



The Orphaned Imagination: Melancholy and Commodity Culture in English Romanticism

Guinn Batten

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Studies of the English Romantic poets generally portray them either as transcending the workings of capitalism or as working in complicity with an entrepreneurial economy. In *The Orphaned Imagination*, Guinn Batten challenges standard accounts of Romantic poetry and argues that Wordsworth, Byron, Blake, Shelley, Keats, and Coleridge—each of whom suffered the loss of a father or father-figure at an early age—possessed an orphan’s special insight into the dynamics and aesthetics of commodity culture and its symptomatic melancholia.

Building on the theoretical insights of Slavoj Žižek, Judith Butler, Julia Kristeva, and Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, Batten interweaves the discourses of psychoanalysis, economics, biography, sexuality, melancholy, value, and exchange to question accepted ideas of how Romantic poetry works. She asserts that poetic labor is in fact paradigmatic of the kinds of production—and the kinds of desire—that capitalist culture renders invisible. If symbolic exchange, in cash or in words, requires the surrender of a beloved object, if healthy mourning requires an orphan to “work through” emotional loss through the consolation of art or a love for the living, then the rebellious Romantic poet, Batten contends, possessed unique insight into the alternative authority of a poetic language that renounced a culture of denial. Batten urges that scholars move beyond critical approaches condemning allegedly regressive forms of pleasure, recognizing that they, too, are haunted by melancholic attachments to dead poets as they conduct their work.

The Orphaned Imagination will interest anyone concerned with the claims of the English Romantic poets to a distinctive, valuable form of knowledge and those who may wonder about the power of contemporary theory to illuminate a traditional field.

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