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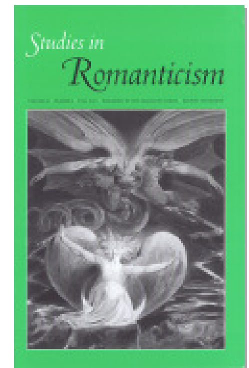
The Suffering Traveller and the Romantic Imagination by Carl Thompson (review)



Jonathan Lamb

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Mauss, the foundational theorist of the gift, never succeeds in writing of it at all. In its treatment of history and presence, however, *Blake's Gifts* offers unintentional support to Derrida's position. In this review, so far I have stressed the parts of the book that seem to me most valuable, those that illuminate Blake's work by reference to the historical context of its production and initial circulation. Haggarty's project, however, is by no means exclusively historicist. Her discussion of Blake's theory of sacrifice begins by comparing it to concepts found in deconstructive theology; the treatment of inspiration in the previous chapter compares Blake's treatment of inspiration and work to those of other writers throughout the tradition from Plato on. The gift itself appears in the book not only as an historical or literary event, but also as a theoreme, versions of which it sets alongside one another for comparison. Thus, on the one hand, "Blake's letters to his patrons . . . signal the affinity of his conception of giving to Mauss's" (63); but on the other, "the most decisive reason for the incompatibility of Blake's gift with Derrida's, in *The Gift of Death,* is his refusal to countenance the divine donor as wholly other" (174). If such comparisons are possible, can the concept of giving Blake shares with Mauss actually be proper to either? In what historical moment might this concept be realized? When Haggarty writes of the incompatibility of Blake's gift and Derrida's, she overlooks the problem of assigning ownership of the gift to which I alluded above; she also oversimplifies Derrida's work, which on a rigorous reading does not refer to the gift but rather cites such references in the writing of others—Kierkegaard and Mauss, for instance. In this smart and original book, then, the problem of specifying the gift as an historical phenomenon or as a concept proper to a particular author has not been wholly solved, and indeed perhaps could not be.

Matthew Rowlinson
University of Western Ontario

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Carl Thompson. *The Suffering Traveller and the Romantic Imagination.* Oxford: Clarendon Press, 2007. Pp. xi+299. $110.00.

In his narrative of a voyage to the South Seas with the intrepid but unreliable William Dampier, William Funnell promises the reader pleasure at his own expense: "Accounts of the manner how our Attempts miscarried, I hope cannot but be very acceptable to the inquisitive Reader." In pre-Romantic voyage narratives the first person singular had to take a back seat to suffering that was not to be considered as a personal experience, rather as an affliction corporately endured and publicly enjoyed. This was what the

reader was interested in, a reader rather like Lucretius's spectator of a shipwreck who enjoys the contrast between his own security and the distress he sees. Hence John Byron's apology for thrusting himself forward as the necessary and singular party to all the terrible things he experienced: "The greatest pain I feel in committing the following sheets to the press, arises from an apprehension that many of my readers will accuse me of egotism." When Lord Byron said that his grandfather had bequeathed him "an inheritance of storms," they weren't quite the same sort of storms, for three generations later they had become definitely egotistic and satisfied what Carl Thompson calls the taste for misadventure. Byron the poet took ship to find in danger and adversity the sensations that reminded him most keenly of his own existence. As a traveler Wordsworth sought experiences of visionary dreariness whose ample power to chasten and subdue nevertheless induced a reflux of energy that excited and armed his imagination: "The evening storm grew darker in my eye," he reported. Coleridge walked himself into physical ruin on the fells of Cumberland in pursuit of what he called the "eternal link of energy"—his eyelids and joints swollen, his fingers dislocated, but his soul enlarged. Keats had no trouble labeling this wantoning with tribulation the egotistical sublime. But it was a mode of self-consciousness or self-sensibility that was to persist. When Shackleton set out on his expedition to the Antarctic, one of his men wrote enthusiastically of the sufferings to come, as Caroline Alexander's account of the journey records: "If we had everything we wanted we should have no privations to write about and that would be a serious loss to the 'book.' Privations make a book sell like anything" (*The Endurance: Shackleton's Legendary Antarctic Expedition* [New York: Knopf, 1999], 195). The one constant in all of this is the appetite of the reader for descriptions of acute suffering and frightful mishaps.

