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Prose in the Age of Poets: Romanticism and Biographical Narrative from Johnson to De Quincey by Annette Wheeler Cafarelli (Review)

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focus on Hugo in chapter 3, a close reading of a narrative intrusion at the beginning of *La Forêt mouillée* (the earliest of the plays conceived for *Théâtre en liberté*) provides the basis for reinterpreting his personal crisis of 1854 in terms of a larger “crisis of subjectivity.”

To my mind, the best chapter of the book is devoted to the *Tentation de Saint Antoine* of Flaubert. Here Gould’s reliance upon a structural-psychoanalytic (Laplanche’s and Pontalis’s) view of fantasy provides a powerful framework for understanding the fluid and parallel status of both Saint Anthony and the narrator and for moving on to analyze the *Tentation* in terms of overall structure and narrative technique. Here again, the author’s close readings of crucial passages (in particular, the opening) lay a strong basis for a number of persuasive observations—for example, that Flaubert “recreates, in one ‘thrust of style,’ the theatricality inherent in the very act of reading and writing” (p. 140). Gould goes on to argue in the last chapter that Mallarmé’s writing enacts “virtual” equivalents to the actual performances of dance and music that fascinated him. For example, the faun in the “Après-midi” not only acts out obsessive fantasy scenarios but analyzes them theoretically; he is both performer and critic, although never at the same time, and therefore can never reach an entirely satisfactory conclusion.

One might take issue with certain broader points of interpretation—for example, the emphasis upon the “openness” of Platonic dialogue—as well as with certain handlings of intellectual history: the place of *Le Neveu de Rameau* in the history of philosophical dialogue, and the parallel between the crisis of early fifth-century Athens and the “crisis of subjectivity” in late eighteenth-century Europe. Nevertheless, Gould’s readings of specific texts, especially Flaubert, are consistently challenging. This original book offers provocative readings and makes a strong case for revising the very notions of theater and theatricality.

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Prose in the Age of Poets: Romanticism and Biographical Narrative from Johnson to De Quincey. *Annette Wheeler Cafarelli*. Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1990. Pp. vii+301.

Annette Cafarelli undertakes a valuable and ambitious task in this study. She attempts to show that the short, fragmentary, subjective

studies which René Wellek termed “collective biographies” (*The Rise of English Literary History* [Chapel Hill, N.C., 1941], p. 134) are central to the Romantic period, and that in fact these seemingly marginal texts “epitomize Romantic discourse in their emphasis on subjectivity rather than objectivity, heuristic inference rather than proof, paratactic innuendo rather than univocal interpretation, and truth rather than accuracy” (p. 2). Cafarelli intelligently argues that, as an originator of collective biography, Samuel Johnson turns out to be, in a surprising number of ways, a vital progenitor of Romantic discourse.

In Cafarelli’s view, Johnson’s *Lives* influenced the Romantics by focusing their attention on such issues as the doctrine of sincerity, the economic and social marginalization of the writer, and the relationship between lives and works. She analyzes the *Lives* as a canon-forming critical document, and she sees it as putting forward “an evolutionary model of literary history” by virtue of its diachronic sequence (p. 37).

To show that “the Romantics paid Johnson the compliment of imitating him even as they anathematized him” (p. 69), in her central chapter Cafarelli takes up “writers who tried to subdue post-Johnsonian speculation on the links between life and works” and writers who took to collective biography “to rewrite or refute the canon of Johnson’s *Lives*” (p. 72). But the connection with Johnson becomes tenuous in her final chapters where she turns to Hazlitt and De Quincey, “whose central importance is in narrative innovation” (p. 112).

Cafarelli’s argument gets off to a challenging and provocative start, but her book fails to live up to its thesis. Cafarelli initially offers to define collective biography carefully, but as her book develops, the definition seems often to be forgotten. Johnson, too, recedes; Cafarelli does not fail to find some interesting evidence of Johnson’s influence upon Romantic biographical narratives, but she has difficulty making the influence connect with her definition of collective biography, even though this genre is handled so loosely that essays by Wordsworth and Hazlitt turn out to be examples of it.

To the extent that a book deals with defining generic influences, its argument can be only as useful as its definition of genre. Besides the problem of losing sight of her early definition of collective biography, one has to question how well Cafarelli has selected the key terms of her definition. They are, to repeat, “subjectivity rather than objectivity, heuristic inference rather than proof, paratactic innuendo rather than univocal interpretation, and truth rather than accuracy.” The first pair of antonyms is notoriously hard to define; the

second pair denotes two mental operations that are not antithetical at all; the third also creates a false appearance of antithesis; and the fourth, despite Johnson's allegiance to general truth and his impatience with minutiae, would probably have made him expostulate: "Madam, we may have both truth *and* accuracy, and save ourselves the trouble of choosing!"

