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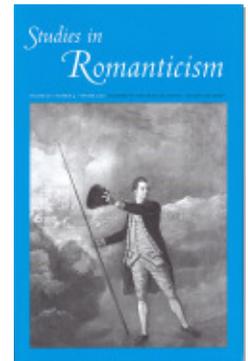
*The Idea of Infancy in Nineteenth-Century British Poetry:  
Romanticism, Subjectivity, Form* by D. B. Ruderman (review)

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that Keats's nightingale is best understood as a symbol" (207), even as, on Gottlieb's reading, "the resolute materiality of Keats's nightingale . . . demands or at least allows for a different kind of approach, one that sees its significance not in what it means or stands for but in how it operates" (208). Here Bryant's idea of "onticology" overlaps onto Bennett's vibrant matter and "the bird's being—what it eats, its mating habits, its health and disposition—goes undescribed and remains unknown to the speaker-poet. In this way, the nightingale exists on an equal ontological footing with Keats" (213). This equality of being reflects what Bryant calls "flat ontology" which "is not the thesis that all objects contribute equally, but that all objects equally exist. In its ontological egalitarianism, what flat ontology thus refuses is the erasure of any object as the mere construction of another object" [Bryant, 290] (Gottlieb, 210). "To Autumn" functions in the same fashion according to Gottlieb, a kind of "machinic" (219) Bryant assemblage that is also flatly ontological: "the poem 'thinks' autumn, not really as a season (despite its first line), much less as a state of mind (for as previous critics have noted, there is no 'mind' or active subjectivity in this ode), but rather as a machine for creating poetic effects. Autumn, in Keats's subtly powerful representation, is a machine that operates on inputs—the dropping temperatures, the changing quality of light—to create a variety of seasonally appropriate outputs" (219). Gottlieb ends his book on this poem because "it embodies the more general anti-anthropocentrism and anti-correlationism at the heart of so much SR and SR-related work—and, as I have tried to show throughout this book, at the heart of much canonical Romantic poetry, too" (223). And, indeed, Gottlieb's book does just that, in consistently illuminating and rigorous fashion that will stir up much-needed debate over the state of the field and beyond.

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D. B. Ruderman. *The Idea of Infancy in Nineteenth-Century British Poetry: Romanticism, Subjectivity, Form*. New York: Routledge, 2016. Pp. 274. \$140.

A critical understanding of childhood, the figure of the child, and the philosophical and cultural construction of infancy and childhood remains largely absent from the general discourse of literary scholarship. This is not to say that excellent new work on childhood is not being done in the fields of literary and cultural studies. Routledge has continued the strong "Studies in Childhood" series that originated at Ashgate under the editorial

guidance of Claudia Nelson, whose own work on children, children's literature, and the rhetorical uses of childhood sets high standards for the field. Palgrave is in the midst of launching a series titled "Literary Cultures and the Child" under the general editorship of Lynne Vallone, another important scholar in the field. But judging by the standard introductions to literary theory which set forth our fields of inquiry—textbooks which typically feature chapters on gender, race, class, and sexuality studies, as well as on the emerging fields of disability studies, ecocriticism and the posthuman—childhood studies remains marginalized. We have yet fully to identify and accomplish the work of interrogating how ideas of infancy and childhood prop up our most basic assumptions of history, culture, and the human self. The myths of childhood, perhaps, are even more stubbornly held than those of gender, race, and class, and we remain surprisingly complacent about even the most sentimental and simplistic accounts of childhood.

Early in his excellent monograph, *The Idea of infancy in Nineteenth-Century British Poetry: Romanticism, Subjectivity, Form*, D. B. Ruderman acknowledges that sentimental and reassuring representations of childhood have their roots in early nineteenth-century literature and culture, so much so that we often label the infant figure of primitive, natural, and innocent human existence the "Romantic child." But Ruderman insists rightly that the Romantic period also gave us a "more disturbing and philosophically fraught" notion of infancy and childhood and, in an important corrective, sets about the task of retrieving and exploring this more unsettling version of Romantic infancy (2). For Romantic writers, according to Ruderman, infancy functions as a conceptual category or, using Raymond Williams's term, a structure of feeling: "an index of certain emerging, often conflicting ideas about the self in the English nineteenth century" (4). This means that even as the Romantic child comes to embody the private, interior and autonomous self, infancy also serves Romantic writers as a way of thinking about and figuring "inchoate and unfinished self-states" (2). Likewise, even as the notion of infant origins enables a new historical discourse of development, the figure of the infant also works to disrupt and block narratives of progress, development, and achieved insight.

