

From

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*British and European Romanticisms: Selected Papers from the  
Munich Conference of the German Society for English Romanticism*

(Wissenschaftlicher Verlag Trier, 2007)

edited by Christoph Bode and Sebastian Domsch

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THIS BOOK is part of an attractive new series of essay collections and monographs under the rubric *Studien zur Englischen Romantik*. In fact, its twenty contributions range well beyond the territory of English Romanticism, and so live up to the ambitious plural—*Romanticisms*—of the title. Christoph Bode's introduction builds on a classic work by Lilian R. Furst, *Romanticism in Perspective* (1969), to suggest that the European Romantics are neither bound by some single system-program, nor totally heterogeneous, but rather linked by a set of 'family likenesses' (including response to the sublime in nature, reversion to traditional religion, Gothic sensibility, say), not every one of which is displayed by every member. Not only does this idea form a flexible and productive groundwork for comparative Romanticism in general, but it also rather neatly describes the relationship the essays in this collection bear to each other.

The collection opens sensationally, with Frederick Burwick's claim that the author of a blank verse translation of Goethe's *Faust* anonymously published in 1821 was none other than Coleridge himself. Since Burwick here reproduces verbatim much of his introduction to the recent Clarendon edition of *Faustus: from the German of Goethe* (co-edited with James C. McKusick), I refrain from comment: the attribution debate is currently raging on the *Friends of Coleridge* website, and the Winter 2008 *Coleridge Bulletin* will contain a full review of *Faustus*. However, the focus on drama—in both senses of the word—does set a kind of tone for many of the chapters that follow. 'European Romanticisms', after all, conduce to such an emphasis, given that so much cultural interaction between nations took place in drama, whether on the stage or in the closet. Thus Mirosława Modrzewska's 'Polish Romantic Drama', which focuses on the 'mystical drama' of Juliusz Słowacki, introduces material that will probably be new to most readers (and remains rather inaccessible due to the lack of translations); while Jeffrey N. Cox's 'British Romantic Drama in a European Context' considers Romantic melodrama as a form of 'quest for a national drama' (128). This 'quest', Cox shows, could never be fulfilled, partly because melodrama often involved translation and even a patching together of sources, as occurred when Thomas Holcroft adapted Pixérécourt's *Coelina* as the highly popular *Tale of Mystery* in 1802.

Marc Porée's virtuoso performance 'De Quincey "à la française"' also discusses translation in a (metaphorically) melodramatic context, speculating on the perverse propriety of Alfred Musset's additions to De Quincey's *Confessions of an English Opium-Eater* in his 1828 translation. In Musset's version,

the prostitute whom De Quincey befriended in London reappears as the wife or mistress of a mysterious lord, whom the narrator challenges to a duel. Porée notes that De Quincey begins the *Confessions* with an attack on the ‘defective sensibility’ of the French (while nevertheless sprinkling his text with French phrases), making it ironic that ‘the work should have ended firmly in the hands of the French’ (53), of Baudelaire as well as Musset. Yet this proved an oddly apt mechanism for disrupting some of De Quincey’s own ‘ideological spin’ (58), including the ‘nationalization’ of opium, which ascribed clear thinking and composure specifically to the *English* opium-eater. The theme of Anglo-French stereotyping recurs in Frank Eric Pointner’s account of Thomas Moore’s satirical poem *The Fudge Family in Paris*.

Duncan Wu, too, provides a French connection in ‘Stendhal and the British Romantics’. He begins from the influence of Hazlitt’s remarks about the phenomenon of idealising ‘Platonic’ love on Stendhal’s *De l’Amour* (1822), then argues that Stendhal imbibed an entire Romantic philosophy through his reading of the *Edinburgh Review* and above all Hazlitt’s essays. Since the latter are clearly indebted to Wordsworth’s Preface to *Lyrical Ballads*, Wu claims that ‘Stendhal’s definition of Romanticism as an art that gave pleasure by presenting “l’état actuel de leurs habitudes et de leurs croyances” thus reflected the direct influence of Hazlitt and Jeffrey, and the indirect influence of Wordsworth’ (47). Wu gives Hazlitt clear priority in this chain of influence, declaring in partisan fashion that Hazlitt’s ‘gusto was always to make Jeffrey appear the intellectually timid Scots dominie that he was’ (45).

