

Book Reviews

Thomas Simmons, *Imperial Affliction: Eighteenth-Century British Poets and Their Twentieth-Century Lives*. New York etc.: Peter Lang, 2010. (Postcolonial Studies 11). xiii + 182pp. ISBN 978-1-4331-0872-3.

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Thomas Simmons's *Imperial Affliction* is an intimate and personal study of a number of eighteenth-century poets (and prose writers) and some of their modern readers. It is at the same time ambitiously broad in its frames of reference.

Unusually frank acknowledgements align the process of writing *Imperial Affliction* with a belief that life and work are inseparable. As Simmons says of his own scholarship, writing and reading are 'a function of the life' (p. xii). So is the whole book: the cover illustration and photograph of the author are by his partner, Rachel Sauter, and his generous appreciation of the intellectual and personal contributions of friends and colleagues runs much more deeply than mere convention or politeness. *Imperial Affliction*, Simmons says, is 'an experiment in reading rather than a comprehensive study' (p. xii), a book about living with poets, critics and teachers.

The personal manner of the book's presentation is of a piece with its argument: that intersections, or failed intersections, between contemporaries (such as Christopher Smart and Samuel Johnson) and between writers and their later readers (such as William Cowper and the twentieth-century critic and poet Donald Davie), constitute a powerful and perhaps necessary motor for imaginative and psychological engagements or repressions. Successive chapters read William Collins through Samuel Johnson's biography in *Lives of the Poets* and through Richard Wendorf's 1981 study, *William Collins and Eighteenth-Century English Poetry*; Christopher Smart through Johnson and W. Jackson Bate's classic studies of Johnson; Cowper through Davie; journals of James Cook alongside poems by Thomas Gray and Oliver Goldsmith; and John Newton's *Authentic Narrative* through the concept of purity and (again) Donald Davie, notably his *Purity of Diction in English Verse*. A process of later incorporation of, and distancing from, earlier writers continues self-referentially: Simmons dedicates *Imperial Affliction* to Bate, and notes his undergraduate encounter with the eighteenth century under Davie. We are constituted of those whom we meet or fail to meet.

Underlying these searching studies is the theory that we seek to define ourselves through 'alterity'; that is to say, through identities against whom ours may be delineated or adumbrated. The book's prevailing spirit is Emmanuel Levinas, whose phenomenological psychology was rooted in an ethical need to acknowledge those others and the external and valid viewpoint they take and represent. Such inter-subjective encounters bring with them an unsettling and even destabilizing dynamic. The effort to accord ethical alterity involves self-exposure and consequent vulnerability. The consequences may be the adoption of a strategy of evasion (as, Simmons argues, was the case with Johnson and Smart), a process of inclusion (twentieth-century critics' incorporation of earlier writers in their own struggles with identity), or, in extreme cases, psychological disruption.

However, *Imperial Affliction* is published under the auspices of another theoretical agenda. Post-colonialism pursues the deliberate aim of destabilization of the subject nation or subject attitudes in order to enable the 'subaltern' (that is, the colonized, the repressed) to define its alterity. The 'other' (or 'Other' as this discourse tends to prefer), that against which self-definition becomes possible, needs on ethical grounds to be freed into space for its own self-definition. The colonializing self must be undermined to allow the emergence of the colonized.

The two theoretical areas governing *Imperial Affliction* intersect, as my use of terms such as 'alterity' and 'repression' indicates. They do so in two main ways. First, any critical discourse is seen to operate through incorporation or repression. Reading may be a form of colonization. Secondly, the writers under analysis lived within the space of a colonizer, eighteenth-century Britain, and also experienced various forms of psychological disturbance. Simmons's happy choice of title, a phrase from Emily Dickinson's 'There's a certain slant of light', is a distillation of the book's theoretical stances. One of the pleasures of intertextuality, notes Simmons, is how the words of a nineteenth-century American poet 'may be seen to comment, not only on her own subject, but the one before us here' (p. 10). What better than a psychologically charged voice from a former colony to speak its otherness? 'Internal difference', the poem says, is where the meanings are.

