A Review by Colin Jager

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If literary scholars no longer think of Romanticism as a Revolutionary literature, many of them continue to view it as a literature of Revolution—as a literature, that is, indelibly marked by the political upheavals of its times. Monstrous Society wants to wean its readers from such revolutionary thinking. In this highly original book David Collings argues that political effectivity ought not be measured by how closely it conforms to the revolutionary model—to radical breaks, reset buttons, new calendars or new worlds. The usual accounts of the Romantic era have over-emphasized revolutionary models of change, he argues, and missed the profound continuity between that time and the early modern period.

Such continuity over the long haul, far from being part of some Burkean argument, is actually more truly political than the revolutionary thinking, both radical and reactionary, through which the period is typically viewed. This is the book’s intervention, and it is a startling one. Collings asks his readers to follow him in developing a “nonmodern historiography, one that does not rely for its premises on the notion of the revolutionary break from the past” (19). If usual trajectory of Romanticism runs from Rousseau through the French Revolution to Marx, Collings proposes an alternative tradition rooted in the festivals and feast days of early modern England and ending with Thomas Spence, or perhaps with Woodstock. The implications of this may be lost on his less careful readers; it is not that Spence and the new agrarians are developing a kind of proto-communism that would eventually be theorized by Marx. It is rather that they are doing something very different, much older and at the same time much more radical, than the whole-scale transformation of which revolutionaries dream. This is a plebeian culture “that did not think in terms of revolution, socialism, political economy, or even nation” (30).

At the heart of this account is an idea of reciprocity rooted in the early modern relationship between gentry and plebeians: “Plebeians accepted gentry power over local political and economic affairs on the condition that the gentry protected the interests of their charges, safeguarded their traditional rights, and recognized them as fellow human beings in festivals and communal rituals” (11). Reciprocity might thus lead to a “mutually affirmative exchange,” but it might also be the site of social contest if the gentry failed to hold up their end of the bargain: “because the bestowal of power was conditional, at certain moments plebeians could take back the power they had given” (11). These negotiations over power are literal—real crowds, real bread, real hunger—but also symbolic. When the crowds gather, either in protest or as part of a festival, one thing at stake is symbolic legitimacy: the magistrate or the state must recognize plebeians as human beings, a recognition signaled both in the festive affirmation and abundance of the carnival or feast and in their proper carrying-out of their roles as protectors of the poor. For Collings, symbolic actions matter.

This interplay between harmony and contest is crucial to Collings’s argument about what he calls the “counter-power” of the crowd. Inspired by E. P. Thompson’s account, in Customs in Common, of the “moral economy” of the early modern crowd, Collings suggests that reciprocity always retains an element of antagonism, understood as internal to the relationship, which then becomes the basis for the negotiations that make up the social order: the crowd could storm the gates, but does not; the magistrate could respond with military force, but does not. Both sides chose life over death, mutually submitting to the reciprocal code—loyalty on the plebeian side, beneficence on magistrate’s—that structures their interaction.

In barest historical outline, Monstrous Society argues that by the end of the 18th century this notion of reciprocity had come under repeated and concerted attack from elites. England entered modernity by disputing the principle of reciprocity. At the end of early modern England, then, reciprocity moves from a tacitly-accepted form that structures social interaction to a structure whose legitimacy was explicitly debated. The mass politics of the 19th century, from Peterloo to the Reform Bill to the Charter, are the responses of the crowd to a new reality in which the duties of the elite are now up for discussion. As Collings argues in his closing discussion of William Cobbett, “the turn from conservatism to radicalism consists of nothing more than an insistence that power fulfill the conditions imposed upon it, expressing in political form the premises embedded in reciprocity, which in the face of official indifference can authorize a shift from loyalty to protest” (243).

