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reads
Henry Crabb Robinson, Romantic Comparatist, 1790–1811
(Liverpool: Liverpool UP, 2020)
by Philipp Hunnekuhl

DIANA BEHLER ASSERTED IN 1977 THAT Henry Crabb Robinson (1775–1867) was "the first foreigner to make a thorough investigation of the ideas of the early romantic school in Germany" (210). Behler, along with René Wellek (1931, 1959), Hertha Marquardt (1964–67), Ernst Behler (1988), Gregory Maertz (1997, 2017), and James Vigus (2010), have all examined from a variety of perspectives Crabb Robinson's exposure to and expertise with German literature and his transmission of that literature to England in the early decades of the nineteenth century. Philipp Hunnekuhl's *Henry Crabb Robinson, Romantic Comparatist, 1790–1811* significantly expands upon this body of scholarship to argue persuasively that Crabb Robinson was the most important pioneering comparatist (Robinson used the term "literator") during the Romantic period. Hunnekuhl bases this claim not only upon Robinson's "intellectual independence" and the "breadth of his reading" in several national literatures but also "his revolutionary role as a theorist of literary ethics and the ways in which this role influenced his critical dissemination of literature across cultural and political boundaries" (2). Robinson replaced Kant's view of art as detached from worldly concerns with the idea that great artists subtly engage their reader's attention toward a moral and ethical end through a "disinterestedness" that shuns the use of overtly didactic methods. Referring at times to the work of Walter Benjamin, Eric Donald Hirsch, and Hans-Georg Gadamer, Hunnekuhl contends that Robinson the comparatist created a critical theory that allowed the artist "to maximise moral engagement and propel social progress across the board," in essence taking "Benjamin's 'effective spirit' beyond national confines in the attempt to make progress global" (14).

Hunnekuhl's seven chapters move the reader through various stages in Robinson's development as a Romantic comparatist, beginning with his early years as an apprentice and autodidact at Colchester (1790–95) (a period in Robinson's life brilliantly examined in 2013 by Jane Giscombe, conservator at Dr. William's Library, London); moving through the period of his allegiance to Godwin's philosophy (1795–1800) and on to that of Kant, Schiller, Schelling, and Schegel, as well as Herder, Goethe, and Lessing during his time as a student and traveler in Germany (1800–05); and closing with his attempt to become a professional writer and comparatist in the years immediately following his return to London (1805–11). The appendix includes

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transcriptions of several documents from the Crabb Robinson Archive in Dr. Williams's Library, such as his 1792 letter to his brother Thomas, his manuscript essay "On novels" (*c.* 1798) and his important letter to Catherine Clarkson of December 1804, along with the texts of some short pieces from Herder's "Blaetter der Vorzeit" that Robinson translated and published in the *Monthly Repository* in 1808 and 1809. Hunnekuhl develops Robinson's literary expertise and critical theory by examining a variety of his informal writings (a few letters, his pocket diaries and memorandum books, and some unpublished essays) and his early periodical publications in the *Monthly Magazine* and the *Monthly Register* (1792–1803). Only three letters have survived prior to 1795, but Robinson's seven pocket diaries provide a fascinating look at his early reading habits in Colchester, especially in British history and politics, in which volumes by Locke, Hume, Smollett, Voltaire, Priestley, Price, and Paine were borrowed from his master, his minister, the local book club and circulating library, or purchased by Robinson from local booksellers. As Hunnekuhl sees it, by 1795 Robinson had become somewhat of a "polymath," possessing "an inquisitive mind . . . well versed in history and philosophy" (36), the product of a "juvenile enlightenment," to use Kathryn Gleadle's phrase, which prepared him for his later role as Romantic comparatist.