The chapter on John Newton is the most straightforwardly post-colonialist. Newton structures his autobiographical *Authentic Narrative* (1764) to accord with teleology, through grace and redemption, consistent with the tenets of evangelical Christianity. This construction leaves a striking gap in Newton's narrative of his spiritual conversion while engaged in the slave-trade: the 'absent story' of the slaves themselves, to whom Newton makes only 'the most cursory references' (p. 156). The Africans are accorded no subject status, but

remain enslaved within Newton's text as the Other. Further, it is the very structure of purification and grace that makes 'possible the telling of this kind of story' (p. 157). Purity as a concept is predicated on absolute inclusion and exclusion. It creates its own version of Otherness to compound that which slave-trading already contains. Newton's 'defilement' as a slave-trader is important as a necessary stage in Newton's purification autobiography, not for its disastrous effects on thousands of Africans (p. 159).

Obvious rejoinders are that Newton was far from unique in negotiating his own identity through a form of hypocrisy (Samuel Johnson noted that the American colonists claimed their liberty while being themselves slave-owners); that he later openly regretted his involvement in the trade; that he became a strong supporter of abolition, at least by the time of his *Thoughts upon the African Slave Trade* (1787); and that real history proceeds by myriad details of human actions and motivations, mostly irrecoverable, that must make us suspicious of sweeping theories. Simmons acknowledges Newton's later involvement in abolitionism, although he casts doubt on the movement's genuine effectiveness. But his real point is wider: that cultural purity, even (or perhaps especially) when it demonstrates 'beneficent inclusiveness', is a function of the endemic imperial project of 'Sameness' (p. 161). This view disables criticism by erecting a theory that incorporates all individual examples within its 'totalizing' structure. It will therefore be in vain to draw attention to the arguments of, say, Linda Colley's *Captives* (2002): that imperial movements have long been a global, complex reality; that the British Empire was heterogeneous and unpredictable; that many Native Americans and blacks fought on the side of the British government in 1776 because the Somerset legal decision of 1772 (after Newton's *Authentic Narrative* and before his *Thoughts*) was widely interpreted as showing that slavery was illegal in British territory. If you accept the theory, all such details will be gathered into coherence with the premise.

Particular problems inherent within such system building emerge in the Cowper chapter. Simmons's proposition is that Cowper's personal experience of the God of evangelical Christianity can be read as a prefiguration of post-colonialism. The deity whom Cowper confronted was a 'totalizing' force. God demands complete dominance within the society of eighteenth-century Britain. The culture and ideology within which Cowper lived manifest 'Sameness', rigidly and wholly inclusive, refusing any divergence or 'Otherness'. The analogy with the colonizing force lies in a parallel of enforced 'Sameness' and consequent subjugation of 'Otherness'. But Cowper was also, at the same time, excluded by God. Having incurred God's wrath, Cowper was doubly damned, to a life that was a kind of living death, and eventually to hell. God appeared to Cowper as entirely 'Other', an inaccessible and punishing God. Cowper thus himself became an 'Other', an exile within the subjugating culture. Ethically, this ideology is unsustainable, unless of course one is prepared to accept the Calvinist perspective wholly and admit damnation as ethical. The cultural world in which Cowper existed, then, is one of asserted 'Sameness', but 'fundamentally off-balance and without meaning, a world of dislocation and vertiginous transformation' (p. 80). It is important to add here that Simmons writes movingly and sympathetically about Cowper's letters of the 1790s. His observation, for example, that Cowper's torment 'exceeds our understanding of tragedy because of its extreme duration and a total absence of catharsis' (p. 81) is both humane and thought-provoking.

