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Introduction [to *Comparative Romanticisms: Power, Gender, Subjectivity* Larry H. Peer and Diane Hoeveler, eds.]

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Introduction: A Lens for Comparative Romanticisms

Larry H. Peer and
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Critical approaches to anything, especially Romanticism, may well run aground on the fallacies of absolutism and relativism. An approach that disdains interrelations between literary movements, generations, periods, and both cross-linguistic and interdisciplinary sources and influences will tend to submit any concept or conceptual framework to a dogmatic and authoritarian set of preconceptions, where even the use of terms may be garbled. Opposite to this absolutism is the referral of Romanticism exclusively to a particular critical lens with its explicit and implicit selection of biases that ignore the dynamic continuance of the movement and that negate any way of understanding the multi-faceted dimensions of its significance.

Many Romantics sensed this twin problem. An interesting way to look at this phenomenon is to remember Goethe in his student years at Leipzig, where he first became acquainted with the writings of Spinoza. Goethe admired Spinoza as an advocate of liberalism and toleration, as one who had insisted on perspective rather than dogmatism in both conclusions about the world and the method by which those conclusions were made. The essence of Spinoza's metaphysical and ethical views is that reality, in order to be known, must be conceived of as a whole, where our understanding of each part of the whole depends upon the relationship of that part to all other parts in a single, self-explaining

system. One of the philosopher's great propositions is that there cannot exist two things either having the same nature or having no relationship to any other thing. Thus, all things depend for their coming into our perception upon both that which is in and of itself the uniqueness of the thing as well as upon that which relates the thing to other things. For the human intellect to perceive the essence of anything, the whole to which it is related must be perceived. That this does not usually happen is the cause of both intellectual fallacy and moral failure. Goethe's pantheist organology derives directly from Spinoza's account of human perception and lies at the base of Romantic theory.

It happens that Spinoza developed *his* system by frequent contact with a group of devoted disciples and leading European philosophers, particularly Leibniz. Spinoza was a lens-maker by profession; Leibniz seized upon the premises of optical theory and the use of optical instruments in his arguments about human perception. For both, the lens was the object symbol of theory, of the promises and pitfalls of human perception. Having already postulated differential and integral calculus by the time he visited Spinoza at The Hague, Leibniz spent the next several years of his life developing theories of knowledge and truth that resulted in hundreds of essays and dozens of key encounters with other thinkers that in turn spurred them on to great discoveries and formulations. In his time a belief arose that he was the last universal genius, a judgement about Goethe that the great minds of Europe were to make three generations later.

The central point of Leibniz's thought is that there are only two types of statements, those that state necessary truth and those that express contingent truth. The first establishes truth in reference by being self-evidently non-contradictory, and the second establishes truth by means other than that which is mere non-contradictory. In "right" thinking, therefore, we must always either perceive that which is self-evidently non-contradictory (usually not possible to any "perceptor" but God) or perceive that which is based upon a hypothesis showing the greatest number of effects deducible from the smallest number of causes. That is, in checking the validity of our perceptions, and the things we say based

upon those perceptions, we must have “sufficient reason” for seeing things as we do.

The individual mind, according to Leibniz, is like a mathematical point on which all possible perceptions converge as do lines of reference. But there is always a relationship between one mind’s “mathematical point” and all other minds; thus, avoiding the relativism of reference to merely one’s own point and the absolutism of reference to all possible points (for Leibniz only God can “refer” in this way) involves recognizing that we are seeing everything from a particular point of view, or through a particular lens. This does not mean that each perception is wrong, only that each one is contingent. Truth would be a harmonious and ordered intermeshing of perceptions revealed, as it were, by a series of lenses mathematically positioned in three dimensions.

Of course, it would be wrong to say that the group of essays in this book (or any group, no matter how large or varied) provides a harmonious and ordered intermeshing of perceptions about Romanticism. We may view this collection of views as a lens, but a Goethean or Romantic lens more like the organic lens of the human eye, flexing, adjusting, and squinting, than like the ground and fixed lenses of Spinoza and Leibniz. These papers attempt to refocus on Romanticism without trying to invent a new synthesis for the movement. The editors have selected thirteen essays from a variety of older and newer scholarly voices that represent a rethinking of key Romantic texts and interrelations through the lens of three fundamental theoretical issues: power, gender, and subjectivity. They call for a newly comparative sense of Romanticism that avoids the kind of critical explication of these issues limited to single national, linguistic, or cultural traditions, or seen through too narrowly applied contemporary theoretical “-isms.”