Godwin's influence upon Robinson began that same year, an influence that Hunnekuhl believes "prompted the development of his first theoretical approach to literature" (7). Two letters on Godwin by Robinson appeared in Benjamin Flower's *Cambridge Intelligencer* in August 1795 and April 1800, each demonstrating Robinson's pre-Kantian belief that "moral truth" and 'benevolence of feeling" could be demonstrated "through the rigorous exercise of reason in accordance with the laws of necessity" (48), which Robinson believed Godwin had done through his idea of the "New Philosophy of Love." Robinson departed slightly from Godwin in his essay "On the Happiness of Youth" which appeared in the *Monthly Magazine* in 1797. In this essay, Robinson argued that the quality of one's happiness does not depend upon gradual experience but rather is intrinsic to each stage of development and is always "a matter of private, or individual, feeling" (59). Novel reading could also be an effective part of the Philosophy of Love, as he suggested in his unpublished essay "On novels," for even in that art form (here Robinson remained close to Godwin) one could find truth located in disinterested benevolence and literary morals (70).

Kant soon replaced Godwin as the primary influence on Robinson's aesthetic ideals. Godwin's skepticism (but not his moral disinterestedness) gave way to Kant's faith in a theory of the mind grounded in an *a priori* moral sense. Robinson's theory, what Hunnekuhl terms "Free Moral Discourse," recognized the value of Kant's absolute aesthetic autonomy of art from morals at the same time that it celebrated the artist's ability to supplant beneath the surface a "feigned indifference," establishing the framework in which the literator, "as facilitator of moral discourse across cultural and political boundaries," could operate (8). Hunnekuhl uncovers in Robinson's letters in

the *Monthly Register* (1802–03), in his notes for his tutorials for Madame de Stael at Weimar (1804), and in a letter to Catherine Clarkson (1804) a deft use of Kant that enabled Robinson to situate his theory of Free Moral Discourse at the center "of the theorisation of art's ethical relevance as it occurred in the wake of Kant's revolutionary mind" (73). Robinson would move on from Kant in short order and into Schlegel, Schelling, and the lesser-known Jakob Friedreich Fries (1773–1843). Inspired by this confluence of German writers, Robinson revised his aesthetic theory near the end of 1804, confessing to Catherine Clarkson his belief that "[The understanding and the affections] are brought together by *the Unity of human Nature & by the Law of moral Culture which requires us to cultivate all our powers harmoniously*. This is the watchword of *my* Philosophy" (98). To Robinson, as Hunnekuhl makes clear, morals and ethics exist autonomously in the space beyond empirical scrutiny, a place where judgments of beauty overlap with those of morals, sustaining the mind's foundational principles of disinterestedness (love) and stimulating its autonomous powers (reason) (100). As a result, Robinson reconciled the non-conceptual activity of the imagination with the Kantian conceptions gained through moral judgment, reaffirming his earlier notion that it is the ultimate unattainability of pure disinterestedness that allows for the essential interplay of art and morals.

Robinson's three essays on German thought and his five letters on German literature that appeared in the *Monthly Register* (1802–03), along with his essay on Lessing in the *Monthly Repository* (1806), reflect the "ethical" turn in his approach to art and morality and his stress upon literary form as the primary means of transcultural criticism. Though the artist could never attain pure aesthetic autonomy, the form of his art provided the reader or viewer a means of discovering moral import through his or her imagination (103). His reading and translations of works by Schlegel, Schiller, Goethe, and Lessing between 1802 and 1806 solidified this theory. Lessing became Robinson's ideal of the ethical and moral artist, most noticeably in his "Parable of the Palace" and his *Education of the Human Race*, where he balanced liberal views on Christianity with a passion for universal moral truth (123). Robinson's published pieces from this period serve as formal demonstrations of Free Moral Discourse, mirroring Lessing's gift of embedding moral purpose within the work of art yet abstaining from moral didacticism.

Before his departure for Germany, Robinson met a young William Hazlitt, fresh from his recent encounters with Wordsworth, Coleridge, and other Romantics. As his surviving memorandum books and notebooks reveal, in the years immediately after his return from Germany in 1805, Robinson met Hazlitt often in London, with Hazlitt receiving tutorials on Kant from Robinson that would play a leading role in Hazlitt's developing ideas on aesthetic discourse and moral conventions (9). Robinson maintained a high appreciation for Hazlitt's genius, though they differed on Napoleon, as revealed in Hunnekuhl's analysis of Robinson's 1806 translation of Gustav von Schalabrendorf's *Napoleon Buonaparte as He Is to a Tee, and the French People under*