This argument's link to colonization lies in the latter's assertion of a cultural dominance that ultimately cannot obscure the fragmentation upon which it builds its 'Sameness'. The 'Other' may be suppressed, but its voices will break through. In the meantime, the 'Other' remains victim, itself destabilized. Is that really an argument for connection between the psychological and political theories, or simply a demonstration that, if one chooses one's language carefully enough, one can talk about one thing in terms that are transferable to another? Does Simmons's own language reflect an answer to this question? Here is the opening sentence of the Cowper chapter: 'While contemporary postcolonial theory is in part defined by the way it applies the language of exile and Otherness to postcolonial situations, it seems that this same discourse – applied to certain specific colonial situations – works as well to reveal fissures and chasms in writers more commonly treated in other kinds of discourse.' (p. 79) Is 'it seems' equivalent to a convincing argument? If it works no better than what we already have, can it really be said to 'reveal'? It is, Simmons later says, 'helpful to us to understand how the colonial forces of Sameness ... destabilizes [sic] Cowper's own subject position' (p. 80), but how helpful is it really? Does the book's method ultimately depend on a juxtaposition of one theory and another, with parallel language as the only real link?

There are problems, too, in the interpretation of details. I shall take examples from the Johnson/Smart and the Collins chapters. Simmons argues that Samuel Johnson's relationship with the poet Christopher Smart, author of *A Song to David*, demonstrates an erasure of the 'mirror-image of something he loathed about himself', notably mental instability (p. 53). Although Johnson generally concurred with an ethical need to acknowledge and 'adopt the joys and the pains of others' (*Rambler* 89, quoted p. 60), and in both his private life (witness his extensive charity within his own miscellaneous household) and his public writings put this

precept into practice, his relationship with Smart was an exception because Smart's failings and weaknesses were 'so deeply embedded in the very psyche from which Johnson wished to turn' – his own (p. 60). The evidence for this argument is: (i) the fact that Smart does not figure in Johnson's *Lives of the Poets*; (ii) references in Boswell's *Life of Johnson* to Johnson's lack of charitable action and attitude toward Smart.

(i) The poets for whose works Johnson was engaged to write biographical and critical prefaces – the 'lives' of the poets – were named for him by the booksellers who hired him. Roger Lonsdale, in his edition of the *Lives*, notes that Johnson 'always insisted that he had little or no responsibility for the contents of the *English Poets*' (I, 9). All we know about Johnson's interventions in the selection is that he recommended John Pomfret, Thomas Yalden, Isaac Watts and Sir Richard Blackmore's *Creation*, and possibly advanced the claims of James Thomson. These are all poets whose death had occurred well before the publication of the *Lives* (1779-81): Pomfret 1703, Blackmore 1729, Yalden 1736, Watts and Thomson 1748. The likeliest stimulus to his advocacy of their inclusion is their relative popularity, consistent with Johnson's belief that poetical honours were ultimately the gift of the 'common reader'. The life of Pomfret is very short, but concludes by asserting that he 'pleases many; and he who pleases many must have some species of merit'. The collection centres on poets from the mid seventeenth century through to the mid eighteenth. Only three poets included – Akenside, Gray and Lyttelton – had died within ten years of the publication of the *Lives*. Even very popular poets recently deceased (such as Oliver Goldsmith, a prominent member of Johnson's circle, who died in 1774) were not included, possibly on copyright grounds. Indeed, the selections are most likely to have been defined and restricted for commercial reasons, and because of rival publishing ventures, such as Bell's *The Poets of Great Britain Complete from Chaucer to Churchill*, in an increasingly crowded environment. A case for the inclusion of Smart (died 1771) on grounds of either popularity or significance within the main time-scale of the collection would not have been tenable. There is surely insufficient evidence for stating that 'Johnson chose to exclude Smart' (p. 46).

