

Rahul Sharma
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*Romanticism, Revolution, and Language: The Fate of the Word
from Samuel Johnson to George Eliot*
(Cambridge University Press, 2009)
by John Beer

THIS IMPRESSIVE BOOK reassesses the French Revolution's impact on British Romanticism through a partly historical and partly theoretical lens, proposing that there emerged a new willingness to question the written word after the Revolution. In each of his eleven chapters, Beer offers concise readings of chiefly canonical Romantic texts. The works of Coleridge feature prominently, to the point where they should probably have been mentioned in the book's title. Beer claims that these texts reveal a newfound circumspection toward the concept of literary art in the wake of the Revolution, which itself had encouraged a rebellious attitude to the traditionally authoritative status of certain forms of published discourse. In the process, he examines the core Romantic themes of identity and vision. He ties each one to the idea of language as it existed before, during, and after the French Revolution, so as to demonstrate the gradual decline in the written word's authority.

Chapter I outlines Beer's basic thesis. Entitled 'Democracy in Somerset and Beyond', it claims that the French Revolution impacted English thought on both a moral level and an 'intellectual' one (19). As Beer convincingly outlines, the 'murderous excesses' in France divided English opinion: only some regarded the events of the Terror as a necessary evil in order for France to change for the better, continuing to draw a parallel with England's Glorious Revolution of 1688 (5-7). In order to convey these details in their full complexity, Beer quotes at length from two little-studied sources, the diaries and letters of William Holland and Thomas Poole respectively.

Having identified the year 1795 as 'a firm turning point in English attitudes to the events in France', Beer addresses the contemporaneous religious dimensions involved (5-19). In particular, Beer points out the 'lack of commitment to religious dogma' (16) that existed amongst the circle of Dissenting intellectuals, who for their part were loosely associated with the controversial Unitarian Joseph Priestley (16). Taking the novelist Robert Bage as an example, he claims that a rising European-wide scepticism was initially aimed towards governmental authorities and ultimately influenced various 'modes of discourse' (18). This observation begets one of the book's main contentions: 'as words themselves came to be seen as lacking in authority, it would also emerge that they could be profitably ambiguous' (19).

Beer is at his liveliest, though, when studying the works of Coleridge. He dedicates at least one chapter to Blake, Hazlitt, and Austen, whilst his penultimate chapter is an entertaining analysis of the themes of memory and language in Tennyson, Gaskell, and Charlotte Brontë. But in my view, his most original chapters are the third and sixth, which are especially concerned

with Coleridge.

Chapter III makes a sophisticated and provocative claim about the originality of *Lyrical Ballads* (1798). We are told that its originality stems not from its portrayal of social outcasts—which had many precedents, as Robert Mayo has shown—but from its response to the era's 'contending emotions' towards the French Revolution (47). Whilst the collection's style and appearance were not particularly unusual at this time, its political orientation is quite atypical. And so it transpires that for some readers it had 'all the excitement of a new departure' (48). In Beer's view, the collection deals with the post-revolutionary 'state of disillusionment and hopelessness' by recovering 'an appreciation of the blessings of ordinary existence' (51). Moreover, the diversity of the poem's human subjects reflects Coleridge's development of the psychological theory of association into speculations on the '*life*' of the mind and its 'occasional experiences of "illumination"' (53). Further, poems such as 'Goody Blake and Harry Hill' reflect the excitement of Wordsworth's exposure to the ideas of Coleridge (55). Yet few readers have perceived these impulses behind the poems, and so Beer concludes the chapter by echoing the irony that Hazlitt observed: 'fools have laughed at them, while wise men scarcely understand them' (60).

Chapter VI, entitled 'Blake, Coleridge and the Riddle of the World', again focuses directly on Coleridge. It argues that Coleridge's major works depict mankind as both uncertain of and unable to comprehend the power of language. 'The Rime of the Ancient Mariner' (1798) is a case in point. Its narrator has inconsistent existential views and concurrently occupies a contradictory universe: thus the poem is 'hard to understand and full of contradictions' (108-111). Beer is led to ask if the Mariner's world is ultimately controlled by Death, or by the Spirit. For in his words, 'if one is looking for poetic justice, one must face the point that the Mariner, who after all committed the crime, is the one to survive, while his shipmates, who simply approved his action at one point, die in agonies of thirst' (111). Beer links this 'riddle' to Coleridge's recent speculations on the 'incomprehensible' nature of God (112). And just as one begins to wonder if this chapter is a digression, Beer links it to the book's main theme of 'discourse'. He explains that 'if the word were not to be treated with monumental reverence but kept truly alive, these necessities of its paradoxical existence would need to be continually acknowledged and propitiated' (112).

The book's last chapter is entitled 'George Eliot and the future of language'. It examines Eliot's changing attitude towards the writing of the Romantic period, noting that as she aged, Eliot 'found her early enthusiasm for Keats, Shelley, and Byron waning' (202). But in the process she would turn to the poetry of Wordsworth for 'reassurance', a taste which appears in her late novel *Adam Bede* (1859). Indeed, 'the point she valued most in Wordsworth was his willingness to take ordinary people seriously' (204). In tracing the way in which, for Eliot, Wordsworth's work lightened the burden of the mystery, Beer comes to a conclusion in tune with his whole book: after the Revolution, it was

'hard' for the reader 'to look to the force of words without invoking some sense of the need for them to be enlivened by the presence of some illumination of ardour' (223).

In conclusion, this book provides many insights about the literary legacy of the French Revolution, despite its rather episodic structure, which probably derives from the fact that the work was originally composed as a series of lectures. Like his earlier study *Wordsworth in Time* (1979), *Romanticism, Revolution and Language* principally examines Coleridge's writings without clearly highlighting this major interest from the outset. The upshot is that its achievements are not entirely in keeping with its advertisements. Nonetheless, Beer admirably draws out the implications of his thesis that following the French Revolution the authority of the (published) word becomes significantly compromised.