Review

Chris Townsend. *George Berkeley and Romanticism: Ghostly Language.*
Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2022. x + 240 pages.
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Chris Townsend's book is on the British Romantic reception of Berkeley, and his introduction frames the book well by posing some of its representative questions, such as: How could the freethinking poet Percy Shelley, an atheist, be described by his wife, Mary Shelley, as "a disciple of the immaterialist philosophy of Berkeley?" (quoted 3). While that can be answered straightforwardly by noting that Shelley upheld a spiritually–seeking, neo–Platonic immaterialism denuded of deity, Townsend's method of delving deeper into the details of the curious appeal of Berkeley to four prominent English Romantic poets—Blake, Coleridge, Wordsworth, and Shelley—is consistently handled and often persuasive. Townsend claims the English Romantics' core themes of the intuition of self and spirit, intimations of the divine, and nature as a symbolic mediator between self and God were received through Berkeley's philosophy, which inspired the Romantic Counter-Enlightenment.

The book is marred by solecisms throughout, and I can only mention a few in this review. One jarring instance confuses "literalist" with "most literal" in describing Wordsworthian imagination as "appearing, in the literalist sense possible, out of thin air" (155). The reader must sometimes contort through language errors to reach the author's meaning, which is unfortunate considering the importance of literary style to his thesis, namely, that Berkeley's mastery of style won over the English Romantics to his visionary theory of language. Townsend's assertion that Berkeley coined "materialism" and "materialist" is also incorrect (6, 35, 59). The *Oxford English Dictionary* credits the words to Ralph Cudworth and Henry More respectively. The author does not keep track of his own statements here, contradictorily claiming "materialism" as Berkeley's coinage (6, 59) and as More's (35). In another dictionary–usage error, Townsend suggests that the "gross" in the phrase "Less gross than bodily," from Coleridge's poem "This Lime-tree Bower My Prison" (1797), might mean "repugnant" (102). The sense of the word "gross" as "disgusting, repellent" is, as the *OED* attests, an Americanism dating from 1959.

The referencing system is also poorly handled. When the author gives a citation as "PHK" or "TD," readers are secure, but not all will know offhand that a quotation from "Works, vol. 2, 168" must be from DHP. From that 9–volume edition of Berkeley's works to the 21–volume Princeton *Collected Coleridge*, many readers will not readily remember, if they ever knew, which title corresponds to "Coleridge, Works, vol. VI" and which to "vol. XV." Using a short–title system, as is common in the humanities for good reason, would have rendered more informatively those last two as *Lay Sermons* and *Opus Maximum*. Nor does the author usually give dates, requisites in the history of ideas, of notebook entries, letters, and annotations.

Berkeley's foci on spirit and language form the unified channel connecting him with the English Romantics, summed up in the subtitle of the book taken from a line in Wordsworth's *Prelude*: "The ghostly language of the ancient earth" (quoted 8). Townsend observes that a little–discussed consequence of Berkeley's thesis of the universe being structured as God's language is that all acts of perception must therefore be acts of reading (44–45). The English Romantic poets, he adds, "who championed visual perception as an exercise in reading," made good use of this corollary of Berkeleianism (45). Townsend's broader motive is to include verse thinking as an important strand in intellectual history. Literary analysis of Berkeley is persuasively argued for, since his reflection on his own style followed his criticism of John Locke's comparatively crude demand that all words primarily represent ideas in the mind of the speaker, as if language were merely a rebus of sense objects along a sentential string. I note, however, that Locke did not require all ideas to be sensory, for he held inner reflection on those ideas to produce mental ideas.

Chapter 1, "Berkeley and the Language of Philosophy" (17–54), begins with the early–Enlightenment preoccupation with language as both veiling and revealing. Concerning philosophical language, this concern was well expressed in Berkeley's remark that "we have first raised the dust, and then complain we cannot see" (PHK 3, quoted 18). In this context, Townsend relates, British freethinkers supported their secular, supernatural–expunged Christianity with "Lockean arguments ... against the functionality of religious terms" that do not signify clear and distinct ideas (19). In an increasingly secular milieu, Berkeley felt the need to develop an improved theory of language. Townsend gives examples of Berkeley's early focus on linguistic style and flexibility as essential to truth in philosophy, as when Berkeley, in an early notebook entry, blames bad thinking on the "fault and scantiness of language" (NB 178, quoted 22).

