

to the passion series), and three major Scott novels (*The Heart of Midlothian*, *The Bride of Lammermoor*, and *Redgauntlet*) are imaginative and richly contextualized by discussions of the criminal law, the poor laws, the dissolution of community, and the value/limits of political contention. All in all, *Symbolic Interactions* contributes not only to our reading of its primary subjects, but to our appreciation of the potential of approaches we've only begun to consider.

Bruce Beiderwell

University of California, Los Angeles

Sara Guyer. *Romanticism after Auschwitz*. Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2007. Pp. 364. \$55.00.

There was a time when theoretical debates in the province of romantic studies reverberated throughout the domain of literary studies. That time now lies decidedly behind us, and the academic study of literature and culture has since pursued a variety of very different projects. *Romanticism after Auschwitz* is admirably underwhelmed by this divergence of agendas, as it resolutely revisits the once-ubiquitous work of M. H. Abrams, Geoffrey Hartman, and especially Paul de Man in order to retrieve their theoretical insights for current ethical and theoretical debates. The book unearths what it calls "a resistant, nonredemptive strain within romanticism" (18). Such a minor, unheroic romanticism not only allows the book to intervene in contemporary critical debates, it is also the theme that connects the book's intensely focused discussions of a number of very different texts: there are chapters devoted to English romantic literature (*Frankenstein*, the preface to the *Lyrical Ballads*, and Wordsworth's sonnets "To Sleep"), but also to texts from different genres (there is a chapter on Robert Antelme's Holocaust-memoir *L'Espèce humaine*), different languages (Paul Celan's German translation of Shakespeare's sonnet 71), and even different media (the last chapter deals with Alain Resnais' film *Nuit et brouillard*, and with Paul Celan's translation of it).

The book's meticulous close readings of these works serve to substantiate its extremely ambitious theoretical thesis on the relation between testimony, lyric, and romanticism. The book argues for (what the blurb calls) "the uncomfortable endurance of the tropes and figures associated with romanticism in one of the most insistently anti-romantic discourses, post-Holocaust testimony." Perhaps such a claim for the persistence of romanticism after Auschwitz is not as shocking as it once was (although the obvious sensationalism of the book's title seems eager enough to cash in on

what remains of that shock value). It is not necessary to underline that the once-prevalent association between the atrocities of nazism and the legacy of romanticism has long been replaced by a more nuanced picture; nor is it uncommon for critical considerations of the ethics and poetics of post-Holocaust writing to turn to romanticism—we can think of the career of Geoffrey Hartman as exemplary here. What yet singles out Sara Guyer's approach is that she does not simply posit the relation between post-Holocaust testimony and romantic poetry as a matter of loose ideological affinity or ethical desirability, but that she instead chooses to trace this connection in minute textual detail.

In order to argue for the persistence of romantic figures in post-Holocaust testimony, Guyer shows that romantic lyric can itself be considered as a mode of testimony. Romantic lyric, she argues, demonstrated the persistence of human life in the face of that which can only be attended to in an oblique, even paradoxical way. That paradoxical way was the way of romantic lyric before it became the way of post-Holocaust writing; romantic lyric managed to address those things it could not simply approach as a malleable object, and it demonstrated that the capacity for such an adequate address is inseparable from the use of figural language. And when the Holocaust confronted its survivors with a particularly urgent demand for such an adequate affirmation, people like the poet Paul Celan, the writer Robert Antelme, and the film director Alain Resnais inherited the romantic lesson of the inseparability of testimony and lyric figure in their responses to it.

This is, in the most schematic terms, the argument that underlies *Romanticism after Auschwitz's* discussions of both romantic and post-Holocaust texts. The strength of these readings makes this book, I believe, a valuable contribution to the vexed question of how literature—and how *we*—are to forge an ethically adequate response to the Holocaust. Guyer draws on prominent thinkers in this recent critical tradition—Derrida, Levinas, Blanchot, Agamben—in order to delineate a romantic testimonial mode, while she at the same time mobilizes insights from the field of romantic studies and from romantic literature itself to develop an alternative to the positions of these thinkers.