There are small clusters of essays on canonical Romantic writers, but these too invariably range into relatively exotic areas of comparison. Thus Rolf Lessenrich compares Byron with Büchner as examples of ‘Romantic Disillusionism’, while Alexandra Böhm brings the phenomenon of Byronism to bear on the currently controversial process of canon formation itself, in “‘Romantic ideology’ and the Margins of Romanticism: Byron, Heine and Musset’. The third chapter in the ‘Byronic’ group is Heike Grundmann’s richly documented and illustrated “‘Mêler le grotesque au sublime”: Orientalism in Byron, Delacroix and Victor Hugo’. The violent exoticism of Delacroix’s oriental paintings, Grundmann points out, derives both from the poetry of Byron and from his sources, and the tradition of grotesque ‘violence behind the veil’ is developed in poems such as Hugo’s ‘Clair de lune’, in which the peaceful scene is disturbed only by the noise of sacks filled with human bodies being thrown into the sea (82-3).

Coleridge gets a cluster too, in the form of Burwick’s chapter on *Faustus*, Joel Faflak’s somewhat bizarre attack on ‘Coleridge’s ventriloquizing of German idealism’ (174), and Nicholas Halmi’s argument that Coleridge introduced the distinction between symbol and allegory into English literary criticism probably as the result of a passing reference in A. W. Schlegel’s *Lectures on Dramatic Art and Literature*. Halmi, following Walter Benjamin, argues that ‘literary criticism has not [benefited]’ from this distinction, and that

as a result of this ‘unfortunate borrowing’ from Schlegel, Coleridge became as guilty as the German Romantics of transferring the theological concept of symbol into literature. Complementing his recent book *The Genealogy of the Romantic Symbol*, Halmi’s argument will surely provoke enduring debate.<sup>1</sup>

Skipping a number of other interesting contributions, I’ll linger for a moment on Angela Esterhammer’s fascinating chapter, ‘The Improvisatrice’s Fame: Landon, Staël, and Female Performers in Italy’. Esterhammer discusses an unusual kind of genre—poetic improvisation, which, she notes, was construed as feminine in nineteenth century England. I am not sure whether this remark is confirmed or contradicted by Coleridge’s ‘Kubla Khan’, whose last stanza comes to mind when Esterhammer makes this comment on Letitia Landon’s long poem *The Improvisatrice*: ‘Inheriting the persona of the *improvisatrice*, a female performer in an audience-directed genre, Landon uses it to focus on the analytic of fame, a condition that leads to a quasi-narcotic disorientation and a psychological dependence on the image of oneself reflected back from others’ (236). The poet of ‘Kubla Khan’, we might say, though a male persona, is trying to imitate the *improvisatrice* (the damsel with a dulcimer), yet remains indeed psychologically dependent on a real or imagined audience—‘all who heard’, and narcotically dependent too, if we believe Coleridge’s preface. Esterhammer brings de Staël’s *Corinne, or Italy* into the discussion, revealing the novel’s subtle modifications of the *improvisatrice* tradition.

Even if, inevitably in so large a selection of papers, the quality is not perfectly uniform, this book pleasingly reflects the variety of perspectives and forms of writing that constitute European Romanticism(s). It admittedly addresses a specialist readership, but among that readership is likely to stimulate new interests, as one turns to a familiar topic only to be drawn by an unfamiliar but overlapping one in another chapter. Long may the Munich conferences continue!

<sup>1</sup> Whether this distinction was of enduring importance to Coleridge following its articulation in the *Statesman’s Manual* is one question that must still be considered. A late notebook entry on the account of creation in Genesis suggests not, in that it conflates the two: ‘a scheme of Geogony, containing the facts and truths of Science adapted to the language of Appearances [...] It is throughout literal—and gives the physical Creation/ then from v. 4 of C. II comes the Moral Creation—the formation of the Humanity [...] with the moral cause, the spiritual process of the Fall, the Centaurization of Man,—and that the whole is symbolic or allegorical’ (CN V 6129).