In Townsend's reading of NTV, Berkeley's argument that the objects of vision "constitute an universal language of the Author of Nature" demonstrates the philosophical depth of a continued concern with linguistic style. For the philosopher's reflections on language show not merely a matter of taste or persuasion, but an engagement with the symbolic basis of an already linguistic and universal reality (22). Further, Berkeley's criticism of the Lockean theory that language is effectively the verbal communication and articulation of ideas from one mind to another, and so must always be clear and distinct, led Berkeley to show how language is often rhetorical and emotional and not always descriptive and correspondent. Supported by this outline at the end of the introduction to PHK, Townsend observes that Berkeley created a philosophically relevant "theory of style" to oppose atomistic views of language, countering that besides describing ideas, language also conveys modes of spirit, the one thing that is not an idea, and of which we acquire not ideas through direct experience but notions through inference (28–29). With his close attention to the effects of literary form and rhetoric, Townsend argues, honed through articles in Richard Steele's *Guardian* and his association with figures including Jonathan Swift and Alexander Pope in London (1713–20), Berkeley created a theory of meaning developing through style that would influence the English romantics (30–36). In this light of literary concern, the rewriting of the monographic arguments of the PHK into the more

concrete, dialogic setting of DHP seems less puzzling, as the famous "arguments for abstraction were no longer being conducted in the abstract" (35).

Berkeley's argument in *Alciphron* that the perceived world is God's perpetual communication through signs reappeared in English Romantic literature, Townsend holds, which described the "spiritual vision" of a divine or spirit–infused nature (39). The conception of the world as a complete system of signs interconnecting spirits is ambitiously demonstrated in both form and content by Berkeley's *Siris*, a work that, as Coleridge put it, is "announced as an Essay on Tar-water, which beginning with Tar ends with the Trinity, the *omne scibile* forming the interspace" (quoted 95).

Townsend analyses a couple of Berkeley's poems on tar-water, pointing out Pope's influence, and finding appeals to common sense and interconnectedness similar to those in *Siris*. Happily, Townsend turns from the quackery of the carcinogenic pine tar to the "Verses on the Prospect of Planting Arts and Learning in America" (1728), a poem of New World optimism that lay behind the naming of Berkeley, California, impressed Emerson and Thoreau, and is still anthologized today, for instance in *The Oxford Book of English Verse* (1999).

Chapter 2, on Blake, commences by noting a recent trend in reading Blake not as an idealist but as proposing an alternative, "visionary" materialism to the Lockean–Newtonian kind (57–58). Citing Blake's own slogan that "Corporeal Friends are Spiritual Enemies" (quoted 58), Townsend rightly dismisses these politically or fashionably materialist approaches to Blake that try to reveal him as a more sophisticated kind of materialist. The sort of sensuous realism and perceptual richness that a cohort of recent literary critics confusedly take as evidence of philosophical materialism in Blake can be understood better as akin to Berkeleian idealism (and "spiritism"), and this is Townsend's position.

Yet Blake's worldview was more deeply influenced by the mystical visions and cosmogony of the obscure and notoriously difficult Jakob Boehme, and, to a lesser degree, by the visionary Emanuel Swedenborg. It seems an oversight that neither of these idealist visionaries of spirit are mentioned in the chapter on Blake, and a consideration of their role in shaping Blake's visionary idealism, with Berkeley being an important adjunct, would have brought a more balanced sense of the proportion of Berkeley's influence on the poet. Although his study acknowledges no idealist sources for Blake other than Berkeley, Townsend steers a course between Kathleen Raine's (1979) extreme Berkeleian Blake view and Richard G. Martin's (1987) finding of an only marginal connection substantiated by Blake's late–career annotations (*c.*1820) to the last third of *Siris*.

Townsend's strategy is to show parallels between Berkeley and Blake and their outright criticisms of materialism. The author notes well that although there is no direct evidence of Berkeley influencing Blake's early and mid-career periods, the character Hyle in Blake's prophetic *Jerusalem* (completed 1820 but commenced in 1804) could well be named after Berkeley's Hylas, and Blake's book was finished around the same time he

annotated *Siris*. Townsend is also right to point out that Blake's sense whereby "the world 'appears Without' but is, in fact, 'Within'" can be read as a conscious expression of Berkeley's doctrine of "outness," where the externality of perceptions is only apparent (64–65).