Unlike peasants rioting for bread, the 19th century crowd is a national entity, and its demands shift correspondingly: from local and relatively tangible concerns to national ones: the Reform Bill and Charter. Besides being simply larger, this is a more abstract and sober affair: though there were plenty of theatrical elements to the 19th century gatherings, they generally lacked the carnivalesque, festive air of their early-modern counterparts. “[B]ecause a vast assembly gathered not to release grain, nor to cheer a hanged man, nor to chair a member of Parliament, it could not complete ritual inversion in its traditional form; addressing itself to a
distant goal, it did not enact its counterpower but displayed it” (234). And this representational domain yields a new kind of problem that modern liberal democracies have mostly failed to resolve: how does one transform reciprocity into institutional legitimacy? Universal suffrage, the very thing denied by the eventual Reform Bill, would be part of the answer. But not the whole of it. Collings writes that real democracy would also “formalize social contest,” in other words that the old interplay between high and low would be preserved, “converted into a formal institutionalization of democratic debate” rather than banished (239). To do away with contest, to banish once and for all the possibility of reversal, turns out to be the revolutionary’s dream, Robespierre’s as much as Burke’s, according to which the state is no longer answerable to the plebeian crowd.

This formal argument gets us to the heart of Collings’s project. Back in the Reagan era, before the command to “always historicize” had emptied out into bland empirical positivism, the new historicism was interesting because it aimed to read history itself in formal terms. Although he doesn’t align himself with that earlier project, Collings is after something similar. Inspired by Bakhtin’s description of the contrast between classical and grotesque bodies, and by Victor Turner’s account of structure and anti-structure in the early modern carnival, Collings argues that the mutual interest in deflecting violence gives festivals, feasts, carnivals, and crowds “a certain symbolic cast” (28). But that symbolic register is destined to change, as well. Once elites no longer admit the formal legitimacy of the crowd’s counter-power and the possibility of reversal it embodies, their efforts to discipline the unruly plebeian body wind up producing the political uncanny they claim to banish. Elites might banish the crowd, but they cannot banish what the crowd symbolizes: cast out of legitimate society, reciprocity returns in monstrous form, in the fevered imaginations of Burke, Bentham, and Malthus, in the mobs and monsters of the gothic novel. The crowd becomes monstrous, then, precisely at the moment that the state tries to cancel reciprocity. To cancel reciprocity, with its give and take, is to believe that society does fundamentally cohere, or would cohere if it were not for some element external to it: depending on the writer, that element might be plebian radicals, revolutionary furies, stock-jobbers, corrupt politicians, or unjust monarchs. What Collings isolates here is a habit of mind, a particular psychology found on both the left and the right, that refuses to recognize contestation as internal to the social body. In Bakhtin’s terms, the classical body banishes the carnivalesque body. This is what liberals like Bentham and conservatives like Burke share: the desire to externalize and then eliminate the perceived source of the problem rather than accepting the reciprocal nature of all social life. But counter-power, pushed outside the realm of legitimacy, doesn’t disappear: it comes back in monstrous form.

In chapters two through six, Collings works out the implications of this idea via readings of Burke, Bentham, The Monk, Malthus, and Frankenstein. The three social theorists try to cancel reciprocity, and its figurative representation in the reversible common body, and replace it with a coherent society that externalizes contestation. Burke, Bentham, and Malthus variously bid to bring an end to early modern England by replacing its dynamic reciprocity with pure stability, and the result is a version of plebeian counter-power that can only be figured by the ghost or monster: “only the Gothic [can] do justice” to the end of early modern England, Collings concludes (17). Like punk rock, the homicidal sexuality and sheer destructive fury of The Monk are the logical, indeed inevitable, result of the administered society of which the social theorists dream. The chapters on Burke and Bentham are notable less for innovative readings than for the way their re-framing within the politics of reciprocity reveals the abiding similarities between these superficially opposed thinkers: both dreamed of structure without antistructure.

The real innovation is to make Malthus rather than Burke the ideological center of the period. Unlike Burke, Malthus manages to re-describe disaster as the normal functioning of a society. With Malthus there is no symbolic order left; only the world of biological necessity and bare life. In a stunning reading of Malthus’s comments on feasting, Collings shows how the Essay on the Principle of Population captures all the anxieties of the period, attempting to legitimize an economy of scarcity and war that runs directly against the symbolic festivity and peaceful abundance of early modern reciprocity: “In Malthus’s ideal world, one is never transported by joy or intoxicated by passion; with the possible exception of a brief period in early marriage, the life of the body must remain a sober fact uncontaminated by symbolic extravagance” (169).

