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Ethical and Aesthetic Alterity

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N A N C Y M O O R E G O S L E E

Ethical and Aesthetic Alterity

Slavery and the Romantic Imagination by Debbie Lee. Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2002. Pp. 224 + xi. \$19.95 paper, \$55.00 cloth.

In this elegant, deeply illuminating book, Debbie Lee argues that Britain's imperial, colonial practice of slavery and British Romantic writers' theory and practice of visionary imagination are interdependent developments. More radically, she claims that the imagination theorized and practiced by these writers is fundamentally shaped by their nation's confrontation with the moral crisis of slavery. Even when not overtly representing slavery, then, these Romantic works offered and still offer ethical models for understanding, respecting, and learning from cultural and racial difference.

While this approach benefits from two decades of critical studies that have challenged the claims of visionary imagination to be autonomous from historical context, she does not argue, like some New Historicists and neo-Marxists, that these writers were blind to the deeper economic structures or the historical events that shaped their works. Instead, she argues first that *this* Romantic ideology is a conscious, deliberate recognition of a crisis in individual and national ethics; and second, that the imagination developed through this conscious struggle is simultaneously "autonomous" and profoundly interdependent with others' minds and feelings. She does not reject the outward, imperial "usurping" of a Wordsworthian egotistical sublime but calls up alternative models for an ethical imagination: Blake's "self-annihilation," Keats's negative capability, Shelley's imaginative love as the great secret of morals, and Coleridge's hope that we can "think ourselves in the Thoughts and Feelings of others" (32). To bring these opposing ethical stances into relationship with one another, Lee calls upon Levinas's concept of "alterity." Alterity, she points out, develops its ethical significance through Coleridge: "He opposes 'selfishness and identity' to 'otherness and alterity,' whose synthesis is 'the community of the spirit'" (36). "Unlike the term 'otherness,'" Lee writes, quoting Galen E. Johnson and Michael B. Smith, "'alterity' shifts the focus of philosophical concern away from the 'epistemic other' to the concrete 'moral other' of practices—political, cultural, linguistic, artistic, and religious'" (37).

“Like Coleridge,” Lee continues, “Levinas describes alterity as the self’s responsibility for the other, as the self’s imperative to place the other at the center of his or her own being, and as the self’s desire to respect and preserve the difference of that other” (39). “Romantic alterity,” then, “the philosophical underpinning of the distanced imagination, helped writers to form some of the most powerful poetic works of the period. This aspect of the Romantic imagination developed in conjunction with the entire culture’s growing awareness of the alterity of Africans and slaves (who were the most discursively visible example of British otherness).” Thus, she writes, “I believe that a strand of what has been canonized as Romantic writing explores issues of alterity that are directly related to slavery” (41).

This approach allows her to overcome the schism that Joan Baum’s 1995 study sought to establish between works that directly and didactically advocated abolition, such as Cowper’s poems, and works that did not represent their authors’ actual sympathy for abolition directly but achieved a more aesthetic and philosophic distance through a broadly humanist definition of imagination. Lee’s concept of an empathetic alterity as a loss of self in the face of the other’s difference serves a function similar to Helen Thomas’s bridging category between abolition advocacy and Romantic imagination, the ecstatic loss of boundaries experienced in evangelical conversion narratives. Yet the dialectical and paradoxical element of difference and distance in Lee’s “alterity” resists what one might term the empire-building of a specifically Christian evangelism.

After her introductory chapters, the body of Lee’s book is a deceptively simple framework for her complex readings of individual works. Her three sections move both geographically and chronologically from “Hazards and Horrors in the Slave Colonies” through “Fascination and Fear in Africa” to “Facing Slavery in Britain.” In the first section she analyzes Coleridge’s “Ancient Mariner” and interprets Blake’s designs for Stedman’s *Narrative of a Five Years’ Expedition Against the Revolted Negroes of Surinam* as a basis for reading *The Marriage of Heaven and Hell*, *Visions of the Daughter of Albion*, and “The Little Black Boy.” In the second she reads Keats’s *Lamia* and Percy Shelley’s *The Witch of Atlas*, both usually read as poems about the play of imagination, as works evoking Africa’s magical religions and its mysterious interior. In the third she reads *Frankenstein* in conjunction with the figures of monstrosity and cannibalism used by both sides in the 1823 debates over abolition of slavery. Then she examines the way two writers—William Wordsworth and Mary Prince—represent Afro-British or Afro-French women who migrate to Britain itself, bringing uncomfortably home the experience of slavery and its cost to families.

