

## Book Reviews

***Discerning the Subject.* By Paul Smith. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1988. Pp. 185. \$29.50. Paper, \$13.95.**

Paul Smith's new book, *Discerning The Subject* will set the standard for discussions in "theory" for some time to come. Smith has already established himself as a responsible and original social commentator and literary critic in his previous work, *Pound Revised* and (with Alice Jardine) *Men in Feminism*. The initial controversy surrounding the latter book has not entirely disappeared, but the subject of "femmeninism" that it marks is now a fixture of current thinking about gender problems. Similarly, Smith's rethinking of the subject will now be the focus of a range of considerations of the future of theory.

The title of the book will immediately give heart to many, in that it hints at a possible recuperation of neglected individuality. But Smith's project is too sophisticated to be subservient to humanist nostalgia. What he does demonstrate, to the satisfaction of all possible readers I should think, is the way in which "theory" has neglected, repressed, or denied a theory of the subject. In a series of brilliant analyses, Smith shows how various modes of modern theory (e.g. Adorno, Marcuse, Derrida, Jameson, Giddens) have operated as if it were not necessary to account for the "subject" as a possible agent, or in those cases where agency of the subject is remembered there is no theoretical account of how the agent has agency, or a capacity for resistance (see Smith's analysis of Marcuse, for instance).

So Smith sets out to "discern" the subject, the subject who has not been discerned by theory to date. But the project is not simply a gesture of saying, "Oh look, there it is, we've found the individual we've been forgetting to think about!" Smith wants the subject to be dis-cerned, and he plays on the root of "cern" which means both to close in, find inside fixed boundaries as a unity, and also to be descended from a patrimony. So the "cerned" subject is the mythical unified individual, self-consciously available to himself, with certain power and property rights in the dominant power relationships of consumer capitalism. Smith wants a theory

of the subject suitable to, but missing from, post-modern theory; that is, the subject when discerned will not be discerned, will not look like the humanist individual reaffirmed. The subject must, therefore, be one that can take into account both psychoanalytical (Lacanian) reflections on the split in the self, and problems of ideological influence. The dis“cerned” subject will also be the displaced, the decentered subject.

Smith recuperates an idea in Althusser, of ideological interpellation, and combines it with Lacan’s concept of the subject and the unconscious in relation with the Other (language). Ideology is not seen as a naive condition of temporary blindness that can be magically overcome. Rather it is posited as a permanent condition of human agency. So Smith confronts both the problem of the possibility of resistance to ideology and the confusing problem that such resistance may itself be ideologically inflected. The fact of interpellation, that is that social and ideological formations call out “Hey you there!” to subjects, is used to counter notions of the permanent domination of agents by media simulacra. Because there are multiple, and often contradictory, interpellations, the subject is more than a simple imprint. Smith sees ways in which we can be free from ideology while subject to it. He denies that we are simply controlled by mechanisms beyond our force. He, common-sensibly, notices that we do resist some of the interpellations, and that as subjects we are the sum of the subject positions we have occupied historically. So the subjects that we are are real historical subjects, and each is in some way different in its particular historical formation. Given that, it becomes possible to conceive of resistance, or what one might want to call choices or preferences between interpellations. Smith elaborates from Lacan a notion of the subject as a series of moments at an edge between Unconscious and Other. If the subject is a history of interpellations, then it is necessarily momentary and therefore a history of moments. Sensing the lack of a substantial self, the subject engages in what Lacan calls “suture,” it sews itself together in an imaginary reflection of itself (the *objet petit a*). This “self” is what the humanist individual thinks of as the unified self, but it too is subject to overcoming (as Nietzsche would say) precisely because of endless interpellations, and endless negotiations at the edge of unconscious and language. At any moment then, the momentary subject can differ from the “someone.”

Smith finds a heterogeneous “subject” instantiated in modern feminism. He does not want to reify, or cern, the subjects active in feminist movements. Indeed it is precisely the plurality of movements, all recognizably feminist, that attracts his attention. The goal of Smith’s critiques is a reaffirmation of difference, or as he puts it, of people. Recognizing that the New Right has already appropriated some of the vocabulary and tactics of oppositional thinking, and has successfully co-opted differential (and deconstructive) thinking into a seductively powerful homogeneity,

Smith's work is meant to allow for a renewed sense of responsible agency in current theoretical work. The final chapter "Responsibility" clearly sets out Smith's relation to and distance from current theory. Indeed the whole book is a negative reflection on "theory," but it has as its goal a moving of theory into active political and social responsibility. For Smith this means that theory must learn to recognize itself; which is to say that any theory of meaning that totally disallows reference, including critical self-reference, is irresponsible.