Townsend's discussion of how Berkeley and Blake differently conceived nature is helpful. Where Coleridge, Wordsworth, and Shelley would agree with Berkeley's view of nature as a universal, divine language, this conception finds little resonance in Blake (66). Blake's nature, Townsend glosses, is a "manufactured … experience," along Lockean and Newtonian lines, that is "categorially opposed to spirit" (66). The illusion of matter as the total and underlying substance of phenomena, Blake held, occluded the reality of spirit. Whether or not Blake's warning against the "'Abstract Horror' of materialism" (72) was inspired by Berkeley's famous philosophical attacks on abstract ideas, the comparison intriguingly aligns the philosopher of anti-abstraction with "the poet of particularity" (76).

Prudently, Townsend aims to avoid the temptation to "flatten the differences" between Berkeley and Blake, talking more of parallels than "direct influence" (71). However, he is not always successful, and a wider view of the relevant history of ideas is lacking. At times, Townsend imputes to Blake a dependence on Berkeley that would more reasonably be acknowledged as an area of common ground. For instance, while Townsend claims rightly that Blake's use of the Pauline notion of the "spiritual body" is very different from "the rationalist distinction of mind and body," he hastily concludes that the notion therefore "owes much to Berkeleian immaterialism" (69). Yet Boehme, a far greater influence on Blake, fits better as Blake's fellow thinker of St Paul's "spiritual body" versus the "natural" or "physical body" with the German mystic writing of the "spiritual body" in several places, as when he wrote that, "the true real Body which is hidden in the Grossness is a spiritual Body."[30]

Chapter 3 turns to Coleridge. From 1796–98, Coleridge not only claimed to be a "Berkelian," he named his second son Berkeley. Sadly, the child died aged 8 months while Coleridge was studying for a year at Göttingen University. There, transcendental idealism was becoming the major philosophical influence on his thought. As Townsend notes, Coleridge's first son was named Hartley after David Hartley, the British associationist he would increasingly oppose, and his third son was Derwent, named after the river and lake in Cumbria, the changing significance of sons' names reflecting a rapidly evolving philosophical and poetic outlook (87). The standard understanding is that Berkeley's influence on Coleridge was strong but short-lived, ousted by German idealism and by the Platonism to which Coleridge adhered. Townsend's compelling argument, however, is that it was just Berkeley's subjective idealism that Coleridge dismissed, while the immaterialist philosopher's theory of nature as a divine, symbolic language continued its influence. Townsend therefore presents an account of Coleridge's 1790s Berkeleian stage followed by a history and discussion of the continuing influence

[30] Jakob Böhme, *Mysterium Magnum*, in *The Works of Jacob Behmen, the Teutonic Philosopher*. 4 vols. Arranged by William Law, M.A., trans. John Sparrow, John Ellistone, and Henry Blunden, ed. George Ward and Thomas Langcake (London, 1764–81), vol. 3: ch.16, §3.

on Coleridge of Berkeley's theory of nature as the symbolic language of God and on the Romantic poet–philosopher's ongoing use of the Berkeleian concept of "outness." Tracing Coleridge's coming to grips with Berkeley to a library borrowing in 1796, Townsend illustrates the background well by showing not only how members in Coleridge's circle such as Thomas Beddoes and Humphry Davy likely led him to Berkeley through references in their scientific writings, but also in an account from Davy of how self–experiments with nitrous oxide, which Coleridge joined, led him to proclaim he "lost all connection with external things," and that "Nothing exists but thoughts!—the universe is composed of impressions, ideas, pleasures and pains!" (quoted 91).

Townsend argues that Berkeley primed Coleridge into a realistic kind of idealism for one who believed in the soul yet opposed the cruder Cartesian dualism of a "descending, & incarcerated Soul" (quoted 94). In a manuscript version of the poem "Religious Musings" (1796), Coleridge prophesied how "Corporal things" shall vanish "like a dream" (quoted 97). In the published version, Coleridge added a note to say that "this paragraph is only intelligible to those, who, like the Author, believe and feel the sublime system of Berkley" (quoted 96).

Trying to demonstrate a possibly pre-1796 Berkelian influence on Coleridge, Townsend takes a sentence from a 1795 lecture on religion that claims "we see our God everywhere—the universe in the most literal sense is his written language" (quoted 99). Yet a broader awareness of the history of ideas would have given the author balance here, as the locus classicus of this idea is Augustine's "great big book, the book of created nature," where "God made letters not of ink" but "set before your eyes all these things he has made."[31] Still, Townsend more successfully draws on Coleridge's 1821 notebook transcriptions from *Alc*, including passages arguing that "God speaks to your eyes" through the symbolic language of nature (quoted 104). This is well beyond the 1798 when Coleridge is often supposed to have "overthrown" Berkeley, and it is the Berkeleianism that Townsend persuasively argues remained relevant for Coleridge: not the subjective idealism, but the "picture of the universe as language" (107).

