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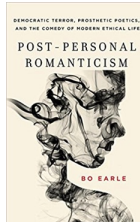
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## POST-PERSONAL ROMANTICISM: DEMOCRATIC TERROR, PROSTHETIC POETICS, AND THE COMEDY OF MODERN ETHICAL LIFE



By **Bo Earle**  
(Ohio State, 2017) xiii + 212 pp.  
Reviewed by **Liz Scheer** on 2018-08-06.

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Confronted with the terrifying absurdity of the contemporary political scene, scholars of Romanticism are called upon to find new ways to connect the current state of affairs to their own work. Bo Earle's rigorous and important study offers a range of new methodological frameworks for considering Romantic subjectivity along the axes of identity politics, climate change, and political solidarity. In other words, the book cogently shows how Romantic-era writers weighed ethical questions "at the level of climate" (5), meaning the invisible, accretive terrors that saturate daily life and demand a response from writers.

The book begins by identifying a paradox at the heart of the Enlightenment, a period that promoted a new kind of individual autonomy even while making it impossible. Romantic poetry, Earle argues, negotiates this contradiction by casting modernity as a concept dependent upon the very elusiveness of autonomous individuality. Seen in this way, that is, as a project invested in the contingency of subjectivity, Romanticism also supports a vision of modernity that is similarly elusive: Romantic "modernity" is a culture of fantasy that cannot be organized into a cohesive set of principles and beliefs.

Though this vision of modernity might seem splintered and grim, Earle provocatively argues otherwise. He suggests that the failure of the "first person plural" (34)--of the cohesive "we" that pervades the post-Romantic world-- is not to be read in a wholly pessimistic way. Instead, the relative "failure" of a modern collective consciousness during the Enlightenment prompted the Romantic poets to poetically construct new forms of "companionability" (34): modes of attachment that turn disenchantment and disillusionment into sites of possibility and repair, and whose ameliorative properties might serve our political present. Earle argues that the British Romantic lyric supplies a crucial testing site for these alternative forms of kinship. Indeed, the resources of verse and figure allowed the Romantic poets to both rehearse and produce new forms of "queer...companionship" (35), small-scale intimacies achieved in verse that continually salvage and re-assert a desire for a collective consciousness in the face of that very project's ostensive wreckage.

As a critical point of departure in his argument, Earle cites Hegel's suggestion that modern subjectivity is "post-individual" (qtd. 16). Drawing from the work of scholars in Romanticism, biopolitics, and Enlightenment philosophy, he argues that the Romantic lyric negotiates a new kind of subjectivity, one that does not wholly reject autonomous selfhood, as Hegel's historical ethics would suggest. Instead, he argues, the Romantic lyric offers new performances of subjectivity that re-calibrate and reconstitute themselves against the backdrop of a modernity marked by unchecked and routinized terror: terror that could refer to both past and present. In chapters on Wordsworth, Blake, Byron, Shelley and Keats, Earle asks how these poets enlisted the resources of verse and figure to construct new forms of personhood and "companionability" (34) from the failures of Enlightenment thought. These "post-personal" subjectivities might be seen, then, as plaintive yet hopeful "last resorts" in an era of disillusionment and despair.

Hegel is Earle's primary theorist, but he also cites contemporary theorists of Romanticism (James Chandler, Susan Wolfson, Timothy Morton, among many others), post-structuralism, psychoanalysis, and affect theory. Also, though Earle sets out to interpret the Romantic lyric, his analyses of it are less formalist than his general aim might suggest. Rather than simply offering a set of compelling close readings, Earle ultimately uses poetry to help show that the Romantic poets were both philosophers and political theorists.

Earle's impressive argument prompts some critical resistance. One cause of concern is Earle's use of the word "climate," which he applies to both climate change and anti-Black violence. Citing in his preface the death of Sandra Bland, an African-American woman who died in prison after having been arrested during a traffic stop in 2015, Earle trenchantly compares the media rhetoric surrounding this death to Hegel's account of French revolutionary violence; in different yet related ways, he argues, both narratives illustrate how routinized killing appears as "an atmosphere or climate" (xi). In the book as a whole Earle returns to climatic metaphors and to literal "climate change" as sites of terror. But he might have noted that critics such as Saidiya Hartman, Claudia Rankine, and Christina Sharpe have used climatic metaphors to portray anti-Black violence, and he could have used their work to sharpen his definition of "climate" and its relation to other (rhetorically) constructed spaces: performances, scenes, theaters and their attending cruelties (metaphors upon which Earle's study both implicitly and explicitly relies).

One might also ask if the "post-personal bonds" (xi) forged in Romantic verse may rightly be called "queer," as Earle suggests (xi). Earle finds post-personal bonds of companionship and desire exemplified by the alternative kinships of Shelley's *Alastor* (115), by the dialectically narcissistic and radically inclusive attachments in Blake's verse (62), and by the "new model of social sympathy" manifested in Keats's "Ode to Melancholy" (179). On the one hand, these readings (as well as others) may be called "queer" insofar as they embrace non-procreative models of attachment that are sometimes erotic and always political. On the other hand, the general concerns of this book seem to highlight modern subjectivity more than single-sex erotic partnerships per se. Earle's study thus prompts us to ponder the meanings and usage of the words "queer" and "normative." Should they be reserved for narratives explicitly about sexuality? Or may they be used to analyze polity, temporality, and ethics in non-sexual or normatively sexual contexts? This book raises questions about where and how to enlist these terms, and to whom they belong.

For teachers of Romantic-era literature, Earle supplies brilliant new ways to frame its relevance to contemporary life-- a project that feels more urgent than ever in the university classroom. Driving Earle's analysis is the claim that Romanticism is an ethic: a way of being and of being-together that might enable us to bear a terrifying present that strikingly resembles the Enlightenment past. The book's subheading, "the comedy of modern ethical life," speaks to this terrible déjà vu. Earle aptly suggests that a kind of comedic terror arises in historical repetition: the present is a tragedy seen before, and hence, the joke is on us. Indeed, Earle's quotation of Hegel (by way of Marx) is chilling in its timeliness: "Hegel said somewhere that history happens twice, first as tragedy and second as farce" (qtd. ix).

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