from the crowd assembled on St. Peter's Field in this collection. The absence of such voices downplays the challenge represented by Peterloo. The editors conclude their introduction, "[we] commemorate the resilience of all efforts to end the rule of violence, oppression and exclusion" (24). Now "A-effing-men to that," as E. P. Thompson was reputed to declare from time to time, but I also wonder what Thompson would make of this somewhat deracinated litany of social aims. Undoubtedly desirable in the abstract, but by their very abstraction pointing to a "comfortable" version of Peterloo when, as the opening sentence of Robert Poole's *Peterloo* declares, "it is still possible to be angry about Peterloo" (1).

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Jonas Cope, ***The Dissolution of Character in Late Romanticism, 1820–1839*.** Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2018. 248 pp. US$110.00.

Jonas Cope's *The Dissolution of Character in Late Romanticism, 1820–1839* is a book that manages to do two difficult things at once: on the one hand, it offers an intellectual history of concepts of "character," and proposes that the problematic of character becomes a central driving force of British writing in the post-Waterloo years. Late Romantic writers carry forward a conversation about personal character most durably linked to David Hume and to early Romanticism, but—Cope argues—if we read past the "second generation" of Romantic poets, the contradictions inherent in earlier accounts of character will become even sharper and better-defined. On the other hand, there is an argument that bears more directly on questions of periodization: "character" thus problematized comes to serve as a new anchor point for a period—1820–1839—that has proven notoriously difficult for critics to grapple with as a whole.

The argument about what happens to character in this period is a subtle one: yes, late Romantic writers bring character to the fore, and the "character sketch" might well be the paradigmatic genre of the age. Yet the result was actually far more ambivalent about the utility or truth of "character" as a concept: as Cope puts it, "the increasing interest in and theorisation of character in the 1820s and 1830s helped destabilise its already unreliable field of reference" (18). As a trajectory from Hume to Dickens might suggest, the main contribution *The Dissolution of Character* makes to literary history is an alternate history of realism—that is, a history in

which the transition from eighteenth-century fiction to Victorian fiction had other paths to follow. Cope himself frames this as an alternative to the reading practices Diedre Lynch has described as "scanning surfaces to look for depths" (cited at 19). Late Romantic works make clear that there was a robust set of alternative reading practices, which were frequently less invested in depicting realistic characters and—more to Cope's point—often totally uncommitted to the coherence of character as a concept in the first place.

After an introduction laying out the basic problematic of character from the eighteenth century to Romanticism—is it an underlying essence that determines an individual's actions and choices, or a discursive and analytical construct without any real underlying coherence?—the book begins with a pair of chapters that lay out that history in much greater detail. Chapters 1 and 2 are both ambitious surveys that weave together moral philosophers (Hume, Bentham, Mill), materialist scientists (Gall, Lawrence, Combe), and literary genres (the character sketch from Theophrastus to the *Noctes Ambrosianae*). The overriding theme of both chapters is that late Romanticism inherits a notion of character that has a fundamental paradox built into it: character needed to be posited as an underlying essence that drove human action, and which could be discerned by careful analysis; yet, at the same time, it consistently came to seem nothing more than a mere heuristic fiction, forged or created by the act of analysis itself.

Chapter 3 marks the turn to the book's specific case studies, and interestingly pairs Walter Scott with Charles Lamb as two figures who demonstrate particular awareness of character's shallowness, constructedness, and fictionality. In Scott's case, that awareness can be seen in his own play with anonymity and narratorial personae, as well as in the metafictional play within his novels. The particular example Cope analyzes is the "black book" in *Old Mortality*—a curate's record of his parishioners and their reputable or disreputable tendencies. This reading, with its focus on the external construction of character in terms of "reputation," might put readers in mind of similar points of reference in eighteenth-century studies (e.g., Jonathan Kramnick, Sandra Macpherson), which clearly carry forward in new form into Scott's fiction. The second half of the chapter turns to Charles Lamb's *Elia* essays, which, like Scott's novels, contain explicit meditations on character as well as play with an authorial persona.

