



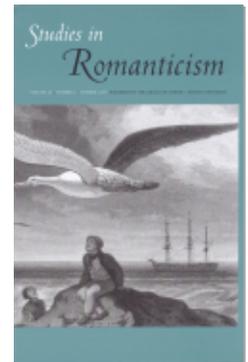
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Unquiet Things: Secularism in the Romantic Age by Colin
Jager (review)

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(Review)

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out sacrifice" (179). Offord's is the best account of *Michael* that I have ever read.

Offord's seventh and final chapter is not so felicitous. Concerned with the indeterminate utopianism of Wordsworth's verse, it opens with a claim at which I was taken aback: "It is astonishing how few critics have read this [Wordsworth's] poetry on its own terms as an avowedly utopian project" (181). My counterpoint is: it's astonishing how few critics Offord appears to have read. Offord's selective engagement with the scholarly literature on Wordsworth is a stain on an otherwise exemplary study. In America, Wordsworth's utopianism has been standard fare since the nineteenth-century: Edwin Percy Whipple maintained in 1844 that Wordsworth's "England of a thousand years past is the Utopia of a thousand years to come." I elaborate on this quotation and on Wordsworth's utopian project in my 2012 Johns Hopkins University Press book, *Wordsworth's Ethics* (Whipple quoted, 48), which Offord apparently did not consult—a pity, as we approach so many poems in convergent ways, most notably "The Discharged Soldier" (Potkay, 49–62; Offord, 61–84). Other American scholars whose work on Wordsworth, encounter, and utopianism that ought to have been engaged include Lynn Festa, William Galperin, Vivasvan Soni, and Nancy Yousef. American scholars often err, conversely, in inadequately recognizing British contributions to the relevant scholarship, though the situation has improved markedly, in both directions, during my time in the profession. Let us not flag in our pursuit of trans-Atlantic encounters and enrichment. At the very least, if much of the critical terrain is *terra incognita* to you, don't make imperious claims about it.

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Colin Jager. *Unquiet Things: Secularism in the Romantic Age*. Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2015. Pp. 332. \$75.

Colin Jager's *Unquiet Things* is a substantial, sweeping, ambitious book. The subject under discussion is nothing less than the condition of modernity itself: Jager's exploration of the privatization of religion, the power of the state, and the effects of capitalism requires him to tackle historiography, hermeneutics, epistemology, and ontology; the strength and significance of this book, however, comes from the deep subtlety with which these weighty subjects are treated.

Jager challenges the assumption that as modernity advances the presence (or "noise") of religion is banished. The title, *Unquiet Things*, originates

from Coleridge's "Frost at Midnight" where a fluttering film in a grate is "the 'sole unquiet thing' in his otherwise silent house"; this fluttering contrasts with the extreme silence that "'disturbs' and 'vexes' meditation" (4). For Jager, silence is an analog for secularism, and the "unquiet thing" is the "residue" of religion (2). Jager's purpose is to trace the means by which the "noise" of religion has been diminished and to listen out for frequencies at which its "disquiet" may yet be perceived in the secular age.

The interpretation of Romantic literature in terms of secularization—which was initiated by M. H. Abrams and Earl Wasserman and later interrogated by critics such as Robert Ryan and Martin Priestman—is refashioned by Jager into an *affective* mould. *Unquiet Things* differs from historicist studies that isolate religion as "a set of cognitive beliefs or mental dispositions" (5). Jager begins with the premise that religion was transformed in the Enlightenment from a mysterious emotive phenomenon into a cognitive creedal one. One of the most original aspects of *Unquiet Things*, however, is its claim that the affective elements of religion dissipated into what Jager describes as the "mood" of modernity: he is concerned "less with religious dispute than with the atmosphere in which that dispute takes place—less with Coleridge's flickering film than with the air currents that push it around" (26). This "atmosphere" or *ambiance* is not necessarily heard or seen but is felt and experienced. It is notable then that in his own prose Jager favors negative constructions, often introducing ideas via those which he considers less important ("I am less interested in X than in Y") in a stylistic manifestation of the essence of the project; that is to say, one of the purposes of the book is to analyze something that is accessed indirectly, something that lurks in the background. As it offers a new way of thinking about where and how affective aspects of religion survive in the secular age, *Unquiet Things* will be relevant for scholars engaged with theories of affect and the history of the emotions, as well as those interested in Romanticism and religion.

The scope, intricacy, and occasional opacity of Jager's cumulative argument makes the lengthy introduction worthwhile. The monograph is divided into three Parts ("Reform," "Sounding the Quiet," and "After the Secular"), each consisting of three chapters. As Jager moves from Walpole's *Castle of Otranto* (1764) to Shelley's "Mont Blanc" (1817), literary texts are not always presented chronologically, though the reader is taken on a long journey of British history that includes Henry VIII's "Act of Supremacy" (1534), the Glorious Revolution (1688–89), Union with Scotland, the Enlightenment, and the Romantic Age. Such a time span is necessary because the "background condition" (63) changes slowly.

