Review of Unfettering Poetry: The Fancy in British Romanticism

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Pity the poor Fancy. This faculty has long been the most misunderstood, underestimated gift of poets. When Samuel Taylor Coleridge (in the *Biographia*) codified the role of fancy as mere handmaiden to the sublime powers of the creative Imagination, he consigned this faculty to a position of ornamental irrelevance from which it has barely managed to escape. Fancy, Coleridge tells us, is the mere “DRAPEry” of poetic genius, “IMAGINATION the SOUL that is everywhere.” Superfluous at best and a positive obstruction at worst, the flimsy surface effects of the Fancy have on this account a subordinate relationship to the animating spirit of the imaginative whole. Since Coleridge’s time, the Fancy has scarcely fared much better in accounts of Romantic poetry and aesthetics. For nearly two centuries this faculty and its poetic embodiments have remained hidden in plain sight.

Such, at least, was the case until the appearance of Jeffrey Robinson’s *Unfettering Poetry*. Robinson’s book is an elegant and unabashedly exuberant defense of Fancy in English poetry, which seeks to restore this faculty to its rightful place at the center of British Romanticism, and at subsequent, mainly twentieth-century, delineations of an experimental literary aesthetics. As Robinson sensibly observes in his introduction, Romanticism is more than the lyric subject convening with its own thoughts in sublime and melancholy isolation. It is also unpredictable, aleatory, and playful; it delights in things, celebrating the mutual emergence and interdependence of self and world; its mood is not duty-bound and self-interrogating but cheerful, unregulated, unfettered and “unfettering.”

This “experimental and irreverent side of Romanticism” (84) is the focus of Robinson’s book. *Unfettering Poetry* is a recuperatory project that, in addition to its corrective privileging of Fancy over Imagination, gives close attention to authors in whom the poetics of the Fancy are seen to be strongest, many of whom have only recently returned to the attention of critics. In the three central chapters comprising Part II of the book, Robinson reads the poetry of Mary Robinson and the Della Cruscans, Leigh Hunt and his circle, and Felicia Hemans as major exponents of the poetics of
Fancy. Robinson’s extensive turn to Romanticism’s erroneously-labeled “minor” poets builds upon work of the last two decades that has undertaken similar acts of critical recovery. By the same token, Robinson reveals several of Romanticism’s major figures, particularly Wordsworth and Keats, to have been poets and occasional celebrants of the Fancy. This practice of juxtaposition – “canonical poetry discussed next to the noncanonical, poetry of men next to that of women” (195) – is both a signature of Robinson’s book and a practical application of its argument: the recuperation of Fancy requires us to look anew at poets we have long ignored as well as to look at more familiar poets in a new way. In an aside from his fine chapter on Robinson’s Della Cruscanism, Robinson observes that his aim has been “to color her poetry in the strangeness it deserves” (128); this statement might in a sense be taken as the programmatic aspiration of the book as a whole.

That defamiliarization is itself a signature trope of so-called “high” Romanticism is no impediment to Robinson’s argument, which identifies a “counter-poetics” of Fancy that operates at once within and against the grain of the Romantic imagination (11). The heirs of Robinson’s Romanticism are not Arnold, Eliot, and Stevens, but the experimental poets of modernism and beyond – Gertrude Stein, Frank O’Hara, Charles Bernstein, and others. Robinson describes his project as an effort to challenge and dispel the “master narrative of the phenomenon we call Romanticism” (114). In chapters 1 and 2 especially, his book prepares the ground for the readings that follow, mounting a polemic against some of the chief architects (both early and late) of this master narrative. Among critics censured by Robinson is Lionel Trilling, whose readings of Wordsworth and Keats emphasized their moral development into poets of “mature masculinity” (204), and Abrams, who tethered Romantic poetry to an eschatological narrative that made all exceptions to this high-minded aspiration seem trifling by comparison. Robinson’s characterization of the greater Romantic lyric – “a drama of subjective completion at the cost of a distancing of itself from the world” (15) – may make a convenient foil to the progressive Romantic poetics on which he focuses. In light of revisionist studies that have complicated the image of the sublimely isolated lyric subject, however, this polemical component of the book feels somewhat dated.
If Robinson’s occasional recourse to critical straw men disappoints, Unfettering Poetry is splendidly successful in celebrating a poetry in which the world itself is “not excluded, but celebrated” (15). Robinson is as gifted a reader of poetry as he is an impassioned one. As he illustrates to dazzling effect, for example, a prominent characteristic of a poetics of Fancy is its paratactic syntax, “a means of expression that reveals a mind-in-motion.” From Swift to Whitman to Bob Perelman, parataxis embodies “the outward-directedness of the Fancy by the theoretically infinite listing of elements in the world or in images” (13). As previously observed, Robinson’s mode of argumentation relies heavily on parataxis; “juxtaposition defines the procedure” of the book (192), which sets in apt conjunction illustrations of the poetic Fancy at work. So too, Robinson’s exposition is often paratactic in its own right; consider, for instance, the following passage on the nature of poetic “cheerfulness”: “Cheerfulness also is manifest in the moment of awakening – the song of the rising lark, a moment of lyric expansiveness of mind, an inflowing of sound, a revisioning of the world. It is the spirit of excess, of overflowing, of intoxication, of the breaking of boundaries and of transformations, of extending consciousness past the self and into the variety of the world” (86). The techniques of anaphora and parataxis on display in passages such as these are by no means accidental; Unfettering Poetry is as much an ebullient performance of Fancy as it is a reflection on the poetics of Fancy in the “long Romantic” period and beyond.

Robinson sets Fancy’s “playful intellectual mobility” (128) – its respect for frivolity, idleness, and waste – against the monumentalizing, moralistic impulses evident in some Romantic poetry and in the work of its critics. Moreover, he shows how, not despite but precisely because of these values (or anti-values), “the Fancy gets associated with the ‘dangerous enthusiasms’ of progressive and radical political thought,” and so becomes “a driving force in the world of poetry at the time of the French Revolution” (112, 118). Robinson’s insistence on the political use-values of poetry can seem somewhat jarring, as if a non- or even anti-monumental poetics would need to be somehow re-monumentalized in order to claim our attention. Why shouldn’t a poetry that shows such cheerful disregard for moral instruction be permitted to enjoy the
pleasures of its own inconsequence? On the whole, though, *Unfettering Poetry* is an intensely rewarding work of great passion, intellect, and unremitting good cheer.