Between the voyages of Funnell and Shackleton the quality and drift of maritime misadventure had evidently changed, however. It was less like an accident befalling a company of nonentities and more like a prerequisite for first-class feelings of pain. To get enmeshed in the supererogatory circumstances of "the only remaining romantic situation," as Hazlitt put it in his *Notes of a Journey through France and Italy,* was the *sine qua non* of an important adventure, not the *je ne sais quoi* of a sheer disaster. Not that terminal disasters didn't keep happening, such as the death of Shelley, but there was no problem fitting them into the genre. There are intimations of this change even in the career of James Cook, perhaps the eighteenth-century's most renowned navigator. For the most part he exhibited the stoic demeanor of a naval commander, a temperament ideally adapted to the tasks of accurate cartography and hydrography, even though his ship may be sinking. Every now and then, however, the ego popped up. Off the coast

of Australia, sailing among reefs which nearly killed his vessel, he confides, "Were it not for the pleasure which naterally [sic] results to a man who is the first discoverer, even though of reefs and shoals . . . this service would be insupportable." He gives a foretaste of the subtle logic linking suffering in the cause of empirical knowledge to the aesthetics of firstness.

In *The Suffering Traveller and the Romantic Imagination,* Carl Thompson sets to work to provide a taxonomy of suffering voyagers and travelers, ranging from the case of Captain Cheap, commander of John Byron's ship the *Wager,* whose abjection on the Patagonian coast was complete, his skin rippling with vermin and his mind so corroded by privation and scurvy that he couldn't remember his own name; to the case of Don Juan's comic flirtation with cannibalism in an open boat. In this regard Thompson follows the example of Yorick of Sterne's *A Sentimental Journey,* who wants to order his examples into their respective categories of idle, inquisitive, lying, proud, vain, splenetic, delinquent, unfortunate, simple, and sentimental travelers. Thompson gives us poetic, empirical, providential, maritime, pedestrian, political, vatic, and (of course) sentimental and egotistical travelers. Several times he turns to William Falconer's *The Shipwreck,* which adds a further possibility to the categories of fatal accidents at sea, namely the georgic traveler. If you are to suffer shipwreck, then at least you can know the uses and names of all the equipment that is going to fail. Although he is fascinated by shipwreck narratives, both popular and specialist, and intrigued by Byronic and Wordsworthian attitudes to the pains of tourism, Thompson seems to circle his topic, and merely to multiply examples. He is never quite sure if the narrative of a disaster is a convention or a genuine novelty—cannibalism is the *ne plus ultra* of a maritime emergency, he claims, but it is also what we greedy readers always knew was coming (68–69). His best material breaks through this classifying grid.

The chapter called "Science and Sacrifice" concentrates on voyages and travels as a form of experiment, and the most interesting are those in which suffering is intimately a part of what is being discovered. His favorite but least predictable example is James Bruce, *soi-disant* sole discoverer of the source of the Blue Nile. Bruce combined the streak of eccentricity that was to distinguish many travelers in Africa and the East, from John Howard through Richard Burton to T. E. Lawrence, with an indifference to pain and a real talent for discovery that was both exasperating and admirable. In his efforts to extract from the public the undiluted praise he thought was owing him, Bruce became prey to bouts of despondency and mental disturbance which did not (like Wordsworth's) calque upon the sublime, but did make Bruce aware of the ambiguity of his achievement, which he so badly wished to reduce to standard outlines of heroism. This extended into the experience of publication and was never going to crystallize in the way

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he desired. Thompson wants to separate the sentimental element of Mungo Park's journeys from this sort of temperamental instability, but it seems more likely that an uneven responsiveness to sensations of all sorts, whether pleasurable or disgusting, links the more memorable of Park's interludes to Bruce's eccentric maneuvers.

