Peter Francev
reads
Romantic Explorations
(Wissenschaftlicher Verlag Trier, 2011)
edited by Michael Meyer

ROMANTIC EXPLORATIONS presents nineteen selected papers from the 2009 Koblenz Conference of the German Society for English Romanticism. The essays interpret Romantic authors through a variety of interdisciplinary themes, such as architecture, art history, gender studies, history, philosophy, and psychology; while prominent topics include Wordsworth and the Alps, Romantic perceptions of art, Romantic perspectives on other cultures and Antiquity, the unconscious and imagination, and the Shelleys. In the introduction, Meyer explains the wide-ranging nature of the collection, stating that the papers 'take a fresh look at the various ways in which the Romantics redefined traditional notions of literature, the arts, the humanities, and science, exploring new ground in a literal and a metaphorical sense.'

The first essay by Stephen C. Behrendt, entitled 'The Romantics and Media', explores how 'physical media may illustrate changes in class and material culture…' throughout a society. Behrendt recounts his practice of taking students into the special collections of the university library so that they can touch, feel, and see a Romantic text. This allows the students, many of whom do not remember pre-Internet life, to develop a physical connection with the texts, stimulating their engagement with questions about print and publishing culture in post-Enlightenment Britain. The essay then considers the role of books in the nineteenth century as 'vehicles of social control'. For example, frontispieces and other physical aspects of books appealed to potential buyers, attracting a variety of customers. Behrendt's essay is pertinent for two reasons: first it highlights what, I think, many academics take for granted, and that is the availability of books as primary and secondary sources in our research. Secondly, the article looks at the publishing/purchasing mentality not just from a socio-economic perspective, but from an anthropological one as well.

In 'Are These the Alps Which I See Before Me, Or Are They But Some Mountains Of The Mind?', Mihaela Irimia examines the importance of George Keate (1729-97), whose poem 'The Alps, A Poem' was published in 1763 and is the first poetic impression of the Alps written in English. Keate celebrates the mountains' 'natural perfection', contrasting the 'artistic accomplishment' of (neo)Classical Rome. Irimia argues that 'The Alps' is a precursor to such Romantic nature-based poems as *The Prelude*, 'Mont Blanc' and *Childe Harold's Pilgrimage*, Canto III; and that if we frame the poem within the bounds of Burke's sublime, 'The Alps' betrays a solid neo-Classic background in an anthropomorphized image of Fancy. In Keate's work, the poet becomes a poet-tourist when, addressing Fancy, he evokes the sublime as fundamental to

the development of the psyche. This substantial essay sheds new light on a seemingly minor and obscure poet.

In Raimund Borgmeier's 'Wordsworth's *Guide to the Lakes* – a Landmark in the Opening Up of a Literary Region' scholars *finally* have a succinct and well-crafted essay on Wordsworth's neglected text. Borgmeier's analysis is rooted in historical information. For example, the first edition was published anonymously in 1810 because Wordsworth had a low opinion of the work; yet within 13 years, Wordsworth had published three more editions of the *Guide* appendixing them with new annotations because he 'wanted to lead his readers to new ways of seeing and appreciating the beauty of the region' (40). Borgmeier suggests that the *Guide* complements Wordsworth's poetics as formulated in the preface to *Lyrical Ballads*. In the second section, Borgmeier positions the *Guide* as a means to open the Lake District as a literary region. He feels that Wordsworth's prose descriptions of the Lake District in *The Guide* are as poetic as his verse, which drew generations of nature-seekers to the Lakes.

Wordsworth remains in focus in Martina Dominus Veliki's 'Wordsworth's Sense of Place: Dominion or Assimilation'. This thoroughly enjoyable article maintains that Nature is first and foremost Wordsworth's reality, and that the poet is best interpreted through the notions of localness and rootedness, whereby Grasmere becomes apart of his consciousness and psychology. Here Veliki finds a sense of homeliness and familiarity. (Re)calling Grasmere evokes a temporal situatedness where the poet is 'attached', his consciousness experiencing 'spots of time'.

