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Edited by Lisa Low and Anthony John Harding

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INTRODUCTION

Milton, the metaphysicals,
and romanticism: reading the past,
reflecting the present

LISA LOW *and* ANTHONY JOHN HARDING

WHEN WE REMAKE THE CANON, to paraphrase Yeats, it is ourselves that we remake. The critic's desire to see affinities between writers belonging to different literary periods is as persistent and perhaps as irresistible as the contrary impulse to separate literature into periods in the first place. Such negotiations of the canon, often fiercely debated, are part of the normal traffic of critical inquiry.

Yet negotiations of and around the canon have probably never been as controversial as they are at present, when cultural materialism, new historicism, and feminism, as well as other critical movements, are directing our attention to the ideological interests that lie behind both the received canons themselves, and all proposed alterations or additions to them. The very grounds of the debate have changed radically and, it seems, irrevocably. In 1954 Louis Martz could argue that there was such a thing as the meditative style (defined as "'current language heightened,' molded, to express the unique being of an individual who has learned, by intense mental discipline, to live his life in the presence of divinity"), that this style was present in the poetry of Southwell, Donne, Herbert, Vaughan, Crashaw, Marvell, Blake, Wordsworth, Hopkins, Dickinson, late Yeats and late Eliot, and that it "forms a tight link between the seventeenth and the twentieth centuries."¹ If this claim now seems extraordinary it is not so much because of any inherent deficiencies in Martz's argument, but rather because very different questions are now being asked. Our sense of what is significant in the literature of the last two centuries (it is safe to say) is profoundly different from Martz's. As Martz pointed out, for example, Donne and Hopkins were both schooled in Jesuit methods of meditation, and this common factor in their backgrounds undoubtedly has a bearing on the poetry they both wrote. What has changed is not the *evidence* for such affinities between the poets, but our sense of the

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relative importance of such evidence. Few critics now would argue that a poet's language expressed her or his unique being as an individual, and those who did would couch the argument in terms rather different from those used by Martz. It is no dishonor to Martz's book to observe that his critical agenda, and his sense of what is valuable in poetry, were strongly influenced by his proximity to Hopkins, Yeats, and Eliot.

On the whole, questions of value were in Martz's book second to questions of historical continuity. Even so, by including Blake and Wordsworth in his list of the poets in whom "the meditative style" could be found, and invoking the Milton of *Paradise Lost* Book VII and *Paradise Regained* as a further example, Martz was implicitly going against the hostile value-judgments on Milton and the Romantics pronounced by both Eliot himself and later by F. R. Leavis. Martz saw affinities – and, more, saw several kinds of affinity, constituting a "line" or canon – where Eliot and Leavis saw only a falling-off, a surrendering of intellectual rigor for impressionistic description and of "felt life" for narcissistic posturing. Both strategies – constructing "lines" of descent, as if appreciating poetry meant determining who were the true inheritors of the mantle, the true successors to an original master, and the opposite strategy of trumpeting the virtues supposedly unique to an earlier period while decrying the qualities of a later one – now seem naive and ill-informed. (John T. Shawcross, in an essay in this volume, takes issue with both approaches, on historical and other grounds.) Criticism has learned to be a good deal more precise about both the nature of the Romantic project and the historical reality which provided the enabling conditions for that project, if not absolutely determining it.

At the same time, however, new historicism has sometimes given the appearance of tending to isolate the Romantic poets from all their literary precursors, canonical or not, and to relocate them in a very narrowly defined historical moment, as if any appeal to a purely literary antecedent, stylistic affinity, or other transhistorical relationship might lead straight to the ideologically-suspect process of canon-formation – which, it goes without saying, serves only entrenched academic interests. But even new historicism has to find some way to deal with moments such as Wordsworth's "Milton, thou shouldst be living at this hour" – with the image of the seventeenth century reflected in and constructed by Romantic writing, with the reception history of Donne, Milton, and other seventeenth-century poets in the early nineteenth century, with the reappropriation of totemic figures such as Milton by culturally-marginalized writers of a later period (Keats, Beckford, Ann Radcliffe), not to mention deeper affinities arising out of the needs that poet and reader shared in the seventeenth century and the nineteenth. The very availability of *Paradise Lost* as a vernacular poetic resource which was not

