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Henry Crabb Robinson, 'Essays on Kant, Schelling, and German Aesthetics'

(London: MHRA, 2010)

edited by James Vigus

THIS COLLECTION IS A MOST WELCOME ADDITION to the slowly growing number of editions of writings by one of Romanticism's most fascinating literary figures. Denied, as a Nonconformist, access to a university education in England, Henry Crabb Robinson pursued a decidedly unconventional career path—law clerk, *Privatgelehrter* and traveller (thanks to a legacy from an uncle), foreign correspondent, barrister, and after his retirement from the bar a founding benefactor of University College London and tireless activist against slavery and for the Dissenters' Chapels Bill. Arriving in London in 1796, he quickly immersed himself in the city's cultural life and, apart from five years in Germany (1800-05), he remained immersed in it for the remaining seventy-one years of his long life, as is attested by the thirty-three manuscript volumes of his diary—begun in 1811, a few years after he had met Coleridge and Wordsworth, and soon to be edited in full by Timothy Whelan and James Vigus.

Crabb Robinson's own assessment of his place in literary history was modest: 'I found early on that I had not the literary ability to give me such a place among English authors as I should have wished; but I thought that I had an opportunity of gaining a knowledge of many of the most distinguished men of the age, and that I might do some good by keeping a record of my interviews with them.' In fact he performed what social network theorists would identify as two distinct roles. One was as a 'hub' (an unusually well-connected person who facilitates contacts among others) within the London literary scene: a mutual friend of Coleridge and Wordsworth, for example, he assisted their reconciliation after the breach of 1810. The other role was as a 'bridge' (a point of contact between networks) from German to British intellectuals and vice versa. His intelligence and gregariousness, combined with his knowledge of French and acquisition of German, enabled him to meet and befriend writers and philosophers of Goethe's extended circle during his residence in Germany from 1800 to 1805 (the last three years enrolled as a student at Jena), and thence to become a conduit of information about contemporary German literature and philosophy.

In *Crabb Robinson in Germany, 1800–1805* (1928), her selected edition of Robinson's letters from Germany, Edith J. Morley affirmed that '[t]o him, more than to any one else, is due that influence of Germany thought and German literature on England in the first quarter of the nineteenth century'. But the basis for that claim has remained difficult to assess. To what extent, then, does the edition of *Essays on Kant, Schelling, and German Aesthetics* assist us?

In his introduction to the volume, James Vigus, conceding that Robinson's 'published work was not widely diffused' (p. 1), does not repeat Morley's sweeping claim. But the texts he presents give us a fuller sense than hitherto of the depth of Robinson's engagement with German philosophy, both Kantian and post-Kantian, and of his overall intellectual trajectory from Priestleyan necessitarianism in the late 1790s to a complex and still shifting engagement with forms of idealism by 1804. The resultant picture, perspicuously outlined in Vigus's introduction, is of 'a complex process of cultural transfer by which the metaphysics and aesthetics topical in Jena and Weimar around 1800 spread to Europe' (p. 1). Doubtless Robinson's most significant act of cultural mediation consisted in furnishing Germaine de Staël, who visited Weimar in 1804 with 'dissertations' on Kant, Schelling, and contemporary German aesthetic philosophy (as represented by Kant, Schiller, Schelling, and the brothers Schlegel).

For her part Morley printed extracts from Robinson's epistolary reports on his philosophical study, but did not reprint the three articles on Kant that he published in the *Monthly Register* between August 1802 and April 1803. Vigus, in contrast, not only reprints these articles but prints for the first time two further articles on Kant, submitted to the *Monthly Register* but not in the event published. Reflecting Robinson's growing dissatisfaction with necessitarianism, these articles explicate Kant's critical philosophy by way of differentiating Kant from Locke and a priori representations from innate ideas. The fourth article, rejected by the *Monthly Register*, concerns Kant's teaching on the subjective forms of sensibility (time and space), while the fifth article, intended for a parallel series of 'Letters on German Literature', surveys Kant's theory of aesthetic judgement. However 'accurate and vivid' the published articles are (as René Wellek judged them to be), their impact on contemporary English readers appears to have been minimal.

Robinson's notes in German on Schelling's lectures on aesthetics (lectures he attended in the winter semester of 1802–3) have been published twice before, first by Ernst Behler in 1976 and then by Walter Jaeschke in 1999. But they have been re-edited from the manuscripts by Vigus and are accompanied for the first time with an English translation, conveniently printed facing the original text. (Although Behler's article is cited in abbreviated form in the notes, it is omitted, surely accidentally, from the bibliography. The reference is 'Schellings Ästhetik in der Überlieferung von Henry Crabb Robinson', *Philosophisches Jahrbuch*, 83 (1976), 133–83.) Introducing his own transcript of the notes, Behler remarked their correspondence to the posthumously published text of Schelling's lectures; but Vigus has discovered an even closer correspondence to the notes taken on those lectures by Robinson's friend Fritz Schlosser: 'Lecture notes often circulated in manuscript at that time, and it seems probable that HCR may have copied from Schlosser, an enthusiastic devotee of Schelling' (p. 64). If Robinson later showed these notes to Coleridge, they might have offered the latter his first exposure to, *inter alia*, a German Romantic distinction between symbol and allegory (see, e.g., p. 81)—

but no evidence has come to light since Behler's edition to contradict his conclusion that the notes remained unknown to Coleridge and 'without direct influence on Schelling's English reception'.

Likewise, 'the exact extent and nature' of Robinson's contribution to Mme de Staël's *De l'Allemagne* remain uncertain (p. 25), partly because the book was published (by John Murray in London, having been prohibited in France) nine years after her exchange with Robinson in Weimar. But it is clear from contemporary reports, such as the journals of Karl August Böttiger and Benjamin Constant, as well as from Mme de Stäel's own marginalia on Robinson's manuscripts (helpfully reproduced in the footnotes to the present edition), that his 'dissertations' on Germany philosophy were attentively received and provoked lively discussion. After an umpromising start, in which Mme de Stäel shocked Robinson by receiving him from her bed and she dismissed him as a 'disciple de Schelling' (qtd. p. 20), the relationship grew more mutually respectful. I am inclined to think that Robinson's success with de Stäel resulted not only from his ability to produce lucid, accessible paraphrases of complex philosophical arguments, but to illustrate those paraphrase with literary quotations—a technique he had already deployed in his articles for the *Monthly Register*. The dissertation on Schelling, for example, contains apposite quotations from Ben Jonson, Schiller, Goethe, Pope (three different poems), Horace, and not least Laurence Sterne: 'the Muses in their connection with the Artist, resemble Corporal Trim whose wound was dressed by a Nun' (p. 130). In summarising Kant's third *Critique*, Robinson seems to have impressed on de Staël the autonomy of the aesthetic; in introducing the writings of the Schlegels and praising the poetry of Goethe, he seems indeed, as he claimed in 1823, to have given her 'her first ideas of German literature' (qtd. p. 23). Ironically, he may have been too successful in this latter respect, for it was August Wilhelm Schlegel, to whom de Staël was now alerted, who succeeded and perhaps supplanted Robinson as her 'intellectual mentor'. If the texts presented in this volume cannot entirely clarify Robinson's place in literary and intellectual history, they do enable us to appreciate his own intellectual achievements more fully and justly than ever before.