Even when the works Lee analyzes deal explicitly with slavery or with Africans, as in Wordsworth’s poems about Haitian exiles, Mary Prince’s *His-*

tory, or Blake's engravings for Stedman, her broad hermeneutic framework and the particular works and topics she explores yield provocative new readings—and those readings have a cumulative explanatory power. Instead of discussing Blake's designs of tortured slaves for Stedman's volume, she focuses on a double-edged interpretation of his designs representing monkeys. Tracing medieval European "ape-lore" that attributed excessive sexuality to monkeys, she shows how pro-slavery advocates transferred these attributes to a race they needed to see as subhuman. On the other hand, she borrows Henry Gates's motif of the "signifying monkey" and Homi Bhabha's analysis of colonial mimicry to argue that Blake's monkeys practice a "mock-mimicry" subversive of colonial power. Mock-mimicry, she suggests, informs not only Blake's critique but actual slave resistance. Mary Prince's narrative, Lee argues, acts as a corrective to increasingly stereotyped, if sympathetic, depictions of slave mothers who fail to protect or nurture their children. She also argues that Wordsworth's lyrical ballad "The Mad Mother" and—if to a lesser degree—"The Thorn" should be read as just such portraits of exiled African mothers. To argue that slavery is the primary source or purpose of Wordsworth's repeated portrayals of deserted mothers in the 1790s seems to ignore his guilt over Annette Vallon, but it is very possible that personal and national guilt might merge in these haunting poems.

When Lee interprets two major works that do not overtly take slavery as their subject but have frequently been read over the past decade as symbolic, indirect representations of slavery or the slave trade—"The Ancient Mariner" and *Frankenstein*—she builds on those interpretations by moving beyond the alienation of slavers' guilt or of the creature's alienating monstrosity to analyze both works through their portrayal of alterity as interdependence. The "skinny hand, so brown" of the mariner and his feverish compulsion to repeat his narrative suggest to Lee the symptoms of yellow fever, the tropical disease that attacked European colonizers but not their already-exposed African slaves. Her interpretation does not stop with the material disease, however, but asks "What happened when foreign matter or foreigners became part of the physical or political body" (48). If the physical "pestilence" is an example of the moral disease incurred by a nation that tolerates slavery, it also represents the "otherness" of a different race. If individuals and nations construct subjectivity, as Kristeva argues, by abjecting foreign material as if it is decay and death, the mariner is able to overturn this abjection when he blesses the water snakes in the "rotting deep" and transforms it into a positive, Levinasian alterity.

Lee's reading of *Frankenstein* carefully refuses to claim that Mary Shelley intended the creature to represent either an African or a racist fear of the enslaved. Instead, she argues that the overt monstrosity and figurative cannibalism of the novel become terms used by both sides as Britain opened up the

debate on the abolition of slavery itself; the second edition of the novel, she points out, appeared just as this debate began. She shows how these images of monstrosity and cannibalism, used both literally and figuratively, mark a “devastating failure of alterity,” a failure of Europeans to accept responsibility for slaves and ex-slaves as ethical, separate selves. This failure is analogous to Frankenstein’s refusal to grant the creature such alterity.

Because Keats’s *Lamia* and Percy Shelley’s *The Witch of Atlas* both explore the play of a magically transformative imagination, they appear to offer test cases for the broadest claim of Lee’s argument, that Romantic imagination and the moral crisis of slavery are mutually defining and thus that any Romantic poem, the more visionary the better, might be interpreted not only in terms of alterity but in the more specific political context of slavery. Though such a position might be inferred from her argument, Lee is careful not to make her applications so universal. And in fact, she shows, these two poems both have links to Africa and thus to a grounding of imagination’s flights in the actual politics of empire and slavery. In Lempriere’s mythological handbook which Keats consulted frequently, the lamia is described as having an African origin, and Shelley’s playful witch emerges from African mountains and travels along the Nile—details well known but little attended to. Both writers, she shows, were familiar with African narratives of exploration. “The paradox at the center of *Lamia*” is the African religion of *obeah* and its serpent-worship, which contains a “power [both] to liberate and [to] enslave its practitioners,” especially when they entered a trancelike state (132). Because the poem also “identifies the serpent . . . intimately with Milton’s Satan,” it makes the resisting reader complicit in dismissing the African serpent-woman and her threat of “inter-racial love” as a fearful otherness instead of a complex alterity. As to Shelley’s African poem, “The lady-witch and her hermaphrodite . . . capture with precision two issues at the heart of African travel during Shelley’s own day: what exactly was the connection between exploration of Africa’s interior and exploration of the human interior by Romantic writers? And how did gender codes coincide with the mapping of both?” (142). The “randomness and error” of the witch’s journey, she argues, “replace the supposedly accurate and orderly progressions of Britain’s charting of Africa” (145); and her guide, the hermaphrodite, challenges the trope of seeing the land as female and hence to be sexually conquered. Finally, her evocation of Levinas’s and Derrida’s association of ethical intimacy “at home” not only with an alterity that places other before self but with Derrida’s notorious post-Freudian definition of woman as “lack” is either a brilliant redefinition of Derrida’s point or a temporary collapse into gender stereotypes that would preclude the more profound ethical alterity that Lee proposes as the basis for Romantic imagination.

Like a more enduring, more ethical version of *Lamia*’s magic, Lee’s book exercises a transformative power of its own, both in its specific readings and

in its overarching hermeneutic framework of “alterity.” I find her Levinasian interpretation of alterity as a root of Romantic imagination profoundly important as a way to draw together philosophical and political approaches to this literature. As a way to discuss the overwhelming political and moral crisis of the slave trade, alterity proves to be a powerful interpretive concept. If I find myself occasionally resisting specific readings, I have the greatest admiration for Lee’s ability to apply her hermeneutic model in multiple ways as she responds to the ambiguities of the works and the ambivalences of their original audiences.

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