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restricted to a classically-educated readership changed the way in which poetic allusion was practiced, as Lucy Newlyn has argued:

Milton's reception ... can be seen to have made more accessible the process of allusion itself. No longer associated only with learned reference to the ancients (and therefore precluding the understanding of less educated readers), allusion depended more and more on the vernacular. Milton's epic provided literary material which was available to readers of vastly differing classes and educational backgrounds: it levelled hierarchical distinctions, both within the literary canon and within the readership itself.²

Such inquiries into the process of canon-formation as it operated in the Romantic period inevitably reflect the needs and priorities of our own time: for one of the lessons of the new historicism is that we should view with suspicion the privilege scholarship has sometimes too easily claimed, of being untouched by the present.³ This volume is concerned not only with those aspects of the seventeenth century that were visible to the Romantics, but with what from both periods is visible to us now – and not merely what can be “made available,” as in an archive.

All this is merely to point out that, as Tilottama Rajan proposes in the first essay in this volume, literary traditions and theoretical positions intergenerate one another. Rajan is particularly concerned with what she judges to be an important structural feature of both *Paradise Lost* and key texts of Wordsworth and Blake: the non-determinative positioning of the reader, or the “reading-function,” discernible in both – a function which she carefully distinguishes from the “implied” reader and “ideal” reader of reader-response theorists. Where these hypostatized readers carry a certain weight of ideological determination, enforcing a certain kind of reading (though not necessarily a specific “meaning”) on the text, the “reading-function” as inscribed within *Paradise Lost* and certain Romantic works creates “a position within the text which can and will be occupied differently by different readers.” Such questions as these raise once again, and more acutely, the problematic nature of literary relationships, whether or not we choose to deal in such loaded terms as “canon” and “tradition.” By discovering how Milton and the Romantics develop in parallel a new kind of text which in its very structure is open to interpretive difference, Rajan's essay prefigures a new literary history that does not have to isolate its texts either from historical reality or from the phenomenological, from readers' actual experiences of literature.

Milton, the Metaphysicals, and Romanticism begins, then, a long overdue reevaluation of the interrelationship between romanticism and the seventeenth century, especially in the context of new strategies of reading. Not all our essays raise the question of the positioning of the reader in the text in the way that Rajan's does, of course, but all of them do address in one way or another

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the issue of the reader's "constitutive role in the making of the text," and the assumptions which the reader brings to the text. Our essays put forward a variety of views on the vital first principle of whether it is legitimate to read author A "through" author B – or whether on the other hand *any* reading of A is bound to be affected by the gravitational pull of B, so that the best we can hope to do is to understand this effect and compensate for it, or alternatively to place the two texts in a mutually illuminating dialectic.

The debate about reading A through B, or comparing A with B, as applied to the relations between seventeenth-century poets and the Romantics, has a long history, of course, going back at least to the 1920s, and William Empson's challenge to T. S. Eliot's theory of the "dissociation of sensibility." In Eliot's view the stronger line of English poetry followed not from the Romantic but from the metaphysical school, a school which for Eliot included Donne, Herbert, Bishop King, Lord Herbert of Cherbury, and Marvell among others. According to Eliot, these were the last practitioners of the fusion of thought and feeling. This fusion, consummated in "wit," enabled the metaphysical poets to "feel their thought as immediately as the odour of a rose." But after the metaphysicals, and, tellingly, just prior to the English Civil War, a disabling "dissociation of sensibility set in, from which we have never recovered."⁴ This dissociation forced poets into either thinking too much (the Augustans), or feeling too much (the Romantics). In *Seven Types of Ambiguity* (1930) Empson challenged Eliot's "dissociation of sensibility" thesis. Where Eliot had argued that the metaphysicals practiced a poetry invariably superior to that of the Romantics, and that Marvell's in particular was wholly different in kind from theirs, Empson argued the opposite: that, while pursuing further the metaphysicals' poetic program, Romantic poetry achieved more, because it was polysemous, predicated not on one-to-one but on multiple and ultimately indeterminate correspondences. Thus the later metaphysicals were read as having anticipated romanticism, as well as improving upon Donne.

