James Castell
reads
Informal Romanticism
(Wissenschaftlicher Verlag Trier, 2012)
edited by James Vigus

INFORMAL ROMANTICISM collects in a revised form nearly all the papers delivered at a conference of the same name held in the Center for Advanced Studies of the Ludwig-Maximilian-University, Munich in September 2011. James Vigus's concise introduction outlines the general aim of the volume to 'introduce the concept of *informal* writing into Romantic studies'. For Vigus and the other contributors, this category includes but is not limited to 'notebook jottings, diaries, letters, travel journals, marginalia […], and draft reminiscences' (1). Given the efforts of previous generations to archive such writing and how much has been published in this field over the past decade, some readers may suspect a misplaced sense of originality in the desire to 'introduce' a concept that is already being explored—albeit with different terminology—both by scholars who attended this conference and by many who did not. However, the handling of 'informality' in these essays is both capacious and flexible enough that such concerns are quickly replaced by appreciation for a useful term that effectively emphasises the commonalities as well as the differences within disparate modes of writing.

Published in the German series, *Studien zur Englischen Romantik*, the essays have an appropriately pan-European flavour, reflecting both a historical period of remarkable cosmopolitanism and a modern European community of scholars who are vigorously multilingual and committed to interdisciplinary conversation. Essays by Christian Deuling and Phillip Hunnekuhl perhaps most embody the international nature of the writing represented. Deuling discusses the reports on literary London sent by Johann Christian Hüttner to Duke Carl August of Saxe-Weimar-Eisenach and Goethe, providing a tabular catalogue of references to British Romantic authors in them (52-58). Hunnekuhl also places his subject—Henry Crabb Robinson—into an intellectually diverse, European context by building upon the pioneering scholarship of Edith Morley but correcting what he sees as its neglect of 'metaphysics, science, and effectively a great deal of philosophy' (62). Particularly admirable is Hunnekuhl's close attention to unique features of informal writing like crossings-out, while linking them to broader philosophical ideas in Robinson's work. Cecilia Muratori is similarly interested in informal writing shaping philosophical approaches in her study of Schopenhauer's annotated notes on the lectures of Blumenbach. For Muratori, 'even private observations of individual researchers, and notes scribbled in notebooks' are central to investigating key questions in the period, such as the relation between man and animal (22). In her example, Blumenbach's formal scientific observations tend to reduce the eyes of vivisected animals to objects where Schopenhauer's annotations and notebook entries highlight more speculatively

the common ground between man and animal with resultant ethical implications.

Frederick Burwick's essay returns to Henry Crabb Robinson and focuses in particular on the differences between Robinson's informal commentaries on London plays and the more public tone of Hunt and Hazlitt when commenting on, for example, Coleridge's *Remorse* (78-81). Not least because informal writing is not intended for publication, Burwick perceives that it has license to notice and record what other forms cannot: 'the contingent awareness he sustains of the company of friends with whom he is seated, his familiarity with certain players and playwrights, and the fluctuations in his personal likes and dislikes' (82). Frequently, this leads to Robinson meditating as much upon himself as upon what he is watching, as evidenced by his differing responses to the acting of Jenny Vertepré in *La chatte métamorphosée* which he saw twice but eight years apart. Angela Estherhammer's contribution is also interested in the connection between informal writing and the stage. As well as fascinating thinking on various senses of speculation in the period, she focuses on questions of spectatorship and remediation between prose and drama in the resolutely non-canonical 'silver-fork fiction' of Theodore Hook who, according to Estherhammer, 'forms a central node in the network of literary and performance culture' in the late Georgian era (132).

Timothy Whelan's essay is similarly concerned with what are traditionally considered non-canonical texts and, in particular, the shaping of literary history through the fragile materiality or misinterpretation of informal writings. His example is the Steele Circle, a group of West Country women writers working between 1720 and 1840. Whelan stresses both the self-confidence of these writers (174) and the necessity of paying attention to informal sources to correct inaccuracies in the histories of their lives and literary careers: most importantly, the number of archival mistakes that instigated and then perpetuated the conflation of Elizabeth Coltman Heyrick and Elizabeth Coltman (176-177). In order to redress this situation, Whelan appends genealogical trees of the first, second and third generations of the Steele Circle, which will no doubt be useful for scholars working on these writers in future. Rosa Karl's contribution on the Romantic tourist gaze is one such essay, using Elizabeth Coltman's Lakeland journal as an example of the fundamentally social nature of literary approaches to solitude that invite shared experience by a reader.