The first of the next essays, addressing fine art, is Felicitas Menhard's 'Picture Perfect? Exploring Landscape, Vision, and Motion in Romantic Painting and Poetry'. Menhard examines how the human subject moves in and through natural scenes, showing how the art of 'peripatetic' Romantics challenges earlier aesthetic ideas, which were often associated with the stasis of statues and paintings. Walking, which now connotes intellectual activity, stimulates the quest for self-knowledge. Menhard discusses 'Stepping Westward' and 'Frost at Midnight', while discovering the epitome of such a topos in *Childe Harold's Pilgrimage*, where the pilgrim doesn't conquer but merges with the space he is traveling through. By contrast, Wordsworth's early work 'The Borderers', while natural in subject matter, remained fixated on the organized structure of Enlightenment – on clarity, organization, arrangement: here, motion becomes stagnant. Menhard's essay impressively negotiates the aesthetics of poetry and painting through well-documented arguments.

Cecilia Powell and Frederick Burwick examine the visual arts of Turner and Gillray respectively. Powell's theme is one of fusion and change: she shows how Turner's view of the Rhine evolved from horror to appreciation. Burwick, on the other hand, scrutinises Johann Christian Hüttner's appropriative interpretations of Gillray's character sketches. Burwick approaches Hüttner's hermeneutics from a transcultural perspective, explaining that by providing the reader with a deconstruction of Gillray, the German journalist is able to exemplify the literary allusion that reflects profitable intellectual commerce

between the German and English Romantics.

The next three papers examine the common theme of views of 'remote' others. For example, Miroslawa Modrzewska, Peter J. Kitson, and Richard Lansdown look at the 'Romantic Ukraine', 'Romantic Explorations of China' and 'The Romantic Pacific', respectively. Modrzewka's fascinating essay discusses Ivan Mazepa (1639-1709), the Ukrainian nobleman who inspired Byron's eponymous poem. Modrzewska argues that 'Byron relies heavily on Polish and Ukrainian romantic and post-romantic literature which, in turn, relies on 17th century baroque art and a transformation of Baroque literary style into a new manner of literary expression' (105). Following Byron's tale, the Polish poet Antoni Malczewski's narrative tale 'Maria' (1825) is the first Polish narrative to use a Byronic structure, ultimately giving rise to the new Ukrainian school of poetry.

Kitson amply demonstrates the first- and second-generation Romantics' connections with China and the East, while presenting a thesis as to why there is no romantic epic narrative focusing in and on China. Lansdowne's concern is with the Pacific island-nations explored by Cook. Despite the limitation in the Romantics' interest, he is able to link islands as they appear in the works of Wordsworth, Coleridge, and Southey with the more prominent poetic islands of Byron.

Two papers link Romanticism to classical and Egyptian antiquity; the first, Noah Herrington's 'Romantic Explorations of Antiquity', begins with background information on Baron D'Hancarville, whose *Collection of Etruscan, Greek and Roman Antiquities* established a foundation of early Romantic art history. Herrington's next two sections elaborate on the *metaphysique de l'art* which grounds itself in the Enlightenment. It emerges that d'Hancarville's armchair ethnography is counterbalanced by a strong empirical interest. Herrington's original approach involves thinking his way into how a neo-Classical scholar would have viewed antiquity. Stefanie Fricke's 'Egyptian Hieroglyphs in the Romantic Age' focuses on the representation of Egyptian hieroglyphs and their role in the depiction of ancient and contemporary Egypt with a special emphasis on the influence of British culture and British national identity. Notably, Fricke treats 'Ozymandias' as a fiction because it 'describes a statue that never existed' (173).

The next trio of essays 'scrutinize the modern and postmodern implications of Romantic perspectives of the self and world' (3) and in my opinion forms the backbone of the collection. Rolf Lessenich's 'Romanticism and the Exploration of the Unconsciousness' provides a brief history of the analysis of the soul and unconscious from the Enlightenment through the Romantic period. He stresses that early Enlightenment writers, favoring the approaches of Hobbes and Locke in their introspective approach to the mind, found the universe ever more chaotic the deeper they looked. Thus the Graveyard poets 'looked to the nocturnal world of nightmares and death which were poeticized by "sensitive melancholy"' (187). Lessenich argues that this sensitive melancholy, along with Burkean and Kantian ideas of the sublime, prevails in