Smith, with deconstructive wit, is anxious not to have his own work too fully contain a subject. Hence the irony of the overall project, in which discerning a subject is displacing a subject. This witty responsibility is reflected further in Smith's inclusion of the critical preface by John Mowitt. Mowitt's comments are perhaps the most penetrating negative analysis of Smith's project that one could wish for. At the same time, however, Mowitt shows precisely where it is that Smith's project succeeds and where it can take us further by the ground it opens up. What Mowitt restores to Smith's analysis is the possibility that critical "reading" (which as Mowitt shows is exactly what is performed by Smith's book) is in itself not of necessity outside the realm of the political and the useful. Tellingly, Mowitt redirects our attention to ways in which elements of deconstruction, in Austin and de Man, have made it possible for us to practice a differential criticism. Books with the range and sophistication of Smith's perform a powerful promise for the future of theoretical discourse and practice in the humanities.

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***Coleridge and Wordsworth: A Lyrical Dialogue.* By Paul Magnuson. Princeton: Princeton UP, 1988. Pp. xii, 330. \$35.00.**

If it is true that, as Harold Bloom says, criticism is the art of knowing the hidden roads that go from poem to poem, then Paul Magnuson has written an exemplary piece of antithetical criticism. Spurning the limitations of objective formalism, he goes to work on the assumption that the connections between poems are more important than the integral unity of the poems themselves. This technique seems a safe bet when applied to a case of literal relationship like the one between Wordsworth and Coleridge. It is hardly a radical departure to read their poems as a continuing and sometimes tense dialogue; what is new here is the thoroughness with which this is attempted. Magnuson sees their dialogue as "the essential generative condition of their poetry" and therefore an indispensable context for meaning. Their poems do not merely allude to one another,

but develop by a process of negation, interrogation, and interruption that resembles a lyric sequence. He aims to intertextualize Wordsworth and Coleridge in order to see their works as an intricately connected whole of which individual poems are but fragments. Their separate poems, he argues, are "merely milestones...not the road itself."

Two things make Magnuson's intensive reading possible. The first is the publication over the past ten years of volumes in the Cornell Wordsworth series that give access to earlier versions of his poems than those he eventually published. His editors have long been aware that Wordsworth was obsessive about revising his poems, so that years could elapse between the initial penning of lines and their first appearance in print. Even after publication, Wordsworth continued to rearrange his poems and make substantial changes in subsequent editions. The new edition being directed by Stephen Parrish for the Cornell University Press draws upon an extraordinarily vast pool of scholarly resources to sort out and present the bewildering variety of states through which Wordsworth's poems passed. Magnuson makes full and careful use of these early versions to determine the texts that Coleridge actually read, and thus to trace the twisting path of their dialogue. A virtue of this painstaking scholarship is that Magnuson is able to draw a picture of a much more tentative and vaguely probing Wordsworth than the magisterial poet suggested by his finished poems, a poet who suffered much more than is usually thought from anxiety over Coleridge's influence.

Magnuson points out that Coleridge had already gained the status of a public figure when he and Wordsworth first met, so that their relationship began on something of a master-pupil footing. Examining the evolution of the pre-Coleridgean "Salisbury Plain" into the "Adventures on Salisbury Plain" manuscript of the late 1790s, he shows how Wordsworth's early pessimism was tempered by Coleridge's optimism as expressed in the "Religious Musings." He then explains how, in turn, the growth of the ill-defined graveler of the first version into the guilt-ridden sailor of the second contributed to the conception of the Ancient Mariner. Though begun as a joint project, Coleridge directed the poem into a supernatural vein that Wordsworth found uncongenial. Magnuson believes that Wordsworth objected to Coleridge's "use of the supernatural as figurative," and replied with his own version of an encounter with a stranger, the "Discharged Soldier" fragment that eventually was incorporated into *The Prelude* (Book IV, 370-469). Nevertheless, Magnuson argues, Wordsworth struggled "to comprehend Coleridge's increasingly figurative vision and to turn it into his own".

The use of the term "figurative" is puzzling in these passages, especially as the second enabling condition that Magnuson acknowledges in undertaking his study is the recent proliferation of critical theory that allows us to put familiar works into new perspectives. The sometimes alarming

productivity of figural language is a fundamental principle of much contemporary thinking about literature, but it is not clear that this is what Magnuson has in mind. He tends to use the word "figure" to denote indifferently a character in a poem, mental activity that is often imaginative, and figures of speech like metaphors. At crucial stages in the argument, his reader is too often left in the dark as to which sense Magnuson intends. Discussing the Lucy poems, for example, he states that "as a figure of poetry rather than as a figure of biography, Dorothy usually represented Wordsworth's own past." Are we to understand Dorothy as a figure (or character) *in* the poetry, here, or as figure standing *for* poetry, that is, as a metaphorical representation? If the answer is "both," then the author is guilty of substituting rhetoric for logic. Hence, important points about "Wordsworth's appropriation of Coleridge's poems and figures as beginnings for his own," about how "Wordsworth was bothered by the figurative itself," not to mention the claim that "one of the major issues between them was the use of figurative language," are blunted by a multiplicity of reference. In which sense are we to understand Geraldine as a "figure" in the discussion of "Christabel:" as a character in the poem, as a symbol, or as product of Christabel's fantasies?

