

## Constructions of German Romanticism

### *Six Studies*

Ed. Mattias Pirholt. Uppsala:  
Uppsala Universitet, 2011. 190 pp.  
ISBN 978 915 54 8152 0

From the earliest critical receptions into the 21st century, critical and creative responses to German Romanticism have been embroiled in the dominant ideologies of the epochs in which they were written. This is the central thesis of Uppsala University's recently published collection of essays: *Constructions of German Romanticism: Six Studies*. Including four essays in English and two in German, the collection begins with an introduction that acknowledges the importance of Hans Robert Jauss' 1970 thesis that 'the critic is in no way able to independently present a unique perspective, standing apart in relation to the process of reception and production' (9). As such, the collection begins with a clear acknowledgement of critical pluralism and the role it has played in the last forty years of literary scholarship in general, and in scholarship on German Romanticism in particular. However, while its introduction hails Jauss' thesis as foundational, it challenges its pure aestheticism, recognizing that 'how we choose to construct literary history is inevitably an ideological act, which gives literature purpose and meaning in a much larger context' (9).

Thus, Jauss' thesis is augmented by the suggestion that critical perspectives 'are all involved in a still ongoing ideological battle' (10): a battle which is pervaded by 'various hegemonic paradigms' such as, for example, Raymond Williams' notion of 'selective traditions' and Fredric Jameson's 'allegorical master narratives' (10). The introduction goes on to observe that 'more than any other epoch in literary history, Romanticism is defined by the ideological view that is dominant' (11). The history of its critical reception is, then, one of competing critical paradigms.

Appropriately, in the opening essay, Anna Culler engages in a re-examination of Frederick Beiser's definitions of *Frühromantik*. In a scholarly and well-balanced discussion, Culler enumerates Beiser's seminal insights into the Jena Circle, while raising concerns about his 'division of labor' (38) between early German Romantic poets and philosophers. Culler argues that Beiser does not pay heed to the 'overlaps' (40) that occurred between these disciplines, which involve moral philosophy, politics, theology and rhetoric. She concludes that although Beiser's work is insightful, it does not

fully appreciate how ‘the pathways’ of poetics and philosophy ‘meander toward a new kind of knowledge’ (41).

Andreas Kubik’s essay provides the collection with an investigation of Novalis’ posthumously published ‘Die Christenheit oder Europa’ [Christendom or Europe] (1799, 1826). Observing that Novalis’ interpretation of the Christian Middle Ages is not based upon historical accounts as much as it is upon his utopian ideal, Kubik interprets ‘Die Christenheit oder Europa’ as a visionary ideological work about Christianity. Thus, while ‘Die Christenheit oder Europa’ has generally been regarded as a historical or political work, Kubik points to how Novalis’ aims entail the Romanticizing of Christianity so as to restore ‘a culture of religious feeling’ (77).

In the third essay, Roland Lysell explores the dramatic criticism of Madame de Staël, charting how Staël’s appreciations of German drama in the second volume of *De l’Allemagne* (1810) are filtered through the ideologies of French aesthetics. Concentrating mainly on Staël’s discussions of Lessing, Schiller and Goethe, Lysell enumerates the way that Staël praised German drama for its ‘naturalism’, ‘imagination’ and ‘the many-sidedness’ of its actors (91), and criticized it for its lack of unity. As Lysell observes, Staël uses these appreciations to criticize French drama for being ‘superficial’ (91), even while she maintains it as the dominant source of her aesthetics.

In the second German essay, Gernot Müller traces the evolution of the reception of Heinrich von Kleist’s work in Sweden and how his work was championed by Fredrik Böök.

Müller’s discussion explains how Böök’s re-figuration of Kleist involves an ideological turn. Documenting how 19th-century Swedish receptions of Kleist had been influenced by Goethe’s rejection of him as an example of the ‘pathology of romanticism’ (124), Müller goes on to relate how Böök salvaged the poet’s reputation, transforming him into a figure of patriotic nationalism. However, Böök’s success positioned Kleist’s work in a far more problematic paradigm, in that the poet became appropriated by the radical conservative movement that was centered on the so-called ‘ideas of 1914’, which were advocated by Rudolf Kjellén and subsequently became part of the foundations of National Socialism.

Todd Kontje contributes the collection’s fifth essay, which discusses manifestations of German Romanticism in the work of Thomas Mann. In a section of the essay titled ‘Romanticism’s Double Legacy’, Kontje succinctly identifies the way in which German Romanticism both embraces the ideals of cosmopolitanism and democracy and persistently maintains the idea of a German soul, which endorses ‘a fervent German nationalism with a tendency toward violence, myth and anti-Semitism’ (134). Kontje notes that it is this duality that Mann comes to inherit, and his essay elaborates on what this inheritance means for an interpretation of Mann’s late novel *Doktor Faustus* (1947). The essay traces the development of this paradox, and so it provides the entire collection of essays with an impressive cultural and literary history. We return to Madame de Staël, Novalis and Kleist to view their work in terms

of a German ideal that begins with the writings of Tacitus and ends with Mann himself.

The breadth of Kontje's discussion is picked up in the sixth and final essay by Mattias Pirholt. Pirholt's ambitious task is an examination of 'the construction of Romanticism in criticism of today' (155). He begins by pointing out the contrast between Staël's notions of German Romanticism as an inventive progression toward modernity that resists the classical world (154) and Heinrich Heine's view that German Romanticism is, in fact, 'a reactionary and restorative movement' (155) that seeks to return to the literature of the Middle Ages. Thus, while he shows how these positions are inherently antithetical, Pirholt also describes them as being unified in a 'constellation' (155) which has become the inheritance of modernity. The essay then proceeds to explore how the paradox of this Staël-Heine constellation influences modernist aesthetics. With reference to the work of W. J. T. Mitchell, Pirholt uses the paradox to consider the problems of mimesis in modernism. His essay concludes by anticipating Pirholt's further work into what he terms 'metamimesis' (175).

*Constructions of German Romanticism* is an excellent addition to the field of German Romantic studies specifically, and Romantic studies in general. Organized in such a way that it follows a literary history, the collection has both thematic and literary breadth that dignifies its diverse subjects. Furthermore the overall stance of the collection – its attention to the ideological bent of literary history and criticism – makes each essay

something of a meta-text, in that these writers are conscious of their roles as critics participating within a climate of ideological conflicts even while they explore how such conflicts have been manifested in the past. The collection is, then, a testament to fine scholarship as well as an illustration of the role culturally conscious critics have in negotiating contemporary ideological paradigms.

Andrew Miller  
Copenhagen University