So what does that romantic alternative look like? The first thing to remark is that the notion of romantic testimony takes issue with two diametrically opposed positions in debates over the literary response to the Holocaust. On the one hand we find the idea that literature has the capacity to restore the voices of the dead, that it can speak about the unspeakable, and that it can represent lost lives in such a way that the reader can identify and sympathize with their agony. On the other hand there is the equally prevalent conviction that literature is powerless to represent the enormity of such events and that it can only negatively assert that such sub-

lime horror is radically unrepresentable, even knowable. Importantly, this distinction in debates about post-Holocaust writing is almost symmetrical to a once-common disagreement in the field of romantic studies about romantic poetical language's (re-)animating powers. The "happy" version of romanticism was most famously represented, as Guyer also notes, in M. H. Abrams' classic *The Mirror and the Lamp*, which asserted romantic poetry's "life-giving capacity" (25), its power to animate objects. This position was infamously inverted with Paul de Man's insistent demonstration that such animation was not so much an index of infinite creativity, but rather a mere rhetorical effect, and therefore an illusion (albeit an illusion that romantic poetry itself, according to de Man, did not share).

In the light of the almost perfect symmetry between these two debates, we can understand that *Romanticism after Auschwitz* brings together the question of testimony and that of romantic poetry's animating power under the rubric of the "master trope of lyric" (13), prosopopoeia. This trope, in which an object is addressed as if it were a subject, underlies the lyrical subject's relation to nature and to the dead or the inanimate, and not least in cases of momentous loss and deprivation, such as the Holocaust. For Guyer, prosopopoeia is not a successful operation of "fictional restoration" (8); it does not underwrite "a redemptive, organicist, or triumphalist rhetoric" (13); it is not the trope through which romantic poets assert their sovereign capacity to animate nature. Instead, the trope of prosopopoeia always signals that this capacity does not exist independently from the workings of poetical figuration. It is because prosopopoeia always self-consciously interrupts its work of (re-)animation that it offers an appropriate model for the way survivors bear witness to the horrors of the Holocaust.

While Guyer follows de Man in recognizing that prosopopoeia is a trope, she does not therefore simply dismiss lyric's animating powers as *mere* rhetoric, as the mere illusion that poetry can animate nature or reanimate the dead. The nonredemptive, minor power of lyric operates beyond the facile opposition between an unsophisticated animism and an ultimately impotent rhetorical performance. The operation of lyric—as of testimony—is tied to neither redemption nor privation, and instead consists in the capacity to *sustain* human life in language (65). Guyer writes: "Understood as a mode of ineptitude or weakness, poetry cannot resolve a crisis of truth, but instead is the condition of possibility of bearing witness to such a crisis without having any means to overcome it" (29). While lyric has no way to bring the dead back to life, the very fact of its taking place makes it an act of witness to the dead, however impotent; by attending to the dead, it affirms their memory as "a life that poetry allows to speak while maintaining the division and the nonidentity of living and speaking" (65). In

this sense, Guyer argues, prosopopoeia is “a trope of survival, sustaining life beyond life or power” (13).

To my mind, it is this assertion of the decidedly unheroic power of lyric that makes up the theoretical originality of Guyer’s notion of a testimony operating beyond redemption and privation. While her argument is often phrased in a jargon that unhelpfully recalls the heyday of high theory, Guyer’s notion of testimony updates “orthodox” deconstructionist positions in at least one vital respect. This becomes clearest in the book’s final chapter on Alain Resnais’ film *Nuit et brouillard*. Guyer shows how this film participates in the evacuation of representation and instead becomes what she calls “the representation of unrepresentability” (206). Yet this aesthetics of the sublime (a staple of criticism of post-Holocaust writing, as well as of deconstruction) is only part of the story; Guyer has no problem showing that the film not only presents us with the image of blindness, but also with that of inescapable vision (211). So “the ultimately reassuring play between the figure of absence and the absence of figure” is interrupted by the exposure of the debris and the remnants that are actually there (211). Instead of offering the consolations of sublime negative knowledge, then, which used to go under the names of undecidability or the aporia, romantic testimony presents us with the impossibility of *not* seeing, of *not* attending to the disaster. Where earlier, deconstructionist forms of romantic criticism often tended to remain immobilized and mesmerized in the face of textual perplexities and moments of undecidability, the lesson Guyer draws from romantic lyric is that the impossible can, or even must be engaged, *not* by attributing a definite meaning to it, but by allowing “the impossible to take place without changing the fact of its impossibility” (219).