Approximately two thirds of the book is concerned with prose. One of the unexpected benefits offered to readers is a new interpretation of the

evolution of the novel. Working through *Otranto*, Austen's *Emma*, Scott's *Waverly* novels, and Hogg's *Private Memoirs and Confessions of a Justified Sinner*, Jager situates the genre's progression—from romance to realism—within the context of secularization. The juxtaposition of *Otranto* and *Emma* in chapters 2 and 3 announces Jager's argument. The process of reform begun by Henry VIII involves a rejection of superstition, miraculous events, and enchantment in favor of a more rational world in which nothing much happens. From Jager's perspective, the lack of fantastic activity in *Emma*—the occurrence of “nothing”—signifies the novel's “generic argument against romance” (8). Jager links “nothing” with truth and focuses on Emma's claim that after marrying Knightley she wished for “nothing.” Of course, “wishing for nothing” is inherently ambiguous but Jager chooses to ignore the (more obvious) positive interpretation and instead reads Emma's empty wish as melancholic. Readers inclined to recognize this “nothingness” may still disagree with Jager's understanding of it. In light of Roger Moore's *Jane Austen and the Reformation* (2016), for example, this melancholy might look more like Austen's own regret at the dissolution of the monasteries; alternatively, to a society worn down by the Napoleonic Wars, uneventfulness perhaps had a peculiar appeal. For Jager, however, “melancholy” is the “mood” of the secular age because when religion declines conceptions of “possibility” and “fullness” are reconfigured (56): in a secular world, hope and expectation are curtailed while missed or past experiences are irrecoverable. Jager discerns this mood at the end of *Otranto*, arguing that “The Melancholy of the Secular” is a condition within which the abundant possibility of romance gives way to the strained limitation of realism. The result of Part 1 is an innovative interpretation of the relationship between secularization and novelistic style.

Part 2, the most philosophically and politically engaged section of the book, focuses on Latitudinarianism and Toleration. In the context of the Glorious Revolution, when “dissent” became a political rather than a theological category, Jager argues that Toleration (which reclassifies “heresy” as “nonconformity”) creates outsiders and minorities. The three chapters of Part 2 draw together an unlikely ensemble of literary texts. Coleridge's “Kubla Khan” may seem generically and thematically incongruous with Walter Scott's and James Hogg's novels, yet the new inflection given to that poem via Jager's analysis of Purchas's *Pilgrimage* makes sense of this grouping. Samuel Purchas's survey of world religions, which has a central role in the preface to “Kubla Khan,” implies that true religion is actually dependent upon plurality; consequently, Jager places the poem in a framework of Latitudinarianism and situates Coleridge beside Scott who was an “enthusiastic proponent of toleration” (13). Chapter 5 subsequently extends the argument of Part 1 by presenting the historical novel as a phase

in the generic progression from enchantment to nothingness. Jager contends that Scott transforms Jacobitism from an emblem of hope (to which the Stuart monarchy and the old religious ways will return) into a historical phenomenon indicative of how far into modernity Scotland has advanced. Again this is a fascinating and productive way of rethinking the development of the novel. Hogg's *Confessions* (the focus of chapter 6) does not quite fit into Jager's scheme of generic progression; nonetheless, Hogg serves as a counterpoint to Scott insofar as his novel suggests that modernity tends to produce, rather than subdue, religious violence.

The unity of this well-crafted monograph is revealed in Part 3. Jager returns to the emotions in his analysis of Byron's *The Giaour* by asking whether "human love [is] the opposite of religion or another version of it?" (191). The bereaved *Giaour* feels the "melancholy" experienced by Walpole's Theodore and Austen's Emma, while his experience of palpable loss echoes the strange presence of "Frost at Midnight." Jager's analysis of the ambiguous silence of Shelley's "Mont Blanc" in chapter 9 also beautifully recalls the opening discussion of the strange unquiet of Coleridge's grate. With reference to Coleridge's "Hymn Before Sunrise," Jager finally reminds readers that in terms of religious belief Coleridge and Shelley ought to be irreconcilably opposed, yet Jager's conclusion is that there is no clear distinction between theism and atheism. This is because atheism itself is a belief, albeit a negative one (230).

The absence of a chapter on Wordsworth is notable in the context of Jager's brief treatment of *The Ruined Cottage* in the Epilogue. Knowledge of Wordsworth's Christianizing revisions to the poem may lead some to disagree with Jager that the Pedlar is indifferent to Margaret's fate (245); however, in the context of the "moods" and background noises Jager uncovers throughout the monograph, the Pedlar's emphasis on the general and universal rather than on Margaret's individual tragedy is consistent with secularism. In this light, the Pedlar speaks for modernity when he encourages the Poet to walk away from the ruined cottage and think instead of the bigger (economic, social, environmental, political) picture. Jager's concern in this monograph is that bigger picture, a picture that persists in the twenty-first century. *Unquiet Things* leaves the reader with the sense that undertones of religion are acutely apt to disturb the strange quiet of modernity. In this context, it is a powerfully relevant book.

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