
Studien zur Englischen Romantik. Studies in English Romanticism

Ed. by Christoph Bode, Jens Martin Gurr, and Frank Erik Pointner (general editors)

Narratives of Romanticism: Selected Papers from the Wuppertal Conference of the Germany Society for English Romanticism

Ed. by Sandra Heinen and Katharina Rennhak
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Romantic Ambiguities: Abodes of the Modern

Ed. by Sebastian Domsch, Christoph Reinfandt, and Katharina Rennhak
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Romanticism and the Forms of Discontent

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British romanticism is intrinsically marked by the precedent of German Idealism and *Frühromantik*, mainly due to Samuel Taylor Coleridge's important – but also controversial (due to accusations of plagiarism) – role as a go-between. This German context is not always invoked by scholars of Blake, Wordsworth, and their peers, and sometimes the result is a notable blind spot. The German Society for English Romanticism is excellently placed to compensate for such oversight. It is one of several strengths of these three volumes that they are attuned to a general European ambit, and, also, a specifically German-language context for British romanticism. They also go far beyond such a focus, though, approaching a wide range of texts and figures from a variety of different interpretive angles. The three publications constitute volumes 19, 20, and 21 in the series *Studien zur englischen Romantik* [Studies in English romanticism], under the general editorship of Christoph Bode, Jens Martin Gurr, and Frank Erik Pointner. Although

edited by German scholars and including many German contributions, the first two volumes are particularly marked by a decidedly international profile. Among the many familiar scholars featured here are Claire Connolly, David Duff, Angela Esterhammer, Nicholas Halmi, Peter Kitson, Timothy Michael, Michael O'Neill, and Tilottama Rajan. From Scandinavia, Cian Duffy and Lis Møller also contribute.

The three volumes are all academically strong, providing interesting and thought-provoking research. The first volume, *Narratives of Romanticism*, edited by Sandra Heinen and Katharina Rennhak, presents selected papers from the 2015 conference of the German Society for English Romanticism. The focus is both on narrative texts and, more abstractly, on concepts and ideas of narrative – including narratives of and about romanticism in general. The volume is marked by the expansion, in recent decades, of the romantic canon to include regional romanticisms: several of the essays relate to Irish romanticism, and Scottish and Danish writings are addressed, too. Among the less canonized authors in evidence is the Irishman Thomas Colley Grattan. Raphael Ingelbien's article argues convincingly that the peripatetic life of Grattan has made it hard to frame him within nation-based canons; yet he does not quite manage to dispel the sense that there were other good reasons for the author's critical neglect: 'Grattan's fiction was to some extent always derivative' (p. 94), Ingelbien admits.

On the other hand, more canonized and traditional critical favourites, whose literary value is undisputed, are in evidence. Core poets of the canon of British romanticism are analyzed, as Jan Alber addresses narratives of the Orient in Keats, Wordsworth, and Coleridge, Mathelinda Nabugodi compares Shelley's *Queen Mab* and *Hellas*, while Michael O'Neill addresses narrative play and creativity in Byron's *Beppo* and Shelley's *The Witch of Atlas*. In a particularly thought-provoking piece, David Duff explores the concept of the 'event' in romantic lyrics, making use of the theories of the Narratology Research Group at Hamburg. Although Duff's essay risks being construed as an imperial gesture on behalf of narrative's ever widening and amplifying dominance among the literary modes, his finely-tuned application of 'transgeneric narratology' to Wordsworth's 'The Idiot Boy' and Coleridge's 'The Nightingale' is an interesting experiment. Also notable for its work with literary genre is Ian Duncan's accomplished essay on Germaine de Staël's *Corinne*, which argues that the 'novelistic plot' of de Staël's celebrated text, 'with its imperative of socialization through marriage, cancels *Bildung*, with its imperative of self-realization through art' (p. 18).

Sebastian Domsch, Christoph Reinfandt, and Katharina Rennhak are the editors of the volume entitled *Romantic Ambiguities: Abodes of the Modern*. In their acknowledgements, they pay a special tribute to Christoph Bode, an outstanding scholar who has long been a key figure for the study of British romanticism in Germany. Although *Romantic Ambiguities* does not explicitly pitch

itself as a *Festschrift* for Bode, his work is referred to – either in passing or, in some cases, more thoroughly – in most of the contributions. His definitions of ambiguity in the monograph *Ästhetik der Ambiguität: Zur Funktion und Bedeutung von Mehrdeutigkeit in der Literatur der Moderne* (1988) and the essay ‘The Aesthetics of Ambiguity’ (1991) are used as touchstones in the volume. Bode’s general definition of ambiguity as a characteristic feature of all literary texts provides a complement to his more specific definition of literary modernism as being self-reflective and involving a ‘semiotic take-off’ where ‘liberated signifiers become multiply interpretable’ (p. 2). Many of the essays follow Bode’s example in interpreting romantic texts as anticipating, or pointing the way towards, modernism, by virtue of their ambiguity.