An important line of recent Romanticism scholarship proceeds from the view that discourse and its texts create and manipulate socio-economic power, and control ideology. The first five essays in this collection deal with how Romantic discourse determines what comes to be seen as ideologically normal in the nineteenth century. Romantic texts speak by observing an unspoken set of regulations, and the discursive power of the movement is reflected in intertextual relations that cross,

for example, between such diverse voices as Melville, Dostoevsky, Whitman, and Richard Wagner, and form a Romantic literary community extending in subtle ways across many language traditions. The first essay, for example, Stephen C. Behrendt's "Remapping the Landscape: The Romantic Literary Community Revisited," suggests that our scholarly responsibility might be to seek a considerably greater common ground upon which to see a reformulated and comparative Romanticism. He shows conclusively that what we designate as Romanticism today (particularly through an Anglo-American lens) cannot function as our designation for Romanticism in the future. This new Romanticism will need to include not only fiction, but theater, books on science, a study of morals and economics, the pan-European periodical canon, and so on. This new and varied discourse will give us a completely different picture from the one we in the Anglo-American tradition have grown accustomed to see. Of course, our recovery of Romantic women writers is an exciting development in the last decade, but numerous male writers need to be recovered as well: and they will be recovered when we come to a deeper understanding of the artistic, social, and cultural ethos of Europe as a whole. It is clear that we need to encourage an expanding and cross-linguistic view of Romanticism, understanding (for example) the British version in broader terms than that of Regency culture. Behrendt's essay desires an interconnectedness called for a generation ago and practiced by René Wellek and other comparatists, as well as by the English Romantics themselves.

Melville's attempt to understand the power of language comes from his reading of British writers, especially Wordsworth. Clark Davis shows how Melville's view of language is linked to concerns of social and economic power. Thus, even widely read American writers of the 1850s participate in a Romantic transformation of language begun by the English Romantics two generations earlier.

Richard Kaplan shows how the sentimentalism associated with Romanticism is routinely and systematically attacked by such authors as Dostoyevsky and Melville. In fact, the confusing of sentimentalism with Romanticism represents the homogenizing of that which such writers simply did not understand in the first place. It is a commonplace that

many nineteenth-century works parody sentimentalism but this essay details a number of ways in which the attack on sentimentalism proceeded, including poking fun at the rhetoric of Romanticism, intensifying the superficial sentimentality of pseudo-Romantic feeling, and turning the melodrama as a genre inside out for realist purposes. No two works serve as critiques of late Romantic sentiment better than Melville's *Pierre* and Dostoyevsky's *Poor Folk*.

Recent scholarship has probed the problem of finding the beginnings of Romanticism in America, and Margaret Reid's essay "From Revolutionary Legends to *The Scarlet Letter*: Casting Characters for Early American Romanticism" adds to the debate. Her thesis is that the developing cultural story of America becomes an agent of mediation between the violent and disordered experience of lived history and the highest ideals of the Romantic imagination. The freedom at the core of Romanticism was valorized by constant use of the early American tradition of storytelling.

Karen Karbiener's essay suggests that Walt Whitman's relationship to Richard Wagner was more than merely that of the influence of a composer on a music lover. Pointing out that Whitman respected and admired Wagner, Karbiener suggests that Whitman was actually intimidated and threatened by the German's power and universality.

The next four essays explore international aspects of Romantic gender reformulation, moving between writers such as Felicia Hemans, Keats, the Schlegel brothers, and the European gothic novelists, and show how Romantic discourse and ideology begin to break down eighteenth-century notions of womanhood, particularly taboos about expressing female passion and transcending social positioning. This group of essays also reveals the paradox of some Romantic writers unwittingly reformulating pre-Romantic male-dominated cultural customs, in spite of the often brilliant strategies they invent to deflate and replace these earlier norms.

In "The Female Gothic, Beating Fantasies, and the Civilizing Process," Diane Long Hoeveler deftly dissects the "female gothic pattern" so central to Romantic fantasy but so little understood in contemporary criticism. The pattern is formed by a "persecuted heroine trapped in a

house diffused with manic oedipal anxieties" who is attacked by random social, economic, or cultural compulsions. Hoeveler finds that this pattern actually goes beyond female writers and the female readership, offering the discovery that nineteenth-century female gothic writing is not radically different from other Romantic works because its highly ideological signifying system does not decode or encode any especially distinguishable experience. The notion that Romantic women writers were careful manipulators of their world view is an important neo-Freudian re-reading of central cultural constructs such as family, socio-economic power, and personal survival.