James Vigus, Franco D'Intino, David Duff and David O'Shaughnessy discuss informal dimensions of writers that are not quite so neglected. Given his stewardship of the volume, it is unsurprising that Vigus's essay is perhaps the most successful at maintaining a dual focus on formal and thematic considerations. In his recovering of Southey and Coleridge's interest in Quakerism, he emphasises both the informality of their writings and their inspiration (however briefly) by 'an ideal of informal religion' (97). Backed up by rich notes, his contribution charts the history of Southey and Coleridge's fluctuating thoughts about Quakerism, both as their personal commitments

change and as they construct their own narrative of the increasing formality of modern Quakerism (111). D'Intino also carefully considers poetic development even as he positions Leopardi as an exemplar of Romantic informality—a writer continually working on fragments, formless drafting, and unfinished outlines who might be prized for the most informal elements in his informal writings, including handwriting (123) or his use of 'etcetera' in the 'Vita abbozzata' manuscript (126). Duff provides a charming meditation on Lamb's use of the essay form, focussing in particular on Lamb's 'reworking' of Wordsworthian intimation through intertextual and intergeneric allusion (154). For Duff, this aspect of the Romantic essay is both an attempt to reconnect the form with its earlier 'concrete, informal' manifestations, especially in Bacon (150), and a powerful argument for appreciating Lamb's '*essayistic* poetics' (154). O'Shaughnessy is more interested in the social than the formal in his discussion of the value of Godwin's later work through the lens of his interactions with and contributions to the establishment of the University of London. Such work is enabled by the electronic publication of Godwin's diary, 'a key informal source' which permits greater clarity 'on his social activities, and patterns of behaviour and social contacts, previously obscured in the manuscript' (169). O'Shaughnessy's conclusion attempts to complicate traditional standpoints on the later Godwin: in contrast to Hazlitt's belief that Godwin was 'well past his sell by date' by this point, his 'opinions on current affairs were still considered to be worthy of these social gatherings' (171).

There is no doubt that Vigus has valiantly tried to arrange these essays so that they speak to each other in a way that transcends the conference where they were originally delivered: Felicitas Meifert-Menhard's essay is a solid opener, for example, in its helpful overview of theoretical mediations on marginalia from Johannes Amos Comenius to Jacques Derrida and especially once it arrives at its fascinating example of Coleridge annotating a Wordsworth annotation in an edition of Shakespeare's sonnets (16-19). That this arrangement is only partly successful in facilitating broader relevance is perhaps an inevitable result of the (itself comparatively informal) genre of conference proceedings. Quality is not always sustained across the volume and, even in the best contributions, more might have been said on the specific question of informality—both to put more pressure on the term itself and to mitigate against the sense that familiar ground is being covered with a simple change in terminology.

Ironically, given that he doesn't use the term, the stunning exception to this is Paul Hamilton's plenary on Romantic occasionalism. Hamilton takes his starting point from J. C. C. Mays's inclusion and justification of unpublished occasional works in the *Collected Coleridge* edition of Coleridge's poems and his own observation that 'we have inherited a Romantic prejudice against the poetry of some occasions rather than others, a prejudice which, paradoxically, stops us from appreciating some of the poetry of those same Romantics who invented the prejudice' (200-201). Hamilton counters this prejudice by considering Simon Jarvis's recent work on Wordsworth alongside Fichte,

Schelling and Novalis. In Jarvis and Novalis in particular, he argues that 'the occasional and the creative, the dramatic and the poetic, go together' and this leads to a 'mutually interlocking set of ideas' where 'poetry, poetically distinctive thought, prosody, occasional writing and not general description' allow for one to know 'both self and other in a different way' (204). As a result, 'occasion, then, seems to get to the heart of a characteristic of poetry by which its universality is activated rather than constrained by the particularity of its subjects' (205). Hamilton transports this chiasmus into thinking about political 'occasions' (in particular, the Restoration and the French Revolution), arguing that 'political theory […] can set precedents for poetic initiative as much as poetry can for political innovation' (208).

Most importantly, however, Hamilton's conclusion offers a critique of occasion as 'one of those philosophical inventions of a kind of intractable category in response to which philosophy can regenerate or reinvent itself' (210). Hamilton is making a sophisticated contribution on the state of exception and Giorgio Agamben's dispute with Carl Schmitt. But Vigus's placement of this essay at the end of *Informal Romanticism* is also a perceptive gesture, because it is an insight that might equally be turned back against this volume as a whole. To what extent is the concept 'informality' specific enough to cater for even some of the occasions and genres to which Romantic writing responds and which it also creates? Does it permit the regeneration or reinvention of the writing or thought of the period? Or must it always be an oppositional exception to what is more canonical, established or formal? When 'informality' is self-consciously prioritised as it is by many writers in the period, does it become 'formal' itself? It is too much to expect the short essays in this volume to answer these questions fully. But, in its introduction of a category that is both an expansion and a refinement of previous scholarship, *Informal Romanticism* does provides a useful contribution to contemporary debate and a stimulating basis upon which to build more work.