Empson's view was attacked and has never been widely accepted. For example, Merritt Y. Hughes and Ruth Wallerstein complained against the "kidnapping" of Donne and Marvell; Rosemond Tuve countered Empson by analyzing Marvell's poetry in the context of Ramistic rhetorical practices; Joseph Summers argued that despite some similarities Marvell's vision is "finally unlike" that of the Romantics; and for Frank Kermode, "The Garden" does not celebrate but rather deliberately rejects an arboreal sensuousness that only *seems* to us Romantic in character.⁵ These 1940s-to-1960s views of the metaphysicals remain influential. Thus, for Donald Friedman, writing in 1970, nineteenth-century critics erred in seeing Marvell as a pantheist; for Barbara K. Lewalski and Andrew J. Sabol, Vaughan's love of nature was generally "overemphasized"; and as recently as 1986 John T.

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Shawcross has argued, like Wallerstein, that “Donne needs to be rescued from too close an association with romanticism” and that “the false specter of Romantic effusion has blighted poetic criticism for a long time.”⁶

If Eliot and his followers had shown how to read the metaphysicals, F. R. Leavis, in *Revaluation* (1935), did the same for the cavalier poets and the Augustans, once again at the expense of Milton and the Romantics. Leavis named the metaphysical-Augustan school the “line of wit.” Leavis’s poetic, based on qualities he perceived in Jonson, Carew, Marvell, Dryden, and Pope, was what would now be called masculinist: he praised “tough reasonableness,” “native robustness,” “racy vigour,” and “impersonal urbanity.” On the other hand Milton, Shelley, and (interestingly) Herrick came in for severe criticism. “Milton’s dislodgement,” Leavis wrote provocatively, “in the past decade, after his two centuries of predominance, was effected with remarkably little fuss.” Shelley was “in some ways a very intelligent man,” Leavis reported, but “peculiarly emotional,” and his poetry unlike Donne’s becomes “unreadable” in maturity.⁷

In the 1960s and 1970s some of the assumptions behind these influential critics’ views were brought into question. In the 1970 preface to the revised edition of *The Visionary Company* Harold Bloom targeted Eliot and his followers in particular, rejecting the appearance of political neutrality which their criticism assumed. “English culture,” he argued, “has been divided between those who have accepted the Puritan religious revolution of the late sixteenth and seventeenth century and those who have fought against it.” Eliot’s critical judgments were guided by a conservative political and religious agenda rather than by purely aesthetic principles. In claiming that Eliot’s Anglo-Catholicism “accounts finally for *all* of Eliot’s judgements on English poetry” Bloom not only called those judgments into question but permitted a reevaluation of the line in the light of his and others’ particular political and religious affiliations.⁸

The politicization of English romanticism was a relatively new phenomenon. Until the 1960s, at least according to M. H. Abrams, the connection between romanticism and the French Revolution, or for that matter, between the Romantics and the English Civil War, had been almost wholly ignored. In the 1960s and 1970s Abrams and Bloom joined Christopher Hill in offering a revisionary reading of Milton and the Romantics as fellow-laborers in a progressive political movement. Thus for Bloom, “the French Revolution ... is the single most important external factor that conditions Romantic poetry” (xiv); similarly, Abrams writes that, far from constructing Eliot’s “dream world,” the Romantics were “to a degree without parallel ... obsessed with the realities of their era.”⁹ Equally important was Bloom and Abrams’s sense that romanticism was a reemergence of the ideals that impelled the republican

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side in the English Civil War. For Abrams, the Romantics were non-conformists who looked back past the eighteenth century and Augustan moderation to find in the left-wing activists of the seventeenth century the source of their own version of Puritan radicalism. For Bloom, pointing out the descent of the English Romantics from the “Left Wing of England’s Puritan movement” was the “most important point to be made about English Romantic poetry... particularly since it has been deliberately obscured by most modern criticism” (xvii).