Cafarelli tries to make her definition more precise by focusing on the notion that collective biographies must have some meaningful sequence. Mere alphabetization by the subjects' last names can never be meaningful, for there must be "a sustained ideological program [that] emerges" from the sequence (p. 5); yet sorting lives chronologically rather than alphabetically seems fraught with significance for Cafarelli. Confusingly, she says that "we must distinguish between collective biography as a linear but discontinuous narrative based on a specifically ordered sequence and collective biography as an episodically random but intellectually cumulative narrative" (p. 6). The dichotomies blur and become indistinct as this sentence swims before the eyes. By definition, a sequence must have some degree of continuity in order to be a sequence. One needs to know precisely what sort of continuity and what sort of discontinuity can be credited, and why, rather than looking (as Cafarelli at points seems to do) for any sort at all. After these opening gambits one waits to see whether Cafarelli's contrarities can hold her book together.

As it turns out, Cafarelli's argument does not become stronger when the definition is applied to specific cases. The question of meaningful sequencing is an awkward one in regard to Johnson's *Lives*, for its constituent biographies were initially meant to be published as separate prefaces to individual volumes, and the order of the *Lives* in their collected form was established, as Cafarelli acknowledges, by "the accidents of publication history rather than . . . [by] an initial integrity of design" (p. 31). Nevertheless, Cafarelli says, seeming to contradict herself, "collectivity in the *Lives* does not arise on the level of explicitly ordered sequence or uniformly shaped biographies" (p. 34). To see the interrelationship of the *Lives* "we must look to thematic patterning reverberating within and between the lives, rather than to structural homology" (p. 35). Cafarelli thus takes refuge in the notion of thematic patterning, substituting it for "sequencing." But while it is true that "the *Lives* has remained virtually unexplored as a narrative sequence" (p. 30), discovering thematic patterning in the *Lives* is a familiar approach, and one that dodges the issue she has raised. When Cafarelli returns to the question of sequence in Johnson's *Lives*, she ponderously assesses the collection's necro-chronology: "The sequencing of the biographies based on the

year of death underscored the spiritual prospect of human experience, in which each generation gently and irrevocably yields to the next in the chain of human achievement that makes up literary history" (p. 35).

Elsewhere Cafarelli seems equally desperate to make a point. She notes, for example, that the *Lives* were bound together without a preface; this becomes characteristic of collective biography in her view (p. 34). But demonstrating homology or influence by citing features that are absent is a curious procedure! Johnson and the Romantic collective biographers also share a lack of Braille footnotes and nude centerfolds.

Such straining to make a point sometimes leads to anticlimax. Her section on the connection between life and work in Johnson's *Lives* is one of her best, yet she ends it with the undercutting statement that "the *Lives* sets forth no formulation of the connections between life and works," and offers the following anachronism as an example of the kind of formulation Johnson failed to make: "Dryden's carelessness as a writer is not said [by Johnson] to exemplify the plight of literature in a culture of economic determinism" (p. 54). Indeed not.

Cafarelli's section on the marginal subculture of authorship is also one of her best, although the issues she discusses are handled more incisively by Alvin Kernan (*Printing Technology, Letters, and Samuel Johnson* [Princeton, N.J., 1987]). Again her discussion fades off in a blur of subtopics, without a clear resolution: "Instead of resolving the puzzle of author and audience, the *Lives* multiplied its implications for audience and text, critic and canon, poet and society, high and low culture" (p. 66).

Cafarelli's early trouble in applying her definition to Johnson's *Lives* worsens when she reaches Wordsworth's 1815 Essay, Supplementary to the Preface. This dubious example of collective biography does contain a nineteen-paragraph survey of English writers showing that genius is neglected, and it does react to Johnson's *Lives*. But which of the defining traits of "collective biography" does the Essay exemplify? Does it exhibit "heuristic inference rather than proof"? Apparently not, for Cafarelli writes that in dealing with the topic of genius Wordsworth "offers a series of *proofs* that drift into the realm of rhetorical questions and unverifiable assertions" (p. 96; emphasis added). In dealing with *Paradise Lost* Wordsworth "sought to *prove* the sales low" (p. 97; emphasis added). Cafarelli seems to forget her criterion of "heuristic inference" that she had opposed to "proof" in defining collective biography and framing her initial argument. Instead, she merely sets Wordsworth's Preface and Johnson's *Lives* side by side and reads them as a dialogue. The exercise is interesting,

even illuminating, but it does not very fully support the book's stated purpose.