Thompson mentions the mutual fondness between Park and his horse. Certainly in terms of sentiment this is worth stressing. The scene of the animal's supposed death outdoes the pilgrim and his dead ass in *A Sentimental Journey:* "I took off the saddle and bridle, and . . . surveyed the poor animal, as he lay panting on the ground, with sympathetic emotion; for I could not suppress the sad apprehension, that I should myself, in a short time, lie down and perish in the same manner, of fatigue and hunger" (*Travels in the Interior Districts of Africa,* ed. Kate Ferguson Marsters [Duke, 2000], 205). It is hard not to think of the four books of *Gulliver's Travels* while reading *Travels in Africa.* In Kaarta, for example, Park is exposed to a roomful of curious spectators thirteen times in a row, like Gulliver when performing tricks in public houses in Brobdingnag. In Benowm the chiefs are not sure whether to put Park to death, or to relent and only amputate his right hand, a degree of mercy equal to the decision of the Lilliputians when they decide merely to blind their huge guest, and not to starve him. Gulliver's tender farewell to his master-horse inaugurates the same feelings of isolation and misery experienced by Park when he says farewell to his mount. However, Thompson locates the point of suffering here at the end of the traveler's tether: robbed, stripped, horseless and 500 miles from the nearest European settlement, Park recalls

> At this moment, painful as my reflections were, the extraordinary beauty of a small moss, in fructification, irresistibly caught my eye. I mention this to shew from what trifling circumstances the mind will sometimes derive consolation; for . . . I could not contemplate the delicate conformation of its roots, leaves, and capsula, without admiration. (227)

Echoing Mary Louise Pratt, Thompson wants to say that Park has followed the Ariadne thread of Linnaean taxonomy to the visible proof of providence. It seems more likely that he anticipates the imbrication of raw sensation and "plant geography" experienced by Humboldt in the Andes when, with his feet shredded and his clothes in rags, he was absorbed into the physiology of the waxood palm, *ceroxylon andicola* (Michael Dettelbach, "The Stimulations of Travel," in Felix Driver and Luciana Martins, *Tropical Visions in an Age of Empire* [U of Chicago P, 2005], 45–47). In order to arrive at these intensities Humboldt was capable of constructing scenes of torment and deliberately inserting himself into them: galvanizing his gums,

eyes and wounds; attaching frogs' legs to his deltoid muscle; suffocating in mines to test the effect of gases on plants; crushing mosquitoes to measure the impact of the venom on his pierced skin. In return he enjoyed the epiphany of being folded into vegetable and animal geographies, like Park with his moss, or Gulliver with his horses. This is not providentialism, nor Linnaean taxonomy. Nor is it empiricism, since the body and even the identity of the experimenting subject is an instrumental part of the experiment, and it is not vitalism, animism, or Brunonian irritability. It appears to be an experience at once more extensive and more particularly intimate than we are generally capable of appreciating. Among the Romantic poets Wordsworth and Coleridge stand out as exceptional exemplars in this regard. When he put his ear to the Keswick road straining to hear the first sounds of the cart bringing the newspaper and then, in the ecstasy of frustrated expectation, fixed his dazzled eye on the night sky, Wordsworth was experimenting with the physiology of starlight and the geography of the sublime. Thompson has written part of the history of how suffering leads to a sentimental knowledge of nonhuman life, but in the end he is too hospitable to the sheer egoists: the ones who suffered only for fun.

Jonathan Lamb
Vanderbilt University

Charles J. Rzepka. *Selected Studies in Romantic and American Literature, History, and Culture: Inventions and Interventions.* Burlington, VT: Ashgate, 2010. Pp. 287. $99.95.

As many of us no doubt have mentioned to our students, the diversity of thought that existed before the mid-nineteenth-century differentiation of disciplines was a significant reason for the vitality of intellectual production in the Romantic era. Cutting-edge science informed by microscopes and electricity experiments coexisted with Shelley's idealism and abstraction; philology, linguistics, and religion were all part of Coleridge's metaphysical stew; and the many different and often unrelated research and speculations that filled the pages of contemporary periodicals were both destined for and emanated from a motley intellectual arena that included amateurs as well as what would be recognized today as specialists or professionals. A similarly exhilarating mix of topics appears in *Selected Studies in Romantic and American Literature, History, and Culture: Inventions and Interventions,* a new volume that reprints some of Charles Rzepka's best essays of the past twenty years. In articles ranging from the Romantic canon to Poe, Freud, Elizabeth Bishop, Charlie Chan and the Wizard of Oz, *Inventions*