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Metaphoric Worlds: Conceptions of a Romantic Nature [Review]

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Metaphoric Worlds: Conceptions of a Romantic Nature, by Samuel R. Levin; xv & 250 pp. New Haven: Yale University Press, 1988, \$26.50.

Samuel R. Levin's *Metaphoric Worlds* is an ambitious book. The author proposes a controversial theory of metaphor motivated by a bold reading of Wordsworth's poetry but his theory sometimes falls short of the poetry it is designed to explicate. His respect for Wordsworth, however, redeems these occasional lapses.

Levin sketches his theory of metaphor in the first six chapters of the book. By metaphors he means "expressions that evince a degree of linguistic deviance in their composition" (p. 1): "the trees were weeping" and "the sea was laughing" are two of his examples. These statements deviate from "ordinary expressions" in making claims that sound false and even ridiculous when measured against everyday experience. A common-sense view of metaphors adjusts them to the familiar world that they seem to defy. "The trees were weeping" thus really means that they were dripping sap. Instead of salvaging metaphors this way, Levin proposes taking them literally, which for him means reconceiving the world to fit them rather than fitting them to the world.

Taken literally, "the trees were weeping" challenges us to conceive of a world where trees as well as people can feel. According to Levin, "in any such effort [to conceive of this world] no definite understanding of that state of affairs [in which trees weep] can be produced" (p. 21). But by straining against the limits of the given world, we as readers reenact "the poet's struggle against limitations inherent in the capacities of human language" (p. 3). Language is limited in that terms describing mental and affective states primarily apply to humans (see pp. 93–94, 137–38). Because "the language at our disposal, for all its utility and excellence, is, for the expression of certain profound and out-of-the-ordinary experiences, an inadequate vehicle," Levin concludes that "it is only by taking [the poet's] metaphors literally that we stand a chance of approaching an understanding of the thoughts and emotions the poet is striving to communicate" (p. 3).

Levin differentiates his view of metaphor from the approach of several other theorists, among them Lakoff and Johnson, Donald Davidson, Paul Ricoeur, Edmund Husserl, Giambattista Vico, and Thomas Aquinas. He also considers the complex truth of metaphors. We can never fill in the conceptual space opened when we take metaphors literally—unlike a scientific discovery, "the trees were weeping" is not a fact and never will be. But trying to redraw the world along the lines of metaphors nevertheless results in knowledge—"knowledge of our own capacities to be sure, but knowledge nonetheless" (p. 99).

Levin's analysis raises several questions, many of them deriving from the conclusion that his outlook on metaphors pays off in a deeper understanding

of Romantic poetry, especially Wordsworth's, the source of one of Levin's examples ("The sea was laughing," *Prelude*, IV, 326). I admire Levin's refusal to soften Wordsworth's demands on his readers. Wordsworth does challenge us to take his metaphors at face value and thus conceive of an animated world with murmuring rivers, laughing seas, and breathing mountains. But I would resist opposing this world to "the ordinary world" (p. 236) and making its expression depend on "deviant" statements accessible only to an "elected few" (p. 235). Picturing Wordsworth's achievement this rarefied way clashes with his repeated commitment to everyday language, common people, and "the actual world of our familiar days" (*Prelude*, XIII, 357). Wordsworth dares us not simply to conceive of his world but to make it the "simple produce of the common day" (Prospectus to *The Excursion*, 55). In thus contesting what we regard as "ordinary" (or "deviant"), Wordsworth may be even more audacious than Levin's sympathetic account supposes.

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The Literature of Guilt from Gulliver to Golding, by Patrick Reilly, viii & 178 pp. Iowa City: University of Iowa Press, 1988, \$18.00.

In his introduction, Professor Reilly outlines the modern repudiation of nineteenth-century redemptive mythology. "We live in the time of the dark epiphany" (pp. 12–13). He pursues this negative epiphany in *Heart of Darkness*, *Death in Venice*, *Nineteen Eighty-Four*, and *Lord of the Flies*.

Some of the basic generalizations are intriguing but porous. "The redemptive mythology, whether religious or secularized, favoured by the nineteenth century excluded the idea of the doomed culprit . . . the man sundered from grace, who, wanting to pray, cannot" (p. 2). Possible exceptions spring to mind: Dostoyevsky, Butler, Twain. "The literature of our time is attuned to hell; it is the heavenly chord that jars" (p. 7). Well, what about Eliot, Tate, Faulkner, and others?

The experience of reading this book is one of alternating from nodding in assent, to groaning, then hanging suspended in dubiety, now and then shaking off ideas like bothersome insects. This is not meant as disparagement, for this is a more vibrant experience than plodding through academic aridities of narrow definitions propped upon "hard" evidence.

As to nodding in assent: in spite of the difficulty of delivering anything new on Swift, Professor Reilly's discussion reveals fresh aspects of Swift's detestation of fashionable doctrines that preached the exculpation of man. When Swift is