

Edward Larrissy. *The Blind and Blindness in Literature of the Romantic Period*.
Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2007. Pp. viii + 229. \$99.99.

Concerned with the figure of the blind man and with representations of blindness in Romantic-period poetry, Edward Larrissy's is an intricate and subtle study. For Larrissy, blindness is a term open to much inflection. There is "the 'ancient' topos of the blind seer" (3), where the quotation marks round "ancient" serve less to scare than to open our eyes to the cultural shaping involved in the notion of "ancientness." There is the Enlightenment's multi-faceted concern to "release all the blind from the dangers of that solipsism which might be encouraged by the privation of the most useful and informative of the senses" (24). And there is a Romantic-period sense that blindness is a condition that contrives to "mirror the complexity of contemporary accounts of . . . consciousness" (32).

A dialectical argument half-shapes itself in the book, most fully articulated in the fine chapter on Wordsworth, and yet is often dismantled before it is fully framed, partly because of Larrissy's commendable reluctance to impose a simplifying scheme on his topic or texts. This dialectical argument proposes that the "inwardness of modernity" sets itself against, often in an "ironic and melancholy" way, what Larrissy calls "the power and confidence of the ancient bard's inward vision" (2-3). Modernity (that is, Romanticism), for Larrissy, recognizes its historically relativistic situatedness. It is aware that it is engaged in "an exchange, involving both gain and loss, of ancient for modern inwardness" (3). The idea of such an "exchange" surfaces intermittently; it does not dominate or drive the book's readings, and yet it is not a necessarily adverse criticism to say that the book's underlying thesis is not always immediately apparent. Even in the first two pages, one is conscious of a struggle to define the guiding theme: Larrissy defines what his book is not about with the half-beleaguered clarity of someone determined not to be misunderstood, even as he amusingly worries lest his collection of associated topics resembles "a Cubist collage":

This book, then, claims a significant influence of literary representations and philosophical discussions of the blind on Romantic-period writing, but does not claim that this is a matter of the frequent occurrence of the image of the blind visionary used in a straightforward fashion. Rather, it seeks to demonstrate the sometimes complex relationship between this topos and other ways of representing the blind. (2)

Appropriately, Larrissy refuses to settle for straightforwardness since the book is and is not a study of Romantic debts and resistance to the Enlightenment. Drawn to this topic, the book remains fascinated by a wider penumbra of concerns. It finds its pivot in the idea that the Romantics pos-

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sessed "a sophisticated sense" of the "historical situatedness and relativity" of the "inner self" (2). Larrissy argues that the Romantic period is the very reverse of an ahistorical Nirvana in which "dehistoricising lyricism" calls the shots. Rather, the book contends in its treatment of blindness that the Romantic period shows itself unable to "conceive the lyrical impulse in a non-historical form" (32). Making this emphasis, it joins forces with those critics who have argued that the Romantic ideology, to the degree that it represents absorption in a supposedly false state of consciousness, is a belated and itself misleading chimera.

McGann's *The Poetics of Sensibility*, it should be noted, makes an approving appearance in Chapter 2, "The Celtic Bard in Ireland and Britain," where his application of the phrase "materialized mentality" to James Macpherson's Ossian poems wins both praise and further reflection: "mentality" reasserts itself in Larrissy's reading, which points out that "the very fact that readers feel compelled to debate the insubstantiality or otherwise of Ossian is in itself significant" (46). The moment illustrates Larrissy's ability to move with quick-footed agility between metaphysical and literary matters, and between particulars and generalizations in such a fashion that any resulting conclusion subjects itself to further analysis and consideration. The first chapter ties together Blake, Wordsworth, Shelley and Coleridge within a few sentences in relation to the question of synaesthesia, images such as Blake's depiction in "London" of a sigh running in blood down palace walls. There, the overlapping of the auditory and the visual ushers in a fascinating account of transactions and negotiations between empiricism and vision, poetry and commerce, and the whole chapter illustrates the economical density of Larrissy's thinking and style. Characteristically he cites purposefully from an array of relevant criticism, always with an eye to key ideas and phrases that lend impetus to his own argument. For example, by way of various commentators, approvingly cited in the case of Philip Connell and Nicholas Roe, he skillfully avoids "political suspicionism" (29) while promoting historical awareness in his discussion of Keats's politics.