Joseph Anthony Wittreich, Jr. continued this radical revision of the canon, arguing that the Romantics’ vision of Milton had been “much neglected, often misrepresented and generally misunderstood,” and pointing out that the New Miltonists’ exclusive focus on Satan had distorted the complexity of the Romantic response to Milton. Wittreich argued that Milton was for the Romantics a hero of political and religious radicalism, and “chief spokesman for a version of Christianity that the Romantics sought to establish as a ‘new orthodoxy.’”¹⁰ The Miltonic image of the poet as a God-like creator, prophetically reshaping a world, informed the Romantic experiment. For Wittreich, the Miltonic–Romantic school was essentially democratic and utopian: while the Catholic–classicizing line was predominantly elitist and conservative, the Romantics, like the republican Milton, looked forward to a reformed society.

Wittreich’s view of Milton as a republican hero has been modified in more recent years by critics such as Jackie Di Salvo and Leslie Tannenbaum, who see the Romantic poets, especially Blake and Shelley, as revising rather than simply extending Milton’s program. Di Salvo emphasizes that Blake and Shelley democratized and feminized Milton’s elitist republicanism.¹¹ Others have followed Bloom’s lead in seeing the Romantics as, in comparison with Milton, failed revolutionaries, who turned away from outward forms of revolution to the ever-fading interior light. Nicholas Roe, for example, has traced Wordsworth’s withdrawal from the political sphere as far back as 1794, in an addition to *An Evening Walk*.¹² Nicola Trott, in an essay in this volume, agrees with Roe in seeing Wordsworth as moving to the interior “surprisingly soon” in a mental revolution which “replaces – rather than precedes – a material revolution.”

In the 1980s, new historicists including Marjorie Levinson, Marilyn Butler, and Jerome J. McGann attacked Bloom and Abrams for too readily accepting the Romantics’ own claims to progressive and democratic sympathies. For Levinson, such claims suppress the fact that Wordsworth exploited the poor as a poetic subject, while turning away from them in his own political praxis.¹³ For McGann, Abrams’s brand of criticism betrayed “an uncritical absorption in Romanticism’s own self-representations.” If in Abrams’s view the

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Romantics were politically engaged, for McGann the Romantics practiced more self-flattery than actual democratic politics. Far from sustaining engagement in the cause of revolution or even democratic reform, the Romantics disengaged from the political; in fact, the poetry they wrote, recommending withdrawal into the inner paradise, confesses that disengagement. In the end, for McGann as for T. S. Eliot, the Romantic myth was a “mere” myth, as precarious as it was delusory: “Blake fell silent. Wordsworth fell asleep, and Coleridge fell into his late Christian contemptus.” As for the second-generation Romantics, they escaped from political engagement as well, Shelley into idealism, Keats into aestheticism, and Byron into sensationalism.¹⁴

A similar reaction has taken place in the feminist reevaluation of the Romantics. In the 1970s and 1980s, feminist criticism of romanticism has taken at least three principal tacks. In the first place, feminists have begun to demonstrate how far the emphasis on male Romantic writers has distorted our perception of romanticism. The low status academic critics give the gothic novel, for example, unfairly disqualifies writers like Ann Radcliffe and Mary Shelley from serious consideration. Similarly, some feminists have argued that periods have been defined in such a way as to exclude women: Jane Austen has been read as more conservative than she really is, with the result that she is considered irrelevant to romanticism and taught alongside the Victorian novelists instead.¹⁵ Similarly, the critics themselves have been called to account. Bloom’s neo-Freudian theory of influence, based on a father-to-son line of descent and an oedipal model of the poet’s relation to the precursor, has come to be seen as objectionably masculinist. A second line of attack has been the recuperation of the little-read women poets of the Romantic period – many of whom were in their lifetimes much better known than any male Romantic except Byron. Poets such as Charlotte Smith, Mary Robinson, “L. E. L.” and Felicia Hemans have been brought forward as writers vital to the culture of the time, and who have their own claims to our attention.¹⁶ In a third revisionary move, feminist critics have begun to reevaluate the “canonical” male Romantics themselves, examining for example their treatment of women. Is their view of woman only superficially more positive than (say) Herrick’s or Milton’s? Do they patronize women while practicing a division of labor, a doctrine of separate spheres, which relegates women to service roles? Under such scrutiny, the sympathy some male Romantic poets express toward women has been exposed as compromised, ambivalent, and far distant from “feminism” as we understand it today.¹⁷