This might be interpreted as a somewhat restrictive remit, given recent critical challenges to the centrality of traditional ideas of modernism in literary history. Surprisingly few of the contributions also acknowledge the rich theoretical tradition of work on literary polysemy, particularly important in New Criticism and post-structuralism. Nevertheless, most of the 19 articles included in *Romantic Ambiguities* present incisive and well-argued interpretations of romanticism and its legacy. The traditional scholarly virtue of close reading is much in evidence. The volume’s opening three essays – by Mark J. Bruhn, Nicholas Halmi, and Ralf Haekel – are all devoted to Wordsworth and as such have a difficult challenge. The ambiguities of Wordsworth have been a staple of the criticism for many decades. Yet all three scholars present impressive interpretations, with perhaps Bruhn’s affect-centred reading providing the highlight. James Vigus’s close inspection of Hazlitt’s essay ‘On Going on a Journey’ is also a notable piece, engagingly written and striking in the insights it manages to bring out of what might appear to be a minor essay. Furthermore, Frank Erik Pointner and Dennis Weissenfels provide an interesting explication of the changing role of the poetic speaker, from a narrative point of view, in Byron’s major works.

Although it is packed with impressive readings of such classics, *Romantic Ambiguities* does thankfully also journey on less well-trodden paths. Stefanie Fricke’s interpretation of different versions of Austen’s *Pride and Prejudice* is hampered by the hypothetical nature of her speculations about the earliest drafts of the novel, but the comparison between the published text and the YouTube web series *The Lizzie Bennet Diaries* is well done. Sabrina Sontheimer contributes a fine reading of illustrated versions of Coleridge’s *The Rime of the Ancient Mariner*, presenting an especially thought-provoking explication of Hunt Emerson’s cartoons. Ian Duncan’s piece on ‘The Novel and the Romantic “Moment”’ argues that “traces and recollections of British Romanticism ... mark a deliberate disruption of the project of Victorian realism, in their opening of a critical space of Romantic ambiguity ... within the normalizing apparatus of mid-century novelistic practice’ (p. 202). This interpretation provides a probing and

unconventional look at Dickens's *Bleak House*, and – by highlighting how narrative texts are derailed and complicated by lyrical elements – might be taken as a poetic riposte (or at least complement) to Duff's reduction of lyric to narrative in the preceding volume in the series.

The third volume at hand, *Romanticism and the Forms of Discontent*, is based on a panel from the 2016 NASSR conference in Berkeley. This is a more compact and focused volume than its two predecessors. Freud's seminal work *Das Unbehagen in der Kultur* provides a central reference point for the seven contributions, and several of those contributions are tuned into the difficult navigation involved in moving from Freud's German title to its English translation as *Civilization and Its Discontents*. Romanticism is interpreted as a forerunner for twentieth-century unease, as culture and its institutions function as restrictive forces rather than enabling matrices for the individual and its instinctual gratification. After a short preface, editor Christoph Bode unfolds a labyrinthine meditation on 'Romanticism as a Form of Discontent' over no less than seventy-four pages. Despite being overly digressive and loose in its form, his essay includes insightful reflections on theorists such as Freud, Herbert Marcuse, and Norbert Elias, and manages to link their work meaningfully with key romantic texts and biographies.

The other six articles are of a shorter length, all establishing a productive dialogue between the Freudian concept of unease, on the one hand, and romantic texts and concerns on the other. In Nicholas Halmi's 'Past and Future, Discontent and Unease', romantic unease shows itself temporally. The 'monomyth' of progress is countered by 'nostalgia for a past understood to be un-restorable and anxiety about a future understood to be unpredictable' (p. 89). Concentrating on texts preceding 1800, Halmi mainly focuses on Thomas Warton's *History of English Poetry*, supplemented by engagements with Descartes, Louis-Sébastien Mercier, and Kant. Thomas Michael's essay is more concentrated in its focus, elegantly detailing the unsettling imbrication of pain and pleasure in Keats's poetry. Also Katharina Pink focuses on romantic poetry: despite bearing a rather obtuse title ('Romantic Discontent and its Discontents'), her essay is a lucid and helpful analysis of the romantic critique of solitary withdrawal in Wordsworth's *The Excursion*, Shelley's *Alastor*, and Keats's *Endymion*. In Rolf Haekel's piece, discontent is shown to be at work both formally and thematically in Shelley's *Laon and Cythna* and *The Triumph of Life*. Where Haekel draws on Adorno's negative dialectics as a theoretical complement to Freud in his reading of Percy Shelley's poetry, Katharina Rennhak's essay draws on Lauren Berlant's notion of 'cruel optimism' to support her analysis of Mary Shelley's fiction. Rennhak's 'Mary Shelley's Fictions of Cultural Discontent: Attachments of Cruel Optimism in *Frankenstein*, *Matilda* and *Lodore*' presents an ambitious and complex argument that perhaps deserves more space for full

clarification. In the final essay of the volume, Christoph Reinfandt presents an interesting comparison between Wordsworth's *The Prelude* and Karl Ove Knausgård's *Min Kamp*, bringing in the British modernist B. S. Johnson as a third party in its later stages. Although the essay problematically identifies Knausgård as a 'postmodern' counterpart to Wordsworth's romanticism, this is a strong finale to a volume that fruitfully explores romanticism in relation to Freud and other recent formulations of cultural unease.

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