A similar problem arises in Magnuson's use of the word "dialogic" to describe the relationship between Wordsworth and Coleridge. When he claims some affinity with Bakhtin's introduction of the term into our critical discourse it seems too much like an afterthought. He acknowledges that his use of "dialogic" contains nothing of the parodying dynamic essential to Bakhtin's method. Nor is there any hint of Bakhtin's insistence on respect for the alterity of discourse in the way Magnuson describes Wordsworth's total assimilation of Coleridge's texts. Magnuson's use of the term simply refers to the verbal interaction of two people, no matter how much theoretical freight he wants it to carry.

A rather painful instance of Magnuson's difficulties with words occurs when he writes phrases like "the spell Geraldine had uttered has taken affect [*sic*]." I noted at least three other occasions in the text where "affect" had taken the place of "effect." This rather curious blindness to an elementary point of usage can be dismissed as a small mistake, but the deliberate catachresis of words more crucial to his thesis casts a veil of rhetorical obscurity over his arguments that compromises an otherwise stimulating book.

For this is a very good book indeed when it sticks to tracing intertextual connections rather than trying to explain their shadowy and elusive causes. A case in point is the chapter in which Magnuson examines how "Tintern Abbey" grew out of the mode of Coleridge's conversation poems, especially "Frost at Midnight." Read as an "interpretation by revision" of its precursor, "Tintern Abbey" is as much a poem of doubt as it is of faith in the way it responds to Coleridge's challenges over the

sufficiency of nature, the pleasures of solitude, and the assured progress of a unified personal consciousness. How those problems continue to be the central pre-occupation of the fragments that were the seeds out of which *The Prelude* was to grow is a major contribution, and helps explain just why the poem was always thought of as "the poem to Coleridge." Magnuson is expert in explaining how Wordsworth shored up fragments in order to create a "myth of himself as a self-generated poet" as part of his struggle to free himself from Coleridge's influence.

The final major chapter of the book is quite naturally devoted to the 1802-04 dialogue of the great odes. Magnuson conducts a skilful analysis of the verse letter that intervenes in the hiatus in composition of the "Intimations Ode," but surprisingly has very little to say about how Coleridge reshaped this material into the "Dejection Ode." His failure to address William Heath's conclusions (in *Wordsworth and Coleridge: A Study of their Literary Relations*, 1970) about the benefits of poetic form that Coleridge derived from Wordsworth's poem is symptomatic of the way in which the focus of Magnuson's book has shifted away from the relationship between the texts of two poets toward an emphasis on Wordsworth's development as a writer. Something on Coleridge's later attitude to Wordsworth is wanted to round the book out, if only to show the terrible price Coleridge had to pay (as illustrated, perhaps, in "To William Wordsworth") for making Wordsworth into the great poet he became. But in criticism as in life, Coleridge fades into the background. The vaunted methodological dedication of the book's opening pages to read the works of Wordsworth and Coleridge as a "joint canon" in which "each poem takes its significance from its surrounding context" suggests a degree of decentering which the end of the book violates by its preoccupation with Wordsworth's subjectivity.

Perhaps this change in direction is licensed in some way by Magnuson's conception of the dialogue between the two poets as "lyrical." He understands the lyric to be characterized by turns and transitions, yielding an open-ended structure that does not tend toward any final unity of significance. While this may be an accurate description of the way certain poems work, it seems less satisfactory as a principle for ordering a critical argument.

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***The Great War of Words: British, American, and Canadian Propaganda and Fiction, 1914-1933.* By Peter Buitenhuis. Vancouver: University of British Columbia Press, 1987. Pp. xvii, 199. \$27.00.**

Peter Buitenhuis's *The Great War of Words* is a major contribution to our understanding of the way the Great War was conducted. To some extent it complements Paul Fussell's classic account in *The Great War and Modern Memory* of the impact of the Great War on the modern consciousness and the subsequent dominance of irony and skepticism in that consciousness. But where Fussell's work understandably stressed the contribution of the younger generation of war writers—Owen, Sassoon, Jones, Rosenberg, Blunden, Graves—Buitenhuis concentrates his attention upon a now far less familiar group of older British, American and Canadian writers who wrote propaganda and fiction against the Central Powers that employed a common deceptive rhetoric and distortion of reality.