(ii) Simmons argues that Boswell indicates that Johnson's attitude to Smart became distinctly uncharitable, marked by down-putting wit. Boswell reports that Johnson contributed to a journal called *The Universal Visiter* [sic], thinking that he was thereby helping Smart, and records Johnson as saying, 'I hoped his wits would return to him. Mine returned to me, and I wrote in *The Universal Visiter* no longer.' But Johnson in this episode is actually protesting at the ill-treatment of writers by booksellers (publishers, we would say today), a topic on which he had strong views. Smart and Richard Rolt were contracted with a bookseller called Gardner to compile *The Universal Visiter*. The terms of the contract were, according to Johnson, that the authors would receive a third of the profits and were prohibited from writing for anyone else. Johnson saw this as a restrictive, severe and exploitative contract. (The Hill/Powell edition of Boswell notes that the contract was actually worse: Smart and Rolt would receive only a quarter of the profits.) When Smart fell ill soon after committing himself, Johnson was among the contributors who kept the periodical going for a time (Lonsdale, ed. *Lives*, IV, 350). Johnson's remarks surely show that he contributed as long as he thought that Smart might be able to resume his work, and stopped when it became clear that all he was doing was contributing generously to the bookseller's profits, and not helping Smart at all. His wit ('mine returned to me') is at the bookseller's expense: no-one but a madman would work on these outrageous terms.

The proposition of the Collins chapter is that any notion of an identity for Collins is elusive, both as a subject of biography and in his poetry. For example, in the final stanza of Collins's 'Ode to Pity', the speaker wishes that he might in 'dreams of passion melt away' within the temple for Pity that he has constructed in his mind. Simmons reads this as a radical process of 'self-dissolution', 'as if that which were capable of dwelling could only do so by virtue of its self-extinction' (p. 36). But 'melt away' meant to be metaphorically softened or 'dissolved' in ecstasy, a recurrent eighteenth-century sense for which *OED* cites these very lines. The poet is not envisaging self-erasure (a desire 'not entirely sane', p. 36), but is aspiring to the achievement of identification with the nature of Pity: he defines himself by becoming the human, tearful embodiment of the emotion.

A similar questionable reading occurs when Simmons picks out the line, 'Some sweet illusion of the cheated mind', in Collins's epistle to Sir Thomas Hanmer on his edition of Shakespeare. Simmons treats this as dark and bitter, whereas Collins is attesting to the power of Shakespeare's poetry to evoke the magical world of *A Midsummer Night's Dream* and *The Tempest*. These are illusions in the sense that they are true poetically and dramatically rather than literally, but they are conveyors of pleasure: we are 'by Fancy charmed' (line 93). The mind is not driven mad, but is delighted to be 'cheated' by such a 'sweet illusion'.

Simmons's interpretations of Collins's poetry and the actions of Johnson towards Smart reveal a determination to discover 'anxiety' wherever possible. The problems created by these interpretations of texts and of events which we can but dimly perceive through the mists of time reflect the book's general method: the

language that promotes its theories takes precedence over details. If you accept that language, then anything follows. Just because one can argue that Johnson probably did not actively exclude Smart from his *Lives* does not mean that he did not do so. Just because one can argue that Collins probably meant ‘x’ does not exclude the possibility that he meant ‘y’. But is not probability all that we can rationally hold on to? *Imperial Affliction* is a challenging and honest book, dense with argument. This review has not had space to engage with anywhere near all of it, and has in particular not done justice to those sections that examine twentieth-century critics’ responses to the writers. It may be that this reviewer is revealing his blinkered commitment to detail and suspicion of ‘totalizing’ theories, which reflect his Enlightenment, empiricist and sceptical leanings. (Guilty as charged, m’lud.) If you are happy with grand, ‘totalizing’ theories, with reiterations of language such as ‘Sameness’ and ‘Other’ (and ‘totalizing’), and can get past the rather too many errors (Soame Jenyns for Soame Jenyns, *Life of Dedham* for *Life of Denham*), then ignore this review’s doubts and judge for yourself how far the theories illuminate the poetry.

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Ashley Chantler, Michael Davies, Philip Shaw (eds.), *Literature and Authenticity, 1780-1900: Essays in Honour of Vincent Newey*. Farnham (UK) and Burlington VT (USA): Ashgate, 2011. xii + 230 pp. ISBN: 9780754665991.