Feminists have called just as persuasively for a reevaluation of the seventeenth century. Whether and to what extent Milton was sexist, or misogynist, has been debated since Milton’s own times. It is safe to say that many feminists

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regard Milton as Virginia Woolf did, as a maddeningly male-centered poet who required of women submission to men, a submission all the more horrible for its having been called *love*. Donne, on the other hand, is according to Janel Mueller the last metaphysical poet able to carry off masculine bravura, and even Donne could not sustain it past the early period of his secular love poetry.¹⁸ According to Leah S. Marcus, the metaphysicals turned away from women altogether when they turned to God.¹⁹ In the cultural despair brought on by the new science and the collapse of the established church, the metaphysicals retreated to the transcendental sphere where they had themselves to become the “other” – they had, in effect, to become children (and in effect, women as well). Whether this transformation was a good thing, in feminist terms, is a question too complicated to address here. But it is important to draw attention to this issue, especially as we embark on a reconsideration of the relationship between the metaphysicals and the Romantics. For both the Romantics and the metaphysicals were lyric poets who arguably practiced the idealization of childhood and, perhaps, the feminization of the self.

If it seems inevitable that in some sense or other we have to see Milton, however reconstructed or misread, as a major presence in Romantic writing, the presence of the metaphysical poets in, to, or behind the Romantics remains a question that somehow refuses to be settled. Romantic writers are much less likely to claim an affinity with the metaphysicals than with Milton, of course, since their poetry, by comparison with Milton’s, was nearly invisible. Herbert was known to the Romantics as a divine, but not as a poet; Marvell was known chiefly as a prose satirist and republican hero; Vaughan was known only in scattered poems in anthologies; and the Dobell manuscript of Traherne’s poems was not uncovered until the early 1900s. Even Donne was relatively obscure. “Do you know Donne?” Leigh Hunt asked Shelley in a letter in 1821.²⁰ Nevertheless the temptation to see affinities between Marvell’s paradise imagery and Wordsworth’s, or between the innocence of childhood vision in Herbert or Traherne and the evocations of the child’s visionary power in Blake and in *Lyrical Ballads*, remains strong; and the case has been made that the superficial similarities do reflect more than just the modern reader’s telescoping of historical difference or the projection of decadent Romantic taste back into the seventeenth century. If it is true, as scholars working on the seventeenth century have long indicated, that we cannot claim influence, what explains the similarities?²¹

Partial answers, at least, have been suggested by Christopher Hill and Leah S. Marcus. For Hill, if the political and social tensions of the English Civil War subsided during the Restoration and eighteenth century, they reemerged in the Romantic period. The eighteenth century, for Hill, was in effect an

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interruption in what otherwise would have been a continuous movement toward a more egalitarian society. Where the neoclassical poets were “disturbed by none of the doubts which have tormented the sensitive since the days of Shakespeare,” the metaphysicals and the Romantics, troubled by doubt and “internal conflict,” charged their lyrics with “the most intense feeling of their age.”²² Thus for Hill it is a mistake to identify the metaphysicals, as New Criticism traditionally has, exclusively with medieval scholasticism and Anglicanism; rather, metaphysical poetry is transitional, its paradoxes representing, if nothing else, the conflict between medieval and modern in an age of transition.

More recently Leah S. Marcus has argued that both the metaphysical and the Romantic poets retreated to childhood as a way to find unity in periods of cultural despair. For example, she writes,

William Blake’s *Songs of Innocence* and Book Second of the *Prelude* are as concerned with the unity of infant vision as the writings of Thomas Traherne. Sexual innocence and experience and their relationship to artistic creativity are as constant a theme in Blake’s poetry as they are in Andrew Marvell’s. Coleridge’s notebooks indicate that he planned a whole series of poems on the subject of infancy. The traditional association of childhood with the ideals of humility and simplicity was as central to the *Lyrical Ballads* as it was to the verse of Herbert and Herrick. (*Childhood and Cultural Despair*, 245).