the early Romantic poets. He concludes with a discussion of how each of Thoroslev's aspects of the Byronic Hero are 'types of the self-introspective Romantic hero haunted by an ever growing awareness of man's split human nature' (194). James Vigus's 'Hazlitt and Hume' takes up the post-Lockean debate by ascertaining that for both writers, the imagination is responsible for constructing personal identity, which can be constructed negatively as delusion and positively as creative or artistic narration. According to Vigus, Hazlitt's bold, central claim is that 'my interest in my future self is inseparable from and not essentially more powerful than my interest in other people's future selves' (204). This is coupled with the Humean idea that 'the imagination bundles together a mass of perceptions and makes order out of them' (206). Vigus's thesis regarding Hume's influence on Hazlitt informs a comparative examination that could well be extended further. Martin Procházka's easy-to-follow 'From the Apocalypse to Infinity: Blake's Visions of Imagination' discerns affinities between Blake's reflections on art and Nietzsche's idea of the 'will to power'. Blake's notion of imagination may seem linked to Platonic metaphysics and to his (Christian) understanding of the Bible; however, Blake utilizes the world of imaginations as opposite of the finite, temporal and changeable. For Procházka, the spatial-temporal perspective of Blake's imagination constitutes a value-perspective that anticipates the Nietzschean revaluation of 'good and evil.' In tracing this anticipation, Procházka does not neglect the influence of Swedenborg's notions of Hell on Blake's poetry, in which 'apocalyptic images and symbols are used to stimulate the imagination which transforms the basic human feelings and perceptions' (213). These three essays, all very lucidly written, form the cornerstone of interdisciplinary analysis between philosophy and Romantic literature.

The next triad of essays centers upon the Wollstonecraft-Shelley circle. Stephanie Dumke's essay 'A Chameleon under Goethe's Leaves: Shelley and the *Farbenlehre*' demonstrates Goethe's influence on P.B. Shelley which relates above all to 'the *experience* of opposites or polarities in *this* world' (222). Dumke does not claim that Shelley was familiar with Goethe's *Farbenlehre* (Theory of Colors), but she points out that he might have been exposed to the early ideas that also appear in *Faust* Part 1, since Goethe worked on both texts simultaneously. According to Dumke, Shelley sees the philosopher in Goethe, as the latter expounds his anti-Newtonian theory of light. Although the essay would have benefited from a closer comparison between *Faust* and Shelley's poems, Dumke convincingly connects the two writers. Next, Natsuko Hirakura's 'The Portrait of a Family: Wollstonecraft's *Letters from Sweden*' examines Wollstonecraft's attempt to re-establish family ties that are on the verge of breaking. Throughout Hirakura's deconstruction of *Letters* one is able to see the tension between Wollstonecraft the writer, the feminist, the traveler, the mother and the wife. Wollstonecraft's familial devotion clearly emerges, but so does her struggle with her own identity in coming to terms with her feminist desires. The final essay focusing on the Shelleys is Rebecca Domke's 'Feminizing the Historical Novel: Mary Shelley's *Perkin Warbeck*'. Domke

indicates that modern critics' neglect of the work is unjustified on two grounds: first, she challenges the presumption that it owes its significance to Scott's historical novels; and second, she shows that the novel 'carries intriguing autobiographical implications' (239). Domke very forcefully argues that while Scott's version of history is masculine, Mary Shelley's is feminine, and that whereas Scott's Tory progressive politics are evident, Mary Shelley aspires to impartiality and disinterestedness.

The final essay in the collection is Christine Lai's 'Symbols in Stone: The Architecture of Power in Regency London'. According to Michael Meyer, Lai's essay is the 'keystone' of the volume (5). Lai demonstrates how buildings can articulate practical, aesthetic, or symbolic and political purposes as well as become beacons of national unity and glory. She writes well on the flourishing of post-Waterloo architecture in London, including the extensive urban expansion from Paddington to Bloomsbury and from Belgravia to Pimlico. It is the might of Britain that is most evident in this metropolitan growth and it is this which, as Lai describes, Napoleon III seeks to emulate in Paris. The second-generation Romantics, in their own ways, came to loathe the urban sprawl of London and compared it to a 'bloody circus'. Lai's essay, avoiding a superficial approach to the architectural aesthetics, enquires into the meaning and symbolism of the façades which attain their own form of sublimity. Readers are sure to take their next trip to London full of Regency images in mind.

Romantic Explorations is a wonderful collection that all Romanticists should have in their libraries. Aside from the fact that there is something for everyone, those articles that delve into esoteric topics encourage a re-evaluation of standard pictures of the Romantic movement, as well as providing new scholarship in areas not previously examined. It will both inspire established scholars to further expand their research and provide useful signposts to budding academics.