Jonathon Shears

In the opening essay of this volume, Michael Davies argues that in reading Cowper’s conversion narratives ‘we must navigate carefully around an idea of authenticity that assumes an unequivocally centred and univocal self’. The terms are half-borrowed, appropriately enough for this volume, from the title of Vincent Newey’s essay collection of 1995 *Centring the Self*. I say half-borrowed, because that barely registered shift between ‘centred’ and ‘centring’ takes us somewhere close to the heart of this excellent collection of essays in honour of Newey’s work. If, as the editors claim in the introduction, ‘authenticity in art, as in life, is not reproducible’, then this does not do away with the energy released in acts of ‘centring’ or what this volume presents as ‘authentic reading’. That is an authenticity that endeavours, through recognising its decentred and divided aspects, to regain or become proximate to wholeness. Literary criticism has been navigating the issue of authenticity for some time but seldom as carefully as in this book. Not all the essays here, as the editors point out, approach the subject of authenticity on these terms but there is undoubtedly a train of thought running through this work, from Philip Davis’s discussion of the calling forth of ‘animating spirit’ to Bernard Beatty’s ‘connections across difference’, that gestures beyond the over-familiarity of speech acts and performatives.

Davies, in Chapter 1, deepens and enhances the terms of the introduction in his exploration of the ‘subtleties of sincerity’ to be experienced in the ‘castings down’ and ‘raisings up’ embodied in the verse style of *The Task*. His careful close analysis looks to the experience of grace in Cowper as one which, while defying representation, confirms its authenticity in the enactment of reading. Much effort has gone into recovering the authentic Robert Southey in recent Romantic-period scholarship, with new editions of poetry and correspondence pending. It is work which enables Linda Pratt, in Chapter 2, to reassess Southey’s perceived misogyny through the correspondence he exchanged with Anna Seward. At key moments of uncertainty, particularly whilst writing *Madoc*, Seward endeavoured to support and authenticate Southey’s poetic aspirations, even while he was forced eventually to concede the lack of evidence for *Madoc*’s supposed Welsh-Indian descendents in the Americas. It is the absence of documentary evidence that underlies Nicholas Roe’s account of ‘Undefinitive Keats’ in Chapter 3. Roe looks at the uncertainties surrounding the date and time of Keats’s birth and death, the date at which he left school, and reflects on the history of Keats’s biographers and their conflicting but collaborative work in making the definitive Keats a process rather than a goal.

The fourth chapter here is one of several that ask readers to revisit a familiar topic and see it with new eyes, the authentic beneath the commonplace. Michael O’Neill examines Shelley’s ‘intertextual relations’ with Wordsworth, approaching the ‘dialogic delicacy’ indicated by Harold Bloom’s *apophrades* and finding a ‘strength that lies in yielding’ to a complex precursor poet. Instead of reiterating the familiar argument in which Shelley upbraids Wordsworth for the political conservatism of his maturity, O’Neill is able to disclose Shelley’s truck with Wordsworth’s ‘insufficiently robust other-worldly longing’. The volume then retains its focus on the Romantic period as Bernard Beatty and Philip Martin in turn consider aspects of authenticity in the poetry of Byron. Beatty explores the notion of the authentic man as ‘one who does a thing himself’, and offers some useful distinctions between Hamletian acting and Byronic action. The first supposes a distinction between the sincerity of the soliloquies and the performances through which Hamlet engages with other characters; the

second is a form of action when a writer ‘becomes more himself rather than pretending to be another’. Beatty finds writing as action in the work of Pope, Byron and Cardinal Newman. Martin then looks in detail at an alteration in emphasis that comes in Canto XIV of *Don Juan*, where he finds the poem problematising its earlier commitment to authentically present subjects such as war, suffering and the quotidian world without ornamentation. In a new reading Martin proposes that while ‘Byron may not be “after truth” ... he may be after its virtue ... as a means of aggressively assaulting what he identified as the cant of the day’. Also an issue for Byron is the representation of the Orient, but in Chapter 7 A. R. Kidwai draws attention to some neglected depictions of the Orient in Romantic women poets including Ann Candler, Emma Roberts, Anna Maria Jones and Felicia Hemans. While some of these poets had first hand experience of travelling in the East that indicates authenticity, Kidwai suggests that each needed to make concessions to poetic conventions of representation that mean the subject is always negotiating with form.