Him and Hazlitt's later production, *The Life of Napoleon Buonaparte* (1828). Hunnekuhl contends that, despite their disagreements, Robinson viewed Hazlitt's work as the "prose proponent of Free Moral Discourse par excellence" (154) due to his relentless emphasis on the disinterested imagination and the interplay of morality and art. This was the same activity Robinson found present in the poetry (and prose) of Herder, Wordsworth, and Blake, all of whom, Robinson believed, were "advancing idiosnycratic forms of aesthetic free play that kindled and sustained the moral imagination of their readership" (10). Robinson had been introduced to Wordsworth's poetry by Hazlitt in 1799 but it was not until June 1802, just after receiving the third edition of *Lyrical Ballads* in Germany, that he encountered the power of Wordsworth's poetry and its affinity to Robinson's developing critical theory. Robinson immediately lent his copy to Herder in 1803 and later recounted his experiences in the first of three essays on Herder that appeared in the *Monthly Repository* (1808–09). As Hunnekuhl sees it, in the works of Herder and Wordsworth Robinson saw "a loose … framework for imaginative engagement to which the reader's mind may actively respond and, in the process, negotiate an applicable moral" (171). Though the poet is "cold," his art "makes his readers warm" (173). Apparent coldness, or disinterestedness," Hunnekuhl adds, "lures the reader's curiosity, whose active mind then becomes an autonomous extension of the poet's imagination and begins to negotiate the points of morality that the poet appears to be withholding. This occurs along a fluid interface, involving the synthesis of an ever-changing set of appearances, to each of which the reader may react with a certain degree of interest" (173).

As his notebooks and letters reveal, Robinson talked much about Wordsworth to his friends in 1807–08, met him for the first time in 1808, and in November 1809 printed a long review of Wordsworth's *Convention of Centra* in Richard Cumberland's *London Review*. His interest in Blake quickly followed, sparked, as with Wordsworth, by these same aesthetic ideals and appreciation of moral discourse, culminating in his important publication on Blake in Perthes's *Vaterländisches Museum* in 1811, which was followed by his translation of Christian Leberecht Heyne's *Amathonte* (1799) in 1811 (it appeared as *Amatonda*). The latter work was not merely a fictional allegory about four brothers and the power of a magician's predictions to shape their lives but rather an allegory for Free Moral Discourse in which an individual may need to disobey motives imposed by conventional authorities in order to protect and maintain his or her own moral awareness or conscience. Even after 1811, when Robinson turned his attention to more mundane matters of the law, his literary interests and critical ideals about Free Moral Discourse continued, with many instances appearing in his diary, in which he regularly recorded his thoughts on books and writers after 1811. Thus, the kind of "imaginative free play and material tangibility" that Crabb Robinson saw in some of the most important Romantic writers in Germany and England around the turn of the nineteenth century provided a basis upon which Robinson built his theory of Free Moral Discourse as a viable means of speaking to social and political realities.

Though Hunnekuhl believes Robinson's "paramount achievement" prior to his becoming a solicitor in 1813 was his desire "[t]o advance this discourse across European nations" (18), Hunnekuhl's tightly-woven monograph nevertheless opens the door for further inquiry into other areas of Robinson's early reading, writing (both formal and informal), and social interactions that would, like his literary opinions and friendships, continue to impact his life after 1811. One area would be Robinson's evolving religious opinions, from the orthodoxy of his mother during his childhood in Bury St. Edmund's, through the skepticism of Godwin, to his adoption of and allegiance to Unitarianism by 1811. Another area would be politics. Robinson's position as an abolitionist never wavered from the early attempts to end the slave trade in the 1790s, through his defense of Thomas Clarkson in the late 1830s, to his numerous periodical essays on slavery in the southern United States into the 1860s. His positions on the French Revolution, the Napoleonic Wars, and political reform in general, however, moderated considerably from his radical youth in the early and mid-1790s to his more mature positions after 1811, with much of that moderation occurring during his time in Germany and his stint as a foreign reporter for the London *Times*. Future scholarship in these and other areas in the early life of one of the most important diarists and commentators on British life and thought in the nineteenth century will now be able to build upon the solid foundation laid by Philipp Hunnekuhl's *Henry Crabb Robinson, Romantic Comparatist, 1790–1811*.