DIGITAL ACCESS TO SCHOLARSHIP AT HARVARD

Theory for Romanticism

The Harvard community has made this article openly available.
Please share how this access benefits you. Your story matters.

Citation	Warren, Andrew. 2014. Theory for Romanticism. European Romantic Review Forthcoming.
Accessed	February 19, 2015 5:16:05 PM EST
Citable Link	http://nrs.harvard.edu/urn-3:HUL.InstRepos:12559596
Terms of Use	This article was downloaded from Harvard University's DASH repository, and is made available under the terms and conditions applicable to Open Access Policy Articles, as set forth at http://nrs.harvard.edu/urn-3:HUL.InstRepos:dash.current.terms-of-use#OAP

(Article begins on next page)

Theory for Romanticism
Organizer: *Andrew Warren (Harvard)*
Participants: *Mark Algee-Hewitt (Stanford), Ian Balfour (York), Kir Kuiken (SUNY Albany), Yoon Sun Lee (Wellesley), Jon Klancher (Carnegie Mellon), Matthew Ocheltree (Harvard)*

Our roundtable was designed to think about the use (and also the *mis*use, or even the disavowal) of theory in recent Romantic studies. The hope—a hope that was fulfilled—was to open up a discussion addressing a wide, and in some cases ostensibly conflicted, range of theoretical approaches and commitments to and within Romanticism, more broadly conceived. At the very least, we thought it might help define or problematize some important terms, concepts and questions in the field. But such an approach raises an obvious series of second-order concerns: What counts as "theory," and who's counting? How is theory limited or actuated by "concepts," or terms, or questions, or particular archives? What is the relationship between theory and method? How do we as Romanticists seem to be engaging with theory, now? And relatedly: how should we, why should we, when should we?

Because of the richness and diversity of approaches, the conference organizers smartly saw fit to split the roundtable into two parts. "Theory for Romanticism," the first, addressed a range of usual, and not-so-usual, suspects in novel ways: Derrida, Foucault, Agamben, Benjamin, de Man, but also Deleuze, Badiou, Schmitt, Chakrabarty, and the "new materialisms" and "new formalisms" of Jane Bennett, Marjorie Levinson and the Speculative Realists. The second session, "Theories for Romanticism," engaged with "larger scale" versions of or approaches to theory: systems, fields, distant reading, networks, entanglement and digital humanities. In both sessions, each critical assessment of a theory was illustrated or complicated by an accompanying literary text. These, too, represented a broad sweep of Romantic authors and genres: Austen's *Emma* and Scott's *Tales of the Crusaders*; Wordsworth's poetic corpus (digitally mapped) and Shelley's *Prometheus Unbound*; Fichte's *Science of Knowing* and Schlegel's *Athenaeum Fragments*; Coleridge's *Biographia*, his notebooks, and *The Friend*.

Historically, theory has been an elusive object of study. The American term famously baffled the French, some of whom were surprised to find themselves at the center of the new movement or critical practice. Even the supposed "death of theory" evades definition or dating. Terry Eagleton's *After Theory* was published more than a decade ago, and Derrida has spoken of the waning or fall of theory as beginning in the early 1970's, just a handful of years after the 1966 Johns Hopkins conference that allegedly started it all. But it's a falling, he says, that continues to fall and fall and fall. Lacking an agreed-upon positive content, over the years theory has therefore been defined against a number of other fields and positions: against history and varying kinds of historicism; against cultural studies, or identity politics; against analytic philosophy, or philosophy qua striving-after-truth more generally; against method or unreflective practice; against the alleged social or political

conditions which gave rise to it. Theory has even, with Paul de Man, been defined against itself.

