

Book Review

David Higgins, *Romantic Englishness: Local, National, and Global Selves, 1780-1850*.
Hampshire: Palgrave Macmillan, 2014. 225pp. ISBN: 978-1-137-41162-4.
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Romantic Englishness is a thoughtful and careful exploration of the complex interactions between local, national, transnational and global identities in Romantic autobiographical writing. Taking Englishness as his organising principle, Higgins contends not just that it 'was a heterogeneous and unstable category in the Romantic period, and always inflected by alterity' but also that Englishness was an important component of identity in this period and one that has not received sufficient recognition (9). A great strength of this book lies in its coverage of a broad range of authors; Higgins includes case studies of labouring-class authors such as Samuel Bamford, Thomas Bewick and William Cobbett alongside the likes of Samuel Taylor Coleridge and Charles Lamb. The key criterion is that all these authors write about England, in England (hence no Lord Byron). Broadly proceeding chronologically and consisting of seven chapters, *Romantic Englishness* covers a good deal of ground without feeling rushed or superficial. This is great testament to the detailed close readings Higgins provides which are compellingly contextualised within an engaging theoretical framework. As we might expect, Edmund Burke, theories of local attachment, colonialism and globalisation play an important role here. What is distinctive is the use of ecocriticism, particularly the 'glocal': Higgins writes that 'thinking of local "space as globally stretched" is crucial for understanding the relationship between individual and national identity in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries' (5). The introduction makes the tantalising argument that as a result of the suppression of English radicalism these narratives of Englishness 'are also often pitched against the modernising British state' (10). Although this claim is addressed to some extent in chapter three, it could have received more sustained attention. That it did not is perhaps a reflection of the book's focus on the ways in which local identities and Englishness are inflected and complicated by concepts such as empire, slavery and colonialism.

Romantic Englishness begins with William Cowper, presenting him as a forerunner of the writers addressed in the following chapters. Cowper, Higgins argues, 'provided a flexible model for writing about the self that could encompass the domestic/local and the national/imperial' (45). Higgins argues that Cowper's significance to Romanticism more generally, and to the authors addressed in the following chapters, requires acknowledgement, and specifically that previous scholarship has not 'fully recognise[d] the more subtle global connections that inflect Cowper's representation of private retirement' (19). This chapter foregrounds its discussion with 'Charity' but is centred on *The Task* which receives sustained, book-by-book, attention and concludes by pointing towards Cowper's influence on Coleridge.

Higgins is an attentive close reader and this is particularly evident in his analysis of Coleridge's 'This Lime-Tree Bower' in Chapter Two. Unpacking the significance of Coleridge's footnote citing William Bartram's *Travels Through North & South Carolina*, Higgins suggests this may have informed the presentation of animals and birds in 'The Rime of the Ancient Mariner'. The careful reading of the significance of the rook across these texts produces a variety of rich and exciting contexts (also drawing in, for example, Coleridge's relationship with Charles Lamb and intertextual references to Robert Southey's poetry) which very plausibly support the argument that 'The rook in both poems is a powerful image of the local [...] but its power only derives from its position in relation to exotic contexts' (58). This chapter concludes with some attention to Coleridge's understanding of Burkean concepts of family bonds and their relationship to the nation in

‘Frost at Midnight’, ‘France: An Ode’ and ‘Fears in Solitude’, themes which recur throughout the book, but it is strongest when digging deep into the allusions and resonances circulating in ‘This Lime-Tree Bower’.

In Chapter Three, ‘Labouring Class Localism’, we see how ‘something apparently insignificant and localised is used to comment on the wider world and to represent significant socio-political issues’ in Cobbett’s *Rural Walks* and Bamford and Bewick’s autobiographies (71). Higgins’s treatment of Cobbett is compelling but its separation from the analysis of Bamford and Bewick – who are paired together in the second half of the chapter – feels slightly awkward. Bamford and Bewick’s relationship with Englishness is ambivalent; Higgins argues that for these men ‘as well as being associated with rural virtue, [Englishness] is also linked with corruption and despotism’ (74). *Romantic Englishness* begins with discussion of a Bewick woodcut and the persuasive suggestion that Bewick lamented the decline of this format, perceiving it as ‘perform[ing] the equivalent function of history paintings for the upper ranks: the instillation of public virtue and therefore national happiness’. Analysis of these formats might have been given more space throughout the book (80). The focus on labouring-class writers continues in Chapter Four which complicates John Clare’s relationship with the local. This chapter suggests that ‘Perhaps writing that seems the most palpably locatable is potentially the most dislocated: after all, to write about a place is to separate it from the self by turning it into an object.’ (87) Connecting Clare’s writing to changes in enclosure and wood gathering laws and to the expectations of travel writing, we are introduced to a Clare for whom ‘literature allowed an escape from a community that could be stifling or conformist’ (87).

Chapter Five turns to William Hazlitt, providing an account of the significance of Jean-Jacques Rousseau’s *Julie, or the New Heloise* to ‘The Fight’. Returning to the manuscript, Higgins demonstrates the centrality of *Julie* to this earlier version of Hazlitt’s essay and to the possibility that ‘it is possible to reconcile English manliness and Continental sensibility’ (124). Likewise, Hazlitt sought to show that sensibility (signifying here ‘cultural cosmopolitanism’) and prize-fighting were not incompatible (125). Ultimately, Higgins writes, ‘Hazlitt is trying to find an ideal of masculine Englishness that can contain his Jacobinical political views and the confessional writing with which they were associated.’ (125). The negotiation of dichotomous positions is likewise central to Chapter Six. Here Higgins sketches Charles Lamb’s ambivalent relationship with the East India Company as depicted in his letters and the *Elia* essays. Work is ‘the Satanic “Pen&Ink” that simultaneously supports and destabilises the self’ (142). This ambivalence is drawn out through fluent and succinct close readings. In the second half of this chapter Higgins turns to Lamb’s letters to Thomas Manning, complicating previous readings of Lamb’s Orientalism to suggest that it is ‘more troubled’ than has been acknowledged (159). The chapter concludes by noting that Lamb’s writings undermine categories such as civilisation, Englishness and the local, demonstrating the embeddedness of English local attachments in a wider network of connections. Chapter Seven begins in a similar vein, seeking to problematize previous readings of Thomas De Quincey as holding an uncomplicated imperialist position. This plea to reconsider the treatment of local, national and global identities of these authors in a more nuanced way is reiterated (with good cause) through *Romantic Englishness*.

It is a strength of *Romantic Englishness* that its inclusion of labouring-class writers cuts across the networks of authors we are used to reading together. Higgins makes convincing cases for each author’s engagement with the glocal; what the book perhaps lacks is a sense that these writers were self-consciously involved in an attempt to forge a new kind of identity. A small complaint is that the references to William Wordsworth in the blurb and the title of Chapter Two (‘Local and Global Geographies: Samuel Taylor Coleridge and the Wordsworths’) are rather misleading; the Wordsworths occupy only three pages here and

receive no further sustained analysis (though William's 'spots of time' are a frequent point of reference and he is often mentioned as a recipient of Lamb's letters). Their presence here has been rather overstated.

Higgins provides a range of thought-provoking and careful case studies, leaving the reader wanting more; *Romantic Englishness* opens the door for further studies with the compelling account of the local and global which results from its careful negotiation of frameworks such as nationalism, colonialism, empire and imperialism. This is a highly accessible and self-aware text, suitable both for undergraduates with a taste for Romanticism and for more seasoned readers. It also stages an important intervention in theories of local, national and transnational/global identities and should be required reading for students or scholars with interests in the relationship between space, place, and identity.