While I find the relation Guyer establishes between testimony and prosopopoeia conceptually clear, the intrinsic link of this complex to romanticism is perhaps less evident. It is undeniably the case that romantic literature displayed a particularly intense investment in the problematic of life in general, and the animating force of poetical language in particular. Wordsworth’s argument against personification in the preface to the *Lyrical Ballads* is perhaps the most famous document of that preoccupation, and it is fitting that Guyer devotes a whole chapter to the complexities besetting Wordsworth’s stated ambition to “keep the Reader in the company of flesh and blood” (qtd. 51). The second canonical romantic instance Guyer discusses at great length is Mary Shelley’s *Frankenstein*; this novel’s obvious obsession with the powers of animation and the limits of the human make it an almost conclusive piece of evidence in Guyer’s case for the essentially *romantic* nature of her notion of testimony. While it might just be possible to indicate an equally intense occupation with these matters in a literary corpus that predates romanticism (although I doubt this), Guyer’s discus-

sions of Wordsworth and Shelley by themselves prove that the romantic archive amply supports her choice to consider this as an essentially (post-)romantic problematic.

Apart from the chapters on Wordsworth's rhetoric of survival and on *Frankenstein*, there is one other chapter that deals directly with romantic texts: the chapter on Wordsworth's 1807 sonnets "To Sleep." In these sonnets, the speaker addresses sleep directly, and this apostrophe illustrates the paradoxical status of the rhetorical movements that Guyer is interested in; by directly addressing sleep, they constitute "sleep" as a subject, and more precisely as a subject whose activity they hope will lead to the passivity (the sleep) of the speaker—a passivity that thus derives from the instance on whose activity the speaker depends. In this paradoxical situation, full consciousness and complete unconsciousness (sleep) are equally impossible. Yet through the "sheer fact" of address, the sonnets "indicate how an event (or a state) that precludes consciousness [i.e., insomnia] can be witnessed" (143). Instead of consciousness, or the absence of consciousness, the lyric figures thus cause a state of "wakefulness" that "allow[s] for insomnia to be witnessed without being overcome" (143). To this "witness without negation" corresponds "speech without subjectivity" (145), and this speech sustains "wakefulness as nonmastery, irremissibility, and survival" (153). The sonnets, in short, have the structure of a form of witness that does not imply the triumphant recovery of a heroic and strong subjectivity, but that rather consists in an entirely less heroic form of responsibility and vigilance. It is this mode that Guyer also encounters in post-Holocaust testimony.

In the chapter on Wordsworth's preface, Guyer further complicates the tenuous opposition between life and death by the additional distinction between human and nonhuman life—a difficulty that Wordsworth's programmatic dismissal of "personifications of abstract ideas" quite obviously invites. Guyer deals very carefully with the distinctions between prosopopoeia, personification, and anthropomorphism. She shows how Wordsworth's image of "flesh and blood" is both "the name of a life that can become human only through poetry" (65) and the index of "a human life that can only appear through the nonhuman life that figures it" (55). What lyric cannot do is "posit human life without figure" (66); lyric poetry is neither on the side of death nor on that of life, but rather constitutes a rhetoric of survival that produces a life beyond life.

This preoccupation with the limits of the human also informs the chapter on *Frankenstein*. Guyer is very good at showing that, as "prosopopoeia and apostrophe condition and name the central events" in the novel (72), it "has modern poetry as its condition and its rule," and thus, via the argument that subtends Guyer's book, "testimony as its end" (102). The discussion of the limits of romantic anthropomorphism (in Wordsworth and

Shelley) feeds into a chapter on Robert Antelme's memoir of Dachau, *L'Espèce humaine* (*The Human Race*). Reflecting on the total annihilation of human dignity in Dachau, Antelme defines the human as that which paradoxically endures its own suspension; it is a capacity "to be destroyed *and* to live beyond destruction" (111). The human, that is, sustains a state of radical privation; in its inability to disappear, in its mere persistence, it has the same structure as the movement of lyric that Guyer describes throughout the book. Man, far from being an unalterable essence, "is only the infinite capacity for substitution and non-self-identity" (124).

*Romanticism after Auschwitz* is a difficult and often brilliant book, and it offers romanticists exemplary discussions of a number of important romantic texts, as well as a timely reminder of the relevance that romanticism can have in contemporary theoretical and ethical debates in the humanities. The book manages to connect its overarching theoretical argument to the different texts it engages with, and its chapters all achieve an unwavering and intense concentration on the texts at hand; more provincial theoretical issues and extensive discussions of the secondary literature are consistently relegated to the 90 pages of notes that follow this elegant book. In the end, I feel that the real productivity of *Romanticism after Auschwitz* will only become apparent when its demonstration of the relevance of romantic poetry for contemporary debates will be complemented by investigations that mobilize these debates—on the ethics of representation, on the limits of the human, on what is now called biopower—in order to open up new perspectives on a broad range of romantic materials.

Pieter Vermeulen  
University of Leuven, Belgium