Most important for Ruderman's interest in the work and space of the nineteenth-century poem, infancy becomes what he calls "the theater of the figural" itself, the site of a basic struggle to comprehend the "Difference between the Thing & the Image" (9, 8). These last words are Coleridge's description of his son Hartley's efforts to comprehend the relationship between mountains viewed through a window and mountains reflected in a looking-glass, a moment of which Coleridge says, "I never before saw such an Abstract of *Thinking* as a pure act & energy, of *Thinking* as distinguished from *Thoughts*" (8). While Ruderman's first chapter offers an important

new reading of Wordsworth's "Ode: Intimations of Immortality Recollected from Early Childhood"—the most canonical text he treats extensively and one that arguably had the most influence on nineteenth-century notions of infancy and childhood—it is Coleridge's sustained encounter with infancy that serves as the impetus and foundation of Ruderman's study: this well-known notebook entry on Hartley's abstract thinking and the sleeping baby of "Frost at Midnight" anchor the introductory chapter of the book, and Ruderman returns to Coleridge's *Opus Maximum* fragments in a later chapter, finding in the poet's ambivalent responses to infant figures the grounds of his aesthetic theory. Along the way Ruderman offers subtle and significant readings of Barbauld's "To a Little Invisible Being Who is Expected Soon to Be Visible"; Blake's "Infant Joy" and "Infant Sorrow"; Arnold's "To a Gipsy Child by the Seashore" and "The Youth of Nature"; Erasmus Darwin's *Zoonomia*; Sara Coleridge's poems, letters, and manuscripts, including the "Journal of Her Children's Early Years"; P. B. Shelley's prose, including "A Defence of Poetry"; Tennyson's "Supposed Confessions of a Second-Rate Sensitive Mind" and *The Princess*; and Augusta Webster's *Mother and Daughter* sonnet sequence.

Perhaps the most sustained modern engagement with childhood can be found in psychoanalysis, and Ruderman makes good use of this theoretical tradition, emphasizing its romantic origins and even offering his study as a "prehistory" of its insights, preoccupations and dynamics (4). Exploring the philosophical idea of infancy rather than the cultural work and rhetorical uses that ideologies of childhood and the figure of the infant perform, Ruderman is less interested in thematic and narrative representations of childhood than in the formal structures, aesthetic experiences and conceptual spaces that the state of infancy enables; theories of infancy and natality in the work of Agamben, Lyotard, Nancy, and Arendt are his touchstones. Indeed, his lack of attention to the historical and social factors shaping our representations of children and childhood is integral to his argument that infancy opens up a space in the romantic and postromantic lyric "for constantly renewed engagement with the world, a world that is never completely attainable, yet becomes available again for us in fragments and intimations" (22). Throughout his discussion, Ruderman describes the poem of infancy as a "holding environment," a field where we are "induced to learn to encounter learning rather than mere knowing" (16).

Coleridge's first sight of his newborn son, Hartley, is a particularly resonant example of the inchoate, ambivalent interruption or caesura (in Deleuze's sense of the term) that the figure of infancy produces: for two hours, Coleridge reports in a letter to Thomas Poole, he felt nothing but an unformed melancholy towards the infant; only when he sees the child nursing at its mother's breast do his feelings take paternal form (92). That

moment of strange pause before Coleridge falls into sentimentality, before he places the infant in the ideological structure of the mother/child dyad, is, for Ruderman, what the poem of infancy holds within its form and what it offers as its experience. Ruderman's interest in the relationship between infancy and poetic form thus drives this study. His ambitious argument that "attention to infancy catalyzed a revolution in literary form and genre" in nineteenth-century Britain is never fully realized, but if there are no tectonic shifts in the generic landscape of nineteenth-century poetry, there are deep, local insights into both familiar and less familiar poems, as well as a profound, ethical engagement with what the state of infancy makes possible (3).

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Benjamin Kim. *Wordsworth, Hemans, and Politics, 1800–1830: Romantic Crises*. Lewisburg, PA: Bucknell University Press, 2013. pp. vii + 196. \$80.

In *Wordsworth, Hemans, and Politics, 1800–1830: Romantic Crises*, Benjamin Kim addresses questions that have engaged Romanticists for some time: how might we account for the shifting political positions of William Wordsworth and Felicia Hemans? And, to a lesser extent, what connections might we find between them? Wordsworth and Hemans met at Rydal Mount in 1830—a meeting with which Kim begins and ends his book—and each referenced the other in poetry. While it is not uncommon to see Wordsworth and Hemans addressed together in chapters and articles, Kim's may be the first book-length treatment of the two. In his introduction, Kim presents a promising argument about a shared temporal structure, a "revisionary mode of writing" he identifies in Wordsworth's and Hemans's work, which relies on the creation of crises and historical moments of uncertainty to allow for visions of a future society (2). Yet ultimately one might be left with more questions than answers, not only about how, exactly, this "politics of crisis" works, but more broadly concerning why he focuses specifically and exclusively on Wordsworth and Hemans, as well as whether or not this paradigm is unique to them among Romantic-era poets (3).

In contrast to work since the late 1980s that has explored Wordsworth's radical politics and added nuance to the traditional narrative of his later conservatism and work that has highlighted Hemans's subversive proto-feminism, Kim ultimately returns Wordsworth and Hemans to their later-