And yet in many of these negative definitions, Romanticism accompanies either theory or the thing it is working against. Why? One reason, as Ian Balfour explained in his introductory remarks, is that the majority of theorists whom our profession esteems have done significant—and often early—work on Romantic writers. Benjamin's first extended text was a dissertation on *The Concept of Criticism in German Romanticism*; Foucault wrote a dissertation on Kant, and Habermas wrote one on Schelling; *Of Grammatology* read Rousseau; Butler early on analyzed Hegel and his French readers, and for Said modern Orientalism began in the late-eighteenth and early-nineteenth centuries; Zizek's recent work has often emphasized the philosophy between Kant and Hegel over Marx or Lacan; even Spivak, who studied with de Man at Yale, wrote a thesis on a "late Romantic" poet, Yeats. Considered in this way, theory might be defined not exactly in itself, yet positively with respect to something else: theory *for* Romanticism. This formulation's necessary obverse is, of course, Romanticism for theory.

The first session cohered in large part around the problem of origins, despite the fact that many of the theories and literary texts under discussion resisted the very concept of an origin. In an innovative dialog between Foucault and Agamben on archaeology and Scott's late work, Matthew Ocheltree illustrated this tension between the need to assume an origin and the impossibility of ever finding or defining one. For Scott, the telos of the chivalric adventure is actually a void, and the movement of romance's return to origins is itself a wager without guarantee of return. Origins are never singular, or recuperable, which is precisely what makes them generative for imaginatively reopening the future's possibilities. A striking example of this paradox was developed in Kir Kuiken's exploration of Coleridge's political theology. Coleridge develops a divided notion of sovereignty which has to regulate and constitute its authority while also accounting for its necessary pageantry and fictionality, the impossibility of it ever grounding itself in a sufficient anteriority. Such a pull of the origin, indeed, often appears premised on the origin's incoherence.

Perhaps accompanying this is the pull of theory. Ian Balfour suggested, for instance, that aesthetic experience demands theory, even if the theory we ultimately construct finds Sianne Ngai's categories of the zany, cute and interesting more useful than Kant's beautiful and sublime. Thinking through potential ways of reorganizing our aesthetic models was precisely the task that Yoon Sun Lee set herself in using recent theories of form and materialism to read Jane Austen and Gothic novels. Such thinking, which privileges molecular assemblages and roving intensities over received ideas of plot and character, might, Lee suggested, be a way to resist what Tilottama Rajan has called the "retrodetermination of Romanticism" by the Victorian Novel. Perhaps an important intervention made by the panel was giving us new tools to work with Romanticism's "Big Two," Scott and Austen.

The second session picked up many threads from the first, including a desire to articulate the notion of system in a number of different guises. Working with the "systems" and "fields" theories of Luhmann and Bourdieu, Jon Klancher explored a puzzling aside from Coleridge's *Table Talk*, stating that "there have been three silent revolutions in England." Klancher's startling conclusion was that in thinking about these kinds of issues Coleridge developed a kind of Method (rather than a "Theory") which could cut across, link and rearrange the differentiation of fields that he saw happening in step with capitalism's growing reach. That Method placed scientific, philosophical/academic, and religious domains in new proximities to each other, without "de-differentiating" them. Andrew Warren was be tempted to call this connection-without-fusion entanglement, a trope he saw increasingly deployed across genres and discourses in the Romantic era—in lyric, the novel, and narrative poetry; philosophy, science and history; the domestic, the legal, and the economic. One of entanglement's functions is to range across such categories and scales. It uneasily links the macro and the micro, the ideational and the material, whole and part, past and present. Entanglement enables a kind of conceptual movement across seemingly unlike registers even as it would seem to disable that, or any, movement. Mark Algee-Hewitt theorized an emerging (and under-theorized) field, Digital Humanities. Mark discussed his work at the Stanford Literary Lab, asking how new technologies and archives make us rethink standard literary categories: corpus, authorship, text and style. What happens, for instance, when we can topologically map Goethe's or Wordsworth's entire oeuvre? What kinds of theory can or should we apply to those methodologies, and how in turn do new methodologies inform or alter our prior critical and literary commitments? Across both sessions, perhaps the most singular takeaway took the form of an imperative: to unfold new theories worthy of both the works we read, and of the present.