Coleridge's enthusiasm for Berkeley's sense of "outness" never waned, finding in the notion the feeling, rather than a deduction, of an object appearing as exterior to oneself. While for Berkeley, the feeling of "outness" explained why people tend to believe in an external, mind–independent world, for Coleridge the concept connected more straightforwardly with the sense of objective reality. Townsend goes too far in asserting that "outness in general is intimately connected with delusion or illusion for Coleridge" (114). Townsend arrives at that opinion via comments by Coleridge that explain how in dreams or in flights of fancy, an illusion of reality can be felt by being given a sense of outness. But this merely indicates that Coleridge distinguished objectivity from outness, not that he saw them as mutually exclusive. Thus, Coleridge, in a note that disproves Townsend's hasty reading, commended "the HEALTHFUL Outness of the Objective," in a contrast between the "the Subjective and the Objective, which visual sunshiny Outness in

[31] Augustine, *Sermons III (51–94): On the New Testament*, tr. Edmund Hill, ed. John E. Rotelle (New York: New York City Press, 1991), sermon 68, §6.

the latter gives" (notebook entry, November 1825).[32] Townsend soon finds a steadier footing, however, when he notes that Berkeley and Coleridge each referred to the sense of the vividness of any experience of outness as a measure of reality versus illusion (114).

In Chapter 4, on Wordsworth, the author argues that Berkeley's divine language of nature helped form "one of Romanticism's signal achievements: … nature poetics" (123). The chapter begins with the young Wordsworth transforming from a devotee of Godwinian reason into a broader, cloudier nature poet, in a change sometimes ascribed to his coming under Coleridge's influence in 1795. In Wordsworth's mid-1790s crisis of abstract reason, he broke from the calculating, utilitarian kind of detached reason represented by thinkers such as William Godwin and William Paley. The author finds in Wordsworth's rejection of utilitarian, abstract reason the same defects that Berkeley attacked in *Alc*, regarding the freethinkers (136). Townsend notes that this occurred during Coleridge's Berkeleian phase. The Berkeleian influx, through Coleridge, of nature as divine language the author proposes, especially in the view of nature as divine language, deeply shaped Wordsworth's sense of "the relation of mind and natural world" (125).

Seeing in the 1805 *Prelude* Berkeleian depictions of nature within a symbolic system, Townsend find both a debt as well as evidence that the poet "breaks free of Berkeley" to envision natural forms as anteceding the mind (125). Whether or not Berkeley ever held such a hold on Wordsworth that he needed to break free, Townsend does well in staying within the evidence that Wordsworth owned only the *Alc* and no other work of Berkeley's. Further evidence comes from Robert Southey, who, in a letter of 1829, commended "Berkeley's Minute Philosopher" as key to "the religious belief which Wordsworth and I hold," being "the only divine philosophy, the perfection of wisdom" (quoted 127). Townsend lays out reasons to take seriously the claim that *Alc* strongly influenced Wordsworth's nature poetry and its themes of the spiritual language of landscape and its ways of connecting people to each other and to God. The greatest connection lies, Townsend claims, between Berkeley's theory of the divine language of nature, as given in *Alc*, and "the religious tie between self and nature" in Book 13 (the final book) of the 1805 *Prelude* (127).

Townsend finds Berkeley's theory of language in Wordsworth's poetry (142). Wordsworth's principle of using "the real language of men," for instance, might well have been inspired by Berkeley's to "think with the learned, and speak with the vulgar" (quoted 137). As for phenomena as divine language, Wordsworth's lines in "Tintern Abbey" where "nature and the language of the sense … anchor … nurse … guide … my heart, and … moral being", are suggestive of Berkeley's view of God edifying humans through his symbolic language of nature (quoted 142). Yet more redolent of the spiritual language of nature spoken by God to humans are these lines from the *Prelude*: "and I would stand,/ Beneath some rock, listening to sounds that are/ The ghostly language of the ancient earth" (quoted 144). The 1798 poems "Expostulation and Reply" and "The Tables Turned" demand removing "barrier between self and nature" (147) caused by book–learning by returning to "a vernal wood," where "One impulse … May teach you

[32] S. T. Coleridge, *The Notebooks of Samuel Taylor Coleridge*, vol. 5, ed. Kathleen Coburn and Anthony Harding (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2002), entry 5281.

more of man;/ Of moral evil and of good,/ Than all the sages can" (quoted 149). Townsend finds a similar attitude in *Siris*, bemoaning the ills of 'studious persons pent up in narrow holes … over their books" who should, "like the ancients, meditate and converse more in walks and gardens and open air" (quoted 147).