The second half of the volume moves forward in time, primarily to consider the place of authenticity in Victorian writing. In ‘Becoming Ruskin’, Keith Hanley examines the way that ‘chronology is replaced by topography’ in Ruskin’s attempts to order his life in *Praeterita*. He argues that a symbolic depth attaches to key places in Ruskin’s life, often mediated through other writers and artists, such as the representation of Bolton Abbey by Wordsworth and Turner. In Chapter 9, Richard Foulkes engages with the problem of textual authenticity in the production of Henry Irving’s *King Lear*. Looking in turn at issues such as the fidelity to Shakespeare’s language, scenery and costumes, some of the drastic cuts made to the text and the role of Ford Madox Brown in stage design, Foulkes draws the conclusion that two types of authenticity are at odds. Any deference that Irving felt to Shakespeare’s plot was secondary to his own conception of what the authentic Lear should be: a compelling representation of Christian faith and redemption.

The writing of Elizabeth Gaskell is the territory for Chapters 10 and 11 provided by Joanne Shattock and Nick Davis. Shattock’s approach to authenticity is, as with Pratt and Roe, primarily concerned with documentary evidence or its absence. Her essay, ‘The Authentic Voice of Elizabeth Gaskell’, adds rewarding new distinctions to issues of authenticity in the volume by overturning the notion that Gaskell revealed a more authentic version of herself in her letters than in her prose fiction. Shattock examines the implications for Gaskell scholars of the Victorian habit of burning personal correspondence and maintains that the “‘me” presented by the surviving Gaskell letters’ is ‘a self-consciously constructed social persona’. Davis is also concerned with social or communal identity in his reading of Gaskell’s *Cranford*. Much of this book focuses on authenticating individual experience, but Davis argues that it is through recognising the individual’s sustenance of a local community – that may appear ‘bizarre, gratuitous and ... irrational’ from the outside – that Gaskell queries nineteenth-century conceptions of cultural homogeneity and faith in social-progressivist thinking. *Cranford*’s ‘contingently formed’ and heterogeneous community is authenticated by its difference.

The final section of the book begins with Geoff Ward’s essay on ‘Thoreau and Creeley: American Words and Things’. Ward, as with Beatty, sees authenticity in the relationship between words and actions, in this case the actions involved in making and working. In establishing the authentic he sees both poets attempting to reach beyond the word ‘like’, or the gap between signs and what they represent, to abut onto the noumenal or ‘things-in-themselves’. Philip Davis explores the authenticity of ‘The Robust Way’ and what he calls the ‘positive capability’ of saying ‘No’ (as distinct from Keats’s Negative Capability) in Bunyan, Arnold and Fulke Greville amongst others: ‘volunteering’ with deep sincerity ‘to what is almost shamefully but also involuntarily inadequate’ in Christian faith is the authentic form of belief. Ashley Chantler’s essay completes the collection, examining authenticity in a range of writers from Cowper up to Joseph Conrad, placing ‘The Cast-Away’ alongside *Heart of Darkness* to reveal the ‘rivets’ that hold in place an authentic inner self in the ‘emerging darkness’ of the modern world.

As the introduction to the volume attests, and of undoubted interest to readers of this journal, one of the common threads underpinning many of these essays is the Protestant concern with self-scrutiny and spiritual autobiography. Readers may come to the book for subjects such as this, and Cowper gets a prominent place here, but they will stay for the rest of the production. There are some great essays here, a testimony to the hard work of contributors and editors alike, that continually suggest ways of writing about and encountering the world that may not be wholly of that world but are undoubtedly of a piece with it. It perhaps sounds idealistic taken out of the context of the introduction, but the editors’ assertion that ‘we recognise the authentic in art when we are moved to change our perception of that which we thought we knew’ rings true on many occasions here. And I should withdraw my qualification for finishing on this quotation: it suggests some reservation and that would be inauthentic.