If Burke and Bentham provoke the transgressive response of The Monk, Malthus provokes something subtler and smarter: Frankenstein. The effort to reduce the social body to the ratios of demography yields a biological mass—the body of the creature, assembled from many different parts—that nevertheless insists on being treated as a bearer of rights and a member of the symbolic order. The coming to life of this mass subject distills the Malthusian fears that there is something beyond the biological. Victor’s refusal to create a mate for the creature emphatizes the Malthusian calculus, and the “something” beyond biology turns murderous in response.

Monstrous Society demands reading from beginning to end; the individual chapters at the center will seem less impressive as free-standing “readings” than as part of a collective effort to practice and exemplify a different way of writing about the Romantic period. Moreover, Monstrous Society opens up possible avenues into some familiar Romantic texts. For example, the rather tired debate about Romantic “apostasy” might be given new life by Collings’s suggestion that scholars think of Romantic politics in terms of the long history of mutually supportive and contestatory relations between plebeians and elites. Within this context Wordsworth’s
Anne-Lise François, *Open Secrets; The Literature of Uncounted Experience*  
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A Review by Laura Quinney  
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In this interesting and original book, *Open Secrets: The Literature of Uncounted Experience*, Anne-Lise François proposes clearing a space for what she calls "a theory of recessive action" (1). What the book means by "recessive action" is perhaps easiest to grasp if one instances the two clearest exemplars: Madame de Lafayette's *Princesse de Clèves*, and Austen's *Fanny Price*. Both are women characters whose unassertive and self-denying behavior has provoked critical controversy, generating both blame and praise, and in particular both feminist critiques and feminist appreciations. Critical relation to the period debate over "feminine virtue" informs these reactions in part, but, the book argues, it also the legacy of Enlightenment values that stimulates ambivalence about Fanny and Madame de Clèves. As heirs of the Enlightenment, one wants to see improvement, progress, profit, and "freedom," or the assertion of agency. These desiderata, in turn, shape "conventional notions of moral responsibility, self-knowledge, and self-discipline" (104). (Aesthetically, these aims are realized in "novelistic" structures: character development, plot, climax, resolution - especially in the case of the Bildungsroman.) Thus, Madame de Clèves's refusal to marry her beloved when her husband's death sets her free, or Fanny's constant silence and demurral, can seem exasperatingly passive. Some feminist critics have wished to redeem their behavior by reading it as a subtle declaration of autonomy. But François advances a different understanding: these characters (and the speakers of the poems she discusses; see below) follow "an ethics of 'non-adò,'" in which they "set aside the [Enlightenment] fantasy of the all-responsible subject" (267).

Madame de Clèves has an "open secret": she tells her husband that she loves another man, and she allows the other man to know that she loves him. Her secret is not "hidden or unstated but simply unavailable, untouchable, nonpossessable" (81). Possession and safeguarding of a secret generally involve an assertion of mastery, but Madame de Clèves abjures the self-aggrandizement of harboring a "secret" secret:

In short, *La Princesse de Clèves* offers an alternative to the common moral framework in which leaving what you know unsaid counts as dishonesty and not acting on what you know constitutes either conscious hypocrisy or unconscious denial, for the novel suggests that *right*, morally free knowledge between humans demands just this kind of avoidance. The princess is not a hypocrite, nor does she hide from her feelings; on the contrary, the "open secret" names the utter simplicity with which she meets the unmeetable in herself and others. (83)

"The utter simplicity with which she meets the unmeetable in herself and others." Madame de Clèves's "passivity" is not defensive and self-regarding, but ethical. *Open Secrets* draws its coherence and rationale from formulating this particular ethics, best understood in its critical relation to Stanley Cavell's well-known writings on the phenomenon of "acknowledgement." (See "Between Avoidance and Acknowledgement," the concluding part of *The Claim of Reason*, and "The Avoidance of Love: A Reading of *King Lear*," in *Disowning Knowledge: In Seven Plays of Shakespeare*). *Open Secrets* makes a plea for demanding less, or rather for respecting those who demand less—from knowledge and experience, from people and ones relationships to them. For this book, even Cavell's moral hierarchy—acknowledgement over against avoidance—participates in the dominant influences