

Michael, Timothy. *British Romanticism & the Critique of Political Reason*. Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 2016. 283 pages. Hard cover, \$54.95. ISBN: 978-1-4214-1803-2.

Timothy Michael's new book traces what it meant to reflect upon and judge the ideals of the Enlightenment period, namely those of reason and the freedom from older systems of thought and knowledge, through the eyes of several important British authors from the Romantic period. With the melody of Immanuel Kant's *Critique of Pure Reason* and the rhetorics of the recent French Revolution always in the background, Michael uses case studies of British Romantic authors such as Burke, Shelley, Coleridge, and Wollstonecraft to explore the bridges their artistic creation and imagination formed between the reasoning mind and the outside political world. The interactions Michael identifies between these authors' conceptions of the experiences of the late-Enlightenment self as an individual and as an active, critical participant in political society and history allow him to consider the articulation and uses of the concept of freedom at the time. The ways in which Romantic authors read and interlaced historical events into a narrative about the creation and development of human knowledge and reason produced, according to Michael, a critical discourse fed by the "reconciliation of subject and object" and by the search for "the subjective conditions of objective freedom" (3). The Newtonian Enlightenment idea of general laws that regulate and govern the courses of both nature and human, political history was juxtaposed with the local, isolated, individual experience of events, and Romantic authors questioned how one narrative fit into the other in an attempt, in Michael's words, to rediscover "the promise of enlightenment after revolution and terror" (2).

Michael opens his study with a particularly important and intriguing question for the domain of literary studies as for that of humanistic interdisciplinary study in general. He asks how we move from concepts that are "merely ideas" such as "liberty and justice" to reality? How do we "make the leap from the realm of ideas to the real world of human beings" (1)? He explains and frames this leap from within Kant's vocabulary relating reason and law. By learning how to free the mind from older structures and systems of thought, the subject eventually learns to insert him or herself into a larger historical narrative of this practice, which Michael calls "*public* enlightenment" (44), and which accounts for the great social and political revolution in France at the end of the century. When they have understood how the laws of political history work, following "the *legibility* of a particular historical sequence" (48), people can then learn what it means to act on this larger scale, taking away the reins of power from legal necessity and beginning to "freely [establish] the conditions of historical necessity" (47). Through language, authors of the Romantic period sought to imagine and to model what Michael describes as the "dream of pure reason" enacted in society, or "an exchangeable currency between two roughly equal trading partners: between the individual consciousness and the world it inhabits" (38). From a definition of the political as a meeting and merging of the structure of reason, that is, the discourses by which we perceive and articulate the outside world, with the structure of this world itself, Michael comes to a definition of freedom as that which allows people to take control of the world's operation and change it for the better.

Since the political discourses of the French Revolution play an important role in the setting up of Michael's argument, it may have been useful for him to have foregrounded his discussion of this event with a few more of the key voices on the meanings and implications of the political during the French Enlightenment such as Montesquieu and Rousseau. The unexpected ways in which these authors were appropriated during the different phases of the Revolution attests to how the definitions of what it meant to know about and to participate in politics changed during this time. However, Michael's book effectively shows how, during the Enlightenment, the political was not a fixed point or concept. It was not understood as one set of rules or another for structuring and operating a government. Rather, it was perceived as an activity, a thread running through culture,

society, and human experience, from the local level of individual perception to the broader level of governments, nations, and their interactions, to the most general level of the laws of these systems. The political during the Enlightenment and Romantic periods was about participation on each of these levels, through the creation of discourse that demonstrates what it means to think, speak, act, interact. It was inseparable from acts of aesthetic creation, that is, from the arts, from literature, from all that which embodied the paths, straight and errant, of human reason. Being a citizen, a conscious member of a political, decision-making body, meant first and foremost being a critic, understanding history as a plurality of narratives in need of “reassessment” and “trial” (30).

The larger purpose of this book is therefore to encourage academics across the humanities to branch outwards, considering the ongoing continuities and ruptures that our social and cultural practices have with the Enlightenment concept of the critical spirit. Even today, the political is not really a science, ordered and contained in its own, separate disciplinary box, but rather part of a continuing Enlightenment theme of experience and the creation and assessment of knowledge across the disciplines. From Michael’s case studies of specific Romantic voices, readers with differing intellectual commitments and specialties can induce more general conclusions. “Attention to figures such as Burke, Wollstonecraft, Godwin, Coleridge, Wordsworth, and Shelley is important, then,” Michael concludes, “because they provide us with models of thought and speech against which we may define our own; they articulate conceptions of truth and freedom that we have, in large measure, inherited. There are, in other words, discursive reasons for studying them” (233-34). His study encourages a reflection upon why the study of literature is so crucial to our education and worldview. What is the experience of reading and how do people work outwards from this, creating a narrative, a library, a collection of ideas, a theory, a science, a program for action? What worlds, programmatic or unexpected, are created in the wake of the experience of reading, reflecting, and judging? How can these activities be translated upon the plane of reality? Here is the basis for an argument about the ongoing importance of literature in our lives, and why it cannot be studied separately from other areas of knowledge, since it is itself a vehicle for knowledge’s creation and modification.