasizing divisions within its counter public sphere.

One pole of Dissenting conversation looked towards the rehabilitation of existing constitutionalism. For women, the bluestocking group led by the wealthy and resourceful Elizabeth Montagu and friends offered such a forum. Anna Barbauld, despite invitations to align herself with the bluestockings and participating to a degree in their activities, tended towards a second pole, which gathered those loyal to the principle of opposition as the heuristic principle of all human exchanges. This trust in 'much arguing, much writing, many opinions' belongs to a severer non-conformist

tradition linking Milton's 'good old cause' to Godwin's privileging, in his *Enquiry*, of communicative action as the guiding light of philosophical explanation. Barbauld, in Mee's description, is located at a particularly expressive moment in the development of this dialogic arena, when the Dissenting ideal of 'conversation' as a transforming dialectic is being countered by notions that a culturally effective politeness has to be separated from enthusiasm or Dissent's Puritan past. Instabilities in Dissenting allegiances and a largely secular progression beyond these oppositions are talked through. Ideas of progress and education change when increasingly they are written about by women. Critics have treated these subjects separately and in depth. Mee's depiction of Barbauld's historical situation captures the tensions and uneasy alliances (in the Joseph Johnson circle, for example) produced in action by these competing or, better, 'conversing' interests.

William Hazlitt, nothing if not critical, is an essential figure in any investigation of the revisions of Dissent and the varieties of secular developments open to it. Are his writings to be valued as one literary future open to Dissent? Can Dissent find a manifesto in his secular, omnivorous, cultural day-to-day critical commentary, journalism in the best sense? Would this description do justice to the 'contrarian' but defining character of Hazlitt's political stance, one so distinctive in its opposition that it can look anachronistic, idiosyncratic, and wilfully nostalgic for a future promised but not delivered by the French Revolution? Kevin Gilmartin raises and answers these questions in a fashion that acknowledges the range of stamped and unstamped radical literature with which Hazlitt's writings negotiated. A political front as broad as this must risk contradiction and paradox; but in the process it may express most effectively the inconsistencies of the un-institutionalized life of radical London. Hazlitt was no communitarian, but Gilmartin shows that his writings are charged with the dialogic energies that a successful political opposition would have to orchestrate. Gilmartin argues that Hazlitt's unflinching catalogues of the good and bad of London life replace conventional Romantic utopianism (the Lakeland republic of Wordsworth's vision) with a vigorous, materialist, inclusive acceptance that a consistently admirable life is unavailable: 'vanity and luxury are the civilizers of the world, and the sweeteners of human life'.

Hazlitt's phrase offers no Mandevillean solution but advocates a knowledge that must get its hands dirty in proportion to its claims to be authoritative and comprehensive. Gilmartin suggests that Hazlitt's vivid immersions in London life, its politics, its pugilism, sports, theatres, topographies, voice a collective fantasy, the 'liberating' abstraction of a 'popular Leviathan', shared by more apocalyptic writers at the Blakean end of contemporary

radicalism. He is fascinated by the fixation of the popular imagination on unworthy (monarchical) individuals, by the diminishing of the idea of the People by abstract schemes for their betterment such as those of Godwin or of Bentham. But his fundamental refusal to distinguish between supporting the People and celebrating individual aspiration finally locates him as a figure uniquely expressive of those unresolved rhetorical negotiations with which the heirs of Dissenting radicalism had to deal.

Shelley, on the other hand, wrote a defence of poetry in which the possibility of reactivating past writing in the service of new causes appears limitless. Michael Rossington's discussion of Shelley's republicanism is therefore a discussion of his 'republics'. The historical adaptability of Shelley's radicalism unrealized it in Hazlitt's eyes; to him, Shelley, symptomatic of his generation, substituted for 'representations of things, rhapsodies of words'.[8] Rossington fits Shelley's republican 'latitude' to Butler's insistence on Shelley's internationalism, itself an historicizing updating of the French Revolutionary rhetoric for post-Napoleonic times. Romantic oppositional thought, one sees, has as many shapes as its uses of history. Rossington's discussion of one period in Mary and Percy Shelley's continuous attempt to keep alive the idea of an English republic explores the historicist tactics they enlisted in furthering this project. Two relevant geographies become the unusual bearers of this political investment and desire: Marlow, near Windsor, where the Shelleys stayed in 1817, and a European context more specifically evoked by stays in Switzerland and then Italy. Rossington's main point is that these different venues enhance each other's presence: remembrances of one locale from the other consolidate and then colour in the republican tradition of each. An English republican tradition that never enjoyed establishment status after the Interregnum obviously has little celebrating its existence in the way of public monuments. It must therefore be materialized inwardly, memorialized informally by the geography of its protagonists, or through the adjacent, supportive traditions of mainland Europe with its much more varied history of actual republican government. Rossington shows that these strands are woven together in the Shelley circle's writing and behaviour so as to furnish a republican texture of consoling substantiality. This republican material, though, interleaves places of literal struggle, such as sites of the English Civil War, with a literary topography, such as Rousseau's Switzerland or Godwin's Wales. In the same way, the Shelleys' English republicanism evokes the presence of absent European centres and figures of republicanism, from Machiavelli to Sismondi. Such syntheses must remain, in Rossington's terms, 'counterfactual' histories, but their idealism powers Percy Shelley's measured response to recent political

oppression. His *Charles the First*, understood within a project of perpetuating English republican politics by other means, mixes historicist dialectics with a pragmatic approach to contemporary radicalism. The play resists the temptation to sacrifice historical grasp to the polemical satisfactions of uncritically monumentalizing an alternative to history's winners.