Hemans's Romanticism and her relationship to European developments of the period are the subjects of Donelle R. Ruwe's "The Canon-Maker: Felicia Hemans and Torquato Tasso's Sister." By reflecting primarily on Hemans's translation and commentary on Goethe's *Torquato Tasso*, Ruwe shows how the entire Hemans canon has been framed by a reinscribing of old masters within a kind of domesticity. Seeing Hemans in a European context shows how a traditional model of canonicity develops into a new version in which canonicity is formed by educational institutions.

An interesting view of Romantic personality is suggested through the lens of Debbie Lopez's essay on Keats and Melville. Referring to an imaginary encounter with various English Romantic poets, including a hideously fat Byron (now reconciled with his wife), a politically converted Shelley, and a dead Wordsworth, Lopez shows how as recreated images these figures are thrown into ironic perspective with the struggle Keats had in writing *Lamia*. Then, by drawing upon a typological relationship with Melville and Hawthorne, Lopez shows that Keats' *Lamia* is not only a female demon but also a fabulous monster, perhaps the "monster" of Romanticism itself.

Julie Costello in "Aesthetic Discourses and Maternal Subjects: Enlightenment, Roots, Schlegelian Revisions" provides an interesting view of the aesthetic discourse of the female. She shows how most recent studies of the gendered social and literary dynamics of British Romantic literature have dealt almost exclusively with Romanticism's idealization of the female. Most apparent in Friedrich Schlegel's novel *Lucinde*, al-

though not exclusively there, is the valorization of female experience *per se*, and the recognition that gender relations are *de facto* characterized by a misunderstanding. That becomes the prime source of creative energy.

The problem of Romantic subjectivity has been viewed in a number of ways by contemporary critics, but the final four essays in this book posit comparative ideas about how Romantic texts are both open (requiring readers' collaboration in producing meaning and significance) and closed (in control of limited possible readings). Without invoking the language of reader-response, phenomenological, or semiotic theory, these essays suggest that key Romantic conventions about subjectivity move between a diverse group of artists, including Pushkin, Chateaubriand, Girodet, and Tieck.

Larry H. Peer's essay on Pushkin shows that most European Romantic poets were deeply immersed in continental philosophy and the periodical literature of the day, so that for them the term Romanticism (in its numerous national variants) maintained a cluster of meanings somewhat at odds with the way the term is often used today. Romanticism for the Romantics meant anti-sentimentality, anti-picturesqueness, and anti-exclusion. Pushkin is a key example of this view of the movement and use of the word, and the Russian is aligned with Friedrich Schlegel, Hegel, and Manzoni in his concern with the tenets of Romanticism as well as the use of the term itself.

Fred V. Randel's essay increases our understanding of the Romantic response to fierce ideological battles that were determined, in some ways, by the political, social, and economic climate of the day. By focusing on the image of the cave, Randel shows clearly that the typical Romantic way of surviving these battles was to find or create a separation from the factions in order to find a personal and ideological utopia in the projections of their thinking. For this reason many of the Romantics and Romantic heroes were loners who had a more profound historical and prophetic vision of societal possibilities than other souls. All Romantic poets lean toward the contemplative solitaries of the monastic tradition, and the ethos of Romanticism itself cannot help but seek a numinous encounter outside established traditions. We thus may understand more com-

pletely the Romantic fascination with hermits, and how such a fascination serves both personal and poetic purposes.

The thematic ontology of Chateaubriand's novel *Atala* is the subject of Michael J. Call's "Atala's Body: Girodet and the Representation of Chateaubriand's Romantic Christianity." The French author claimed to be demonstrating through his Christian epic the harmony of Christian and the Enlightenment's humanistic ideals. But Call shows that *Atala* fails to be this reconciliation, just as Girodet's painting of the burial scene from the epic fails. When Romantic writers or painters drew upon traditional Christian symbolism and sentiment they produced a deconstruction of Christianity. Thus for Chateaubriand Romanticism cannot be a harmony of Christian and Enlightenment ideals, but rather the deconstruction of the attempt to make a reconciliation at all.

Heather I. Sullivan's essay on Tieck's *Franz Sternbalds Wanderungen* demonstrates how the novel both follows and departs from the pulp fiction traditions of its time. Especially in terms of narratology, the novel is about fragmentation and the inability to use both the supernatural and the popular in a harmonious way. Tieck's desire to yet impossibility share self-representation with the world of popular readers is, he believes, the ultimate Romantic difficulty.

Each of these essays offers, in its own way, analyses of the convergences encoded in the typological system we now call Romanticism. Each essay in turn represents a line of reference that can be read as a convergence with several or all of the others. Such convergences tug at the muscles focusing the critical lens, and provide an elucidation through which future views may be directed.