Central to Buitenhuis's account is the story of Charles Masterman's period of office at Wellington House, the home of the British propaganda bureau. From September 1914, Masterman, a cabinet minister, had the willing co-operation of such well-known literary figures as J.M. Barrie, Arnold Bennett, Robert Bridges, John Buchan, Hall Caine, G.K. Chesterton, Arthur Conan Doyle, John Galsworthy, John Masfield, Gilbert Murray, Gilbert Parker, and H.G. Wells. Aside from the publication of such works as Lord Bryce's *Report on Alleged German Outrages* (1915), a highly effective propaganda effort accusing the Germans (falsely for the most part) of all manner of atrocities, Wellington House used such well-known writers (after they had been given carefully monitored visits to the Front) to provide reports on life in the trenches that concealed painful realities and praised the heroism of Allied troops and the skills and sagacity of their generals. Out of such activities emerged a mythology so potent that it prevailed until the end of the war, regardless of all evidence to the contrary, even lengthening the war since it mitigated against any movement towards a negotiated settlement.

According to this mythology, the Allies, who had not started the war, were now engaged in a process of heroic sacrifice necessary to repel the German barbarians. The brave and cheerful British, willingly supported by Empire contingents and led by able generals, were fighting for a noble and just cause, one that included the saving of the French, the most civilized people in all Europe. Indeed, what was at stake was civilization itself. This grand deception, designed to sustain morale in the face of growing casualty lists and the obvious incompetence of the Allied High Command, was in addition aimed at drawing in more recruits and ultimately at persuading the United States to enter the war. Naturally, the role of Wellington House was concealed, one significant technique being the use of prestigious private publishing houses to disguise the origins of

many Wellington House books and pamphlets. Such publications then had all the appearance of being the spontaneous and sincere presentations of independent and unconnected private individuals.

In the course of his fascinating and disturbing story, Buitenhuis has chapters on the propaganda campaign conducted by Masterman's writer-recruits and others; the dissemination of propaganda in the United States; the later propaganda emanating from the Committee on Public Information (the U.S. equivalent of Wellington House formed in April 1917); the disillusionment expressed by some writers following the war; and the contrasting attempts by other writers such as Edith Wharton, Ralph Connor, and Beckles Willson to "set down in their fiction means of reconciliation or redemption through a recollection and justification of prewar ideals."

All this ground is traversed in 182 succinct and telling pages, included among which is an especially remarkable portrait of Rudyard Kipling. Where Charles Carrington and other biographers have frequently implied that Kipling was not caught up in the dirty business of propaganda (Carrington claims that Kipling always refused to write official propaganda for the Government), Buitenhuis convincingly shows otherwise. In addition to discussing Kipling's various war writings, Buitenhuis offers such details as Kipling's faking of a telegram to the people of New Brunswick asking for more recruits as though from the men in the New Brunswick Battalion. No one will read this study without adjusting some features of Kipling's portrait. Also valuable are Buitenhuis's assessments of the ways in which some of the older writers drawn into the British propaganda effort later coped with the aftershock of the war and their own form of complicity in it. Among these writers, Ford Maddox Hueffer (later Ford Madox Ford), author of the propaganda book *Between St. Dennis and St. George*, is given special attention, and Buitenhuis concludes that *Parade's End* "is probably the greatest English novel written about the Great War."

But there are some disappointments. Without any explanation, for example, Buitenhuis chooses to limit himself to fiction. One would like to have had his comments on the vast flood of patriotic and heroic verse that played as significant a role, one suspects, as fiction in the creation of the mythology he describes. Many readers will also be left disappointed that Buitenhuis's study is not longer, given the richness of the material and the fascination of the story he tells. The promise of the reference to "Canadian Propaganda and Fiction" in the title of the book, for example, is not completely fulfilled. In particular one needs to know more details about the precise ways in which information about the war was controlled during its long and often tortuous route from the Front to the Canadian fireside. Furthermore, although Buitenhuis has discussed a number of Canadian writers (Ralph Connor, Beckles Willson, Charles G.D. Roberts,



Sir Gilbert Parker, Max Aitken), one would like more information about other writers published in Canada during the war and the manner in which Canadian publishers themselves engaged in self-censorship regarding what they chose to publish about the war. The account of the activities of Max Aitken (later Lord Beaverbrook) at times also seems too condensed. Nor properly can the great machinery of recruiting propaganda in Canada itself be ignored. The "war of words" was waged in school and college classrooms, in churches, and in reports of the war in every newspaper, all reinforced by recruiting posters, patriotic songs, and popular songs on the subject of war with either a sentimental or heroic theme.

But these are mere quibbles concerning a finely written book that tells us a great deal about a very neglected aspect of the literature of the Great War. It tells, too, an ugly story of lies and deceptions, and the fallibility of some of the twentieth century's finest writers.

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