Townsend reminds us that Wordsworth's poetry of nature not only illuminates the human mind that is sent into deep moods by beautiful or dramatic appearances; it also speaks a "ghostly language … a spiritual presence prior to human consciousness" (160–61). Throughout the chapter, the author shows Wordsworth pushing against Berkeley as much as he might be inspired by him, with the poet sometimes uniting mind and world but at other times emphasizing their disjuncture.

Chapter 5 moves from Wordsworth's ambivalent uses of Berkeley to the romantic Shelley, who the author claims used Berkeleianism on his way towards a view of the world fully existing beyond mind. Unlike Blake, Coleridge, and Wordsworth, the atheist Shelley could not call nature the language of God. Townsend early on corrects Mary Shelley's characterization of her late husband as a "disciple" of Berkeley, yet rightly insists that the influence could still have been strong, especially concerning a commitment to immaterialism. Mary made that pronouncement when writing mainly of Shelley's essay "On Life," where he states his agreement with "those philosophers who assert that nothing exists but as it is perceived" (quoted 174). Shelley's atheism did not detract from his commitment to spirit.

In December 1811, the year his *Necessity of Atheism* pamphlet was published and led to his expulsion from Oxford University, Shelley was introduced to Berkeley by Southey. The first-generation Romantic enjoyed rounding off the philosophical formation of the radical young second–generation Romantic. In a couple of letters, Southey says he set Shelley on a course of Berkeley, fully expecting him to be converted to immaterialism (170). In July 1812, however, Shelley dismissed Berkeley's immaterialism in a letter to Godwin (father of his future second wife), which has caused some critics to doubt any subsequent deepening of appreciation of Berkeley by Shelley. Nonetheless, Shelley purchased Berkeley's *Works* in December 1812 and diary entries show that he was also reading Berkeley in 1817. Townsend argues that in "On Life," written in 1819, Shelley was "retracting his criticism that immaterialism offers only a negative argument" (176).

Shelley's work that receives the most analysis in the chapter is the sublime poem "Mont Blanc" (1816). The author finds a philosophical commitment in the poem to Berkeley's doctrine that to be is to be perceived, but this is qualified by Townsend's Shelley as an epistemological subjective idealism that nonetheless extends into an ultimate faith in ontological materialism (187).

A confused passage occurs when Townsend writes that "Shelley," to retain the constancy of objects when not perceived, "would invoke … the 'constant creation' argument: the mind is always … constructing the world around it, which is nothing other than its ideas; the regularity of the world is therefore a product of the fact that God is always bearing witness to his creation, or indeed is constantly creating the world anew through his

omniscient gaze" (179). Yet, as Townsend is aware, Shelley, as an atheist, could not have thought this. Moreover, as the author quotes a couple of pages later, in the same argument, Shelley asserted the opposite, that "Mind… cannot create, it can only perceive" (quoted 180). For a good fifteen minutes or so, a careful reader would have to work through this and adjacent cited texts to decide whether he or she has correctly read the passage; the author has made a bizarre error in thought; or the author has mistakenly typed "Shelley" (or "he") instead of "Berkeley" and the error went uncorrected. Probably a fourth possibility might be the right one: a clause mentioning Berkeley was perhaps cut by the author without his going back to repair the sense.

Townsend's conclusion to the book is that the English Romantics gained from Berkeley a conviction in the importance of the pre-Enlightenment concept of spirit and its interconnections with nature interpreted as *natura naturans*, God himself, or noumenal reality (be that matter, body, or Platonic forms). Despite my serious misgivings about language errors and lapses of attention and editorial care throughout that spoil the book, with some lapses of thought and lacunae in the history of ideas that prevent this monograph from being authoritative, Townsend's core thesis is persuasively argued and evidenced. Researchers thinking about the literary reception of Berkeley will want to read this book, which will also be of interest to Berkeley scholars interested in how literary style and theory of language work within his philosophy.

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