By the final chapter, the book's purpose seems still farther out of sight. Cafarelli argues that De Quincey's "*Literary Reminiscences* has certain alliances with the tradition of travel writing and the prose picturesque but, on a narrative and critical level, its paramount affiliations lie with the poetic tradition and the poetic use of the pastoral to allegorize nature, art, temporal change, and the passage of human life" (p. 156). This sounds like the thesis sentence from a seminar paper, forced into a book where it does not belong. At other points as well, Cafarelli's prose exhibits the excesses of jargon and diffuseness of perspective that can characterize graduate student work. For example: "In refusing to polarize the issue of ancients and moderns, progress and decline, Johnson problematized the concept of 'imitation' in poetics; in dealing with moral matters as well, the question of imitation is multivocal" (p. 39). "Held in contempt by authors and taken for granted by common readers, the *Lives* confers dignity upon the unsung critical occupation" (p. 69). "Yet many biographers in the Romantic era rebelled by turning to biographies of the living where, unencumbered by epitaphic obligations (although risking litigation even then), generic conventions of form and decorum could be subverted or dismantled" (p. 72). Despite such passages, Cafarelli's prose is generally competent and often pleasing. She is a skilled critic, too; her readings of the works are sensitive and informed, though unfocused. She simply needed a better editor—both for style and for overall design—than she got.

Cafarelli's scholarly apparatus shows that she has done her homework; notes and bibliography occupy ninety pages of this slender book. Still, there are some mistakes and omissions; her analysis of Johnson's role in canon formation would have benefited from Douglas Lane Patey's essay, "The Eighteenth Century Invents the Canon" (*Modern Language Studies* 18 [1988]: 17–37), for example. Her understanding of Johnson's handling of proof and evidence would have been deepened by a reading of Patey's *Probability and Literary Form: Philosophic Theory and Literary Practice in the Augustan Age* (Cambridge, 1984). Her treatment of epic and heroic elements in Johnson's *Lives* could have more thoroughly taken into account the treatment given this topic by Robert Folkenflik in his study of the *Lives* (*Samuel Johnson, Biographer* [Ithaca, N.Y., 1978]). Cafarelli seems unaware of the mock-heroic note that Johnson sounds so often, not least in the very passages that she cites (p. 43). Finally, it is untrue that "Johnson . . . called his works 'the dreams of a poet

doomed at last to wake a lexicographer'” (p. 153); he made this remark about his own ambitious hopes as a scholar.

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Dostoyevsky and the Process of Literary Creation. *Jacques Catteau*. Translated by *Audrey Littlewood*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1989. Pp. xiv+553.

Dostoyevsky and the Process of Literary Creation is a reissue in English of Catteau's 1978 volume *La Création littéraire chez Dostoïevski*. It is also a revised edition, or so Catteau tells us in his preface. There he speaks of bringing the book up to date: "I have condensed the text to clarify the main ideas, cut such notes and references as were not directly relevant, and corrected the minor factual errors of the first edition." Well, there is little in this edition of "bringing up to date" or any extensive condensing. Indeed, the book is pretty much the same: the same rubrics, the same order, the same points of view, the same positions, the same ideas, and with very minor exceptions, the same words. Most of the changes are in the bibliography, where some works on Dostoevsky since 1978 have been added, but the bibliography is still heavily weighted with French and Russian authors, and much good work in English and German is not noted. It has very much an old-fashioned air, and the critical vocabulary comes from a generation or two ago. Catteau has some harsh things to say about Freud's work on Dostoevsky and has little respect for Freudianism. Yet, a half-century of psychoanalytic thinking has completely passed him by, and his conception of Freudianism is filled with the clichés of a generation ago. Aside from Freud himself, he discusses only one other psychoanalytic thinker: Jolanka Neufeld and the *Sketch for a Psychoanalysis*, a personage and work far from the core of innovative Freudian thinking (*Dostoyevsky, Psikhoanalitichesky ocherk*, ed. S. Freud [Leningrad-Moscow, 1925]). When he makes a gesture toward more recent scholarship, it is already dated. He says, "Even psychoanalytical criticism, dizzy from building its own towers of Babel and its inversion of the usual scholarly procedures, using the works to find out about their creator, is now reforming itself, . . . renovated under the name of psychocriticism" (p. 98). Psychocriticism is largely the creation and domain of Charles Mauron's *Des Métaphores obsédantes*