Chapter 4, on William Hazlitt, makes an important intervention in an ongoing conversation about Hazlitt's theory of mind, self, and personhood. The context here is that scholars of Hazlitt's *Essay on the Principles*

of Human Action (1805) have recently made Hazlitt a central theorist of a minimal or impersonal self, and tend to read that text as a key challenge to the concept of character. Yet if one reads later into Hazlitt's career, Cope shows, the waters get murkier. While it has been well-documented that Hazlitt even in 1805 was defending the mind's unity and the first-person character of experience, Cope shows that Hazlitt subsequently makes still stronger assertions that character is a real, fixed, and unvarying determinant of people's behavior—even as he also sometimes seems willing to consider it something constructed, artificial, or at the very least under threat of dissolution.

Chapter 5, on Hartley Coleridge's poetry, opens with a poignant and much-quoted note from Samuel Taylor Coleridge on his son's supposed characterlessness: that "the absence of a Self . . . is the mortal sickness of Hartley's being, and has been for good & for evil, his character—his moral Idiocy—from earliest Childhood" (qtd. at 117). Cope's insight in this chapter is that the threat of "characterlessness" becomes Hartley Coleridge's own abiding poetic concern. Surprisingly, the result is a new account of Hartley's poetics that places him in dialogue with Lucretian materialism and discourses of self and soul. While a similar interest in the dissolution of self is also on offer in, say, Keats's "Ode to a Nightingale" or Byron's *Manfred*, the upshot is a newly serious engagement with Hartley Coleridge as a philosophical poet.

Chapter 6 casts a wide net over some of Letitia Elizabeth Landon's less-studied novels and poems—*Francesca Carrara*, poems from *The Venetian Bracelet* and *Fisher's Drawing-Room Scrap-Book*, and an exchange with Wordsworth via "Rydal Water and Grasmere Lake" and *Romance and Reality*. Its basic claim, though, ought to ring true to any reader of poems such as *The Improvisatrice*, which Cope frames as more familiar: Landon's tendency is not to advance one consistent position or persona, but rather to multiply variant ideas and positions in a shifting, heteroglossic mode that accords with the type of persona she also played with throughout her career. As a writer and theorist of "inconstancy," Cope argues, Landon works against the privileging of "constancy" on offer in other novels (Jane Austen's *Persuasion* is the case in point). The notion of character that results from Landon's own practice is, in contrast, aligned "with spur-of-the-moment expressions unattached to an inner source, expressions generated all but exclusively from social or discursive context" (159).

Chapter 7 concludes the book's major studies with another intriguing pairing, Thomas Lovell Beddoes and Thomas Love Peacock. These two

case studies seem to hold together by virtue of being particularly pointed challenges to the ontological underpinnings of character itself—not merely to what can be known of a person, or what impels their choices, but whether there is any substance, at base, to their existence. Appropriately, then, these two idiosyncratic books (Beddoes's *Death's Jest Book* and Peacock's *Crotchet Castle*) pick up and intensify some of the conceptual strands from other chapters: for example, Hartley on the substance of the soul (or lack thereof); Scott on the mere discursiveness of character, as revealed by metafictional play. Interestingly, it is in the section on Peacock, in a novel that divides human types into a taxonomy of "idiots, blockheads, and geniuses," that Cope gives a faint glimpse of how the discourse of character links up to matters of population management and eugenics. Accordingly, this chapter suggests some of the important steps that readers of this book might find fruitful to take next.

The book's afterword—on Dickens's *Sketches by Boz* and Carlyle's *Sartor Resartus*—felt more important than the typical afterword in a book such as this one, since its premise entails an important claim about the bigger picture and its intellectual stakes: the nineteenth century's reckoning with empiricism, the legacy of sentimentalism, and the rise of realism, to name just a few. Moreover, after the book's tour of lesser-studied late Romantic works, Dickens and Carlyle immediately felt more clearly of that same moment. The afterword thus shows in palpable fashion how early Victorian aesthetics carry forward a "Reform-era" obsession with loose, surface-oriented character sketches, and makes them (as Carlyle in particular does) a vehicle for high-minded but ultimately noncommittal theorizing about what it means to be a character, or have a character. If it was already easy to draw a line from *Tristram Shandy* to *Sartor Resartus*, *The Dissolution of Character in Late Romanticism* has done an admirable job of filling in the gaps in that story. In short, it continues to supply new reasons why students of Romanticism or of early Victorian literature ought not neglect those years of "late Romanticism" or the "Reform era," since they help clarify so many things that might otherwise have seemed like loose ends. Better still, Cope fills out that bigger historical picture while still doing justice to the idiosyncrasy—the weird, distinctive character—of the period itself.

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