Following Marcus, Janel Mueller has suggested that in Traherne “the child is erotically self-cognizant,” and that this has significant implications for subsequent “representations of poetic subjectivity and femininity.” Traherne’s “open sensibility and ostensible artlessness” anticipate Blake’s child speakers, both suggesting “revolutionary articulations of sexual freedom and equality” (“Among the Metaphysicals,” 156).

It is important to point out, however, that such claims go against New Critical as well as new historicist practice. We may take Ruth Wallerstein as representative of a view of history which harmonized well with the New Critic’s estimation of seventeenth-century poetry. In *Studies in Seventeenth-Century Poetic* (1950), Wallerstein argued that Marvell’s “habit of thought had deep roots not in Hegelian but in Mediaeval and Renaissance logic”; thus, Marvell should be studied in the context of Plato, Plotinus, and Tertullian rather than of Freud, Marx, or Darwin. Readings which saw “modern” concerns already emerging in seventeenth-century poets constituted for Wallerstein a “barbarous” kidnapping of men who were schooled since youth in the “great concinnities and ornaments of rhetoric” (152–53).

Wallerstein’s book was enormously influential. From it followed a spate of works of an even more scholastic kind, pursuing still more remote ancient and medieval theological and philosophical sources. But there are several problems with Wallerstein’s method. In the first place, as Colie points out, Wallerstein

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pursues her investigations into Marvell without considering whether Marvell actually knew the tradition she delineates.²³ The emphasis on intellectual background in some ways places Marvell in the same category (as “thinker”) with Tertullian and St. Bonaventure, and leads to a neglect of the poetry itself. It could also be argued that Wallerstein underestimates the extent to which the Romantics shared the metaphysicals’ admiration for Platonic and neo-Platonic traditions, and similarly profited from them. But the most obvious shortcoming of Wallerstein’s method, from a new historical standpoint, is that it ignores the social and political realities of Marvell’s age. For the new historicist, it is absurd to claim, as Wallerstein does, that Marvell remained aloof from his contemporary milieu, or that the scholastic approach is more “consistently historical” than the political one (*Studies in Seventeenth-Century Poetic*, 152).

Still, the new historicist McGann is just as rigorous as Wallerstein in his opposition to constructing “modernist” connections, cautioning us against comparing periods as radically divergent as the seventeenth, nineteenth, and twentieth centuries. For McGann such inter-period comparisons are likely to fail because they will overlook relevant “historical differentials.” Thus, McGann derides the current received view that “romanticism comprises all significant literature from Blake to the present,” just as he views with suspicion comparisons between Renaissance and Romantic poetry. Curiously, in a phrase that almost word-for-word recalls Wallerstein’s, McGann argues that Donne’s “self-awareness is more Plutarchian than Hegelian” (*Romantic Ideology*, 56, 20, 75). But is this true? Or is McGann here merely replacing the neoromantic views of a Bloom or an Abrams with a different kind of taste, one that (ironically) he shares with Wallerstein, a far more traditionalist critic?

Wallerstein’s and McGann’s observations are sanative and even liberating, but may underestimate continuities between the metaphysicals and the Romantics by confining “the modern” too narrowly to our own era. Some scholars are much less ready to believe that the divide between one period and another might be absolute and unbridgeable. The historian Lawrence Stone describes the “*early Modern period*” (italics ours) in English culture (from 1500 to 1800) as undergoing “massive shifts in world views and value systems.”²⁴ Do such shifts undermine Wallerstein’s claim of continuity between medieval scholasticism and metaphysical poetry? Similarly, Basil Willey has argued that the transfer of interest from God to the self, and particularly to the self-in-nature, began as early as Bacon’s *Advancement of Learning*, which proposed the scientific method as the key to the acquisition of knowledge. For Willey, the “submission of the whole self to ‘things’” which underpins Baconian scientific method anticipates both Wordsworth’s idea of a union of mind with external world, and Keats’s idea of negative capability.²⁵