Getting into the canon, or encouraging reading 'across' the canon broad enough to have yourself included within the new boundaries was clearly important for the children of Dissent. The corresponding updating of Dissent can become the major creative focus of a writing bent on this kind of assimilation. Anne Janowitz's account of Lucy Aikin, niece of Anna Barbauld, records another creative history or historicism: the Aikin family's unusual ability to manipulate their ongoing literary reception. Janowitz is interested and understandably challenged by the part her own commentary is invited to play in this continuing process. Here the past repossesses the present at each stage of reinterpretation; or, less dramatically, we can say that the interactive character of historicism becomes unusually salient when the past is so vociferous in claiming its share of the hermeneutical contract. In this case, the Aikin family's management of its reception is of a piece with their other educational enterprises. The Warrington and Palgrave academies prepared Dissenting students for the learned professions. Their ambition of assimilating non-conformism into polite society through professional competence and civic sense attracted mainstream Anglican support. The gentrification of Dissent increases with its post-Revolutionary mutation from a politically fraught *fraternité* into 'friendship', or a liberal openness to the opinions of others. But the 'severe contentions' of friendship of which Jon Mee writes are still apparent in Janowitz's account of the career of Barbauld's niece, Lucy Aikin, in her updating of the family's literary culture in a shape appropriate to Victorian times. Even her familial memoirs were formally partisan, explicitly combating French hegemony in this genre. Her description of the relation between her father and aunt discloses a considerable literary rivalry and its effects on herself. Historical momentum towards a universal franchise provoked her aggressively to set limits to the liberalism in which Dissent had come to rest. She could feel disgust when remembering the unbridled democratic moment of early Dissenting sympathy for the French Revolution. Janowitz's subtly sympathetic account lets us see how Lucy Aikin's memoirs, literary and familial, repossess her family's past so as to create a central role for the Dissenting heritage to whose polite assimilation she is a participating witness.

Pamela Clemit, in the subsequent essay, re-aligns canonical Romanticism from a different point of view. She does this by applying Butler's remarks

about the irreplaceability of scholarly editions to the case of Godwin's letters. To find explanatory contexts in a circle of acquaintance is especially useful where a writer of Godwin's longevity and mobility of opinion is concerned. Changeable on principle, Godwin's views were always meant to originate in the collision of minds and the clash of ideas resulting from public conversation and association. The letters show that in private life too, in the give and take of more intimate social relations, his ideals of sincerity, rationality, and frank communication are put to the test in various comic and tragic ways. Clemit speculates that the private, epistolary tempering of Godwin's notorious intellectualism correlates with a general movement of ideas in the Romantic period from revolutionary rationalism to radical sympathy. The progressive drive is not lost; it is modified by a conciliatory pragmatism that revives sentimentalism as the context for forward thinking. Like everyone else, Godwin has to manage affection and conflict domestically. Sentimental expression is too urgent and democratic a force to wait for the best supporting philosophical argument to emerge. Domestically, in other words, Godwin can be seen to be negotiating in his letters the affective life mostly sidelined by his earlier, purer Enlightenment optimism. Equally, the fact that his still unpublished letters do in fact possess this large-scale resonance revises received views about the sources of his philosophical energy and inventiveness, and reminds us that the Enlightenment was sentimental as well as rationalistic.

Godwin's complex and far from unexamined life, recorded in his letters, provokes a versatility and range of writing that now can be seen to answer philosophical purposes. Rather than abandoning philosophical and political theory, Godwin's later writings, Clemit suggests, confirm his acceptance that Whig practice is required to communicate republican principle: he was prepared, that is, to use orthodox literary resources, in all their generic diversity, to present the case for reform. Clemit goes so far as to claim that Godwin's presentation of his theories through novels, histories, biographies, and meditations critically revises the accepted 'organization' and 'classification' of knowledge. His writing thus keeps alive a project high-minded enough to justify the 'secular career' of a lapsed Dissenting minister. Clemit also demonstrates that this high-mindedness goes with an astute commercial sense for the literary market. A mixture of the two, perhaps, explains Godwin's unusual support for contemporary women writers. Godwin's letters, if published, would confirm Clemit's picture of a thinker whose speculations were always meant to be socially practicable and whose sociability was always principled. His increasingly diverse writings both map the literary resources of the time and suggest his continuing dissent from