Larrissy's range is evident in his second chapter, on the "The Celtic Bard." Gray, Ossian, Hemans, and Scott lead the way (Blind Alice in *The Bride of Lammermoor* points towards the "figurative significance that the border could assume," 44), before the subject of second sight in Wordsworth, Blake and Keats takes over. Larrissy comments on the relationship between Wordsworth's two poems, "The Blind Highland Boy" and "Ode: Intimations of Immortality," with its depiction of "the Child" as an "Eye among the blind" (quoted, 51). The best part of the chapter provides a succinct defense of Thomas Moore's musicality (the aural is often associated with blindness in the book): "images of the past," Larrissy writes, "occur to the mind's eye, but the melancholy musicality carries with it not only the

sense of loss, but a lack of clarity about the future" (59). The third chapter develops Larrissy's contention, in his 1985 study of the poet, that Blake is "ambivalent" in his view of "empiricist theories of knowledge" (64). Or, at least, that is what it appears to set out to do, but the multitude of particular observations and invocations of Berkeley, Voltaire, and William Molyneux (proposer of the idea that a man, born blind, but given back his sight, would be unable to interpret visual experience) serves more to confirm Blake's opposition to "empiricist theories." Perhaps Larrissy is arguing that Blake's understanding of the senses in works such as *The Marriage of Heaven and Hell* indicates a reevaluation rather than a rejection of the "empiricist," but, not for the only time in the book, the absence of signposts makes it hard to grasp the overall tendency of the argument. Things come together more coherently (though implicitly) in the incisive section on Blake's printing methods, read as showing the poet-painter's wish to extend our understanding of the senses by making "relief etching" (a technique that refers to the "invention of relief printing for the blind") "a means of access to imaginative vision" (84).

The fourth chapter is a well-researched discussion of "edifying tales" (to give the chapter title) about the blind by authors such as Charles Lamb in his *A Tale of Rosamund Gray and Old Blind Margaret* (1798). Larrissy hears in Lamb's tale Wordsworthian emphases on the value of unpretentious ordinariness. The point is cogent, though Lamb's book, published in 1798, has almost certainly not, *pace* Larrissy, "learnt from Wordsworth's assertion that 'The moving accident is not my trade'" (91) since "Hart-Leap Well!, from which the quotation comes, was not composed until 1800. Chapter 5 develops the Wordsworthian theme in a study of the poet's "transitions." This chapter is the most impressive in the book, largely because Larrissy allows himself space for ampler readings of individual works than is the case elsewhere. The discussion returns to Jonathan Wordsworth's characterization of the poet as preoccupied "with border-states" (quoted, 103). Larrissy writes about exchanges and "border-crossings" (104) of various kinds in a range of works—including *The Borderers*, "Tintern Abbey," "Home at Grasmere," and *The Excursion*—with the disciplined ratiocinative intensity typical of his criticism at its best.

Other canonical Romantic writers and texts are to the fore in the remaining three full chapters (they are followed by a very brief Conclusion). Larrissy reads Coleridge and Keats as aiming at a "fullness of perception . . . which remembers, but cannot recover, the visionary intensity of the bard" (142) and offers an especially attentive reading of "This Lime-Tree Bower My Prison." Coleridge's poem earns its place in Larrissy's story, not only through its initial reference to the possibility of "blindness," but also because it thematizes modes of vision, including imaginative transformation,

into something “like a different kind of blindness” (147). The intelligent material on Keats builds to a cogent climax with an account of Moneta’s “visionless” (quoted, 168) blindness, though one would, ideally, have liked a fuller exploration of Keats’s self-questioning art.

Byron and Shelley are discussed in relation to Byron’s identification of “Milton as the ‘blind Old Man’ in the Dedication to *Don Juan*” (177), a blindness involving many aspects, including the older poet’s “blindness to the power of his own Satan” (178), and Shelley’s concern to explore the “deep truth” (quoted, 178). The reading of Rousseau’s fate at the hands of the “shape all light” in *The Triumph of Life* hinges on Larrissy’s sense that the poem “has already established that Rousseau’s will is flawed” (185). From this sense, he adumbrates an ethically consistent and potentially hopeful reading. But it is Rousseau who diagnoses himself in this way, and it is not his will but his heart that he blames (“I was overcome / By my own heart alone”), and can his own self-diagnosis be regarded as straightforwardly confessional and trustworthy? Again, one wants a more tenaciously extended and engaged reading. Larrissy produces a sketch of an account; this reader would have enjoyed seeing it worked up into a finished, more detailed picture.

And yet the overall canvas of the book is rich and ambitious, concluding with a lively reading of the motif of blindness in Mary Shelley’s fiction. The balanced fairness of judgment, which pervades this fine book, is evident in the account of *Frankenstein* and its pursuit of “a better, if disillusioned, way of seeing” (194). Such a way of seeing, in turn, comes close to defining Edward Larrissy’s very considerable gift to his readers in *The Blind and Blindness in Literature of the Romantic Period*.

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James Bieri. *Percy Bysshe Shelley: A Biography*. Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 2008. Pp. xviii+832. \$45.00.

The publication of James Bieri’s biography of Percy Bysshe Shelley—initially in two volumes from University of Delaware Press in 2004 and 2005, and now in one volume from The Johns Hopkins University Press (including in paperback)—is a true milestone. It has been a staggering thirty years since the last comprehensive biography of Shelley appeared, Richard Holmes’s 1974 *Shelley: The Pursuit*. While the gap has been filled by the ongoing publication of the indispensable *Shelley and His Circle* project, as well as by the complete reediting of Shelley’s poetry underway by Donald

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