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Handbook of British Romanticism

(Berlin: De Gruyter, 2017)

edited by Ralf Haekel

As his introduction to the *Handbook of British Romanticism* makes clear, the volume's editor, Ralf Haekel is keenly aware that the very idea of such an enterprise may appear anachronistic to many. Who needs a heavy and hardbound "handbook" in the age of the Internet? He thus insists that the book is not meant to be consulted for information on specific topics (old-fashioned for "google"), nor to inform readers of what British Romanticism *is* in a narrow sense, but rather to make readers aware of, or better yet, participants in, current debates and reflections on a vast array of topics germane to studies in British Romanticism. As Haekel puts it, "Romanticism today needs to be seen as an open field rather than a clearly defined and distinct concept" (1).

Thus, rather than serving as a font of knowledge, the handbook wants to "present and reflect on the current debate within Romantic studies . . . most of all the status of present-day theory within the field" (1). If there is a central question at stake, it is not "what is British Romanticism?" but something like: what is the status of scholarship on British Romanticism in the aftermath of New Historicism and the heyday of theory in the late twentieth century? Or, as the editor puts it, the book "poses the question of what has happened since the historicist turn" (1). As scholars of Romanticism, having moved beyond the rise and fall of the Big Six, as well as beyond what we might generally label the *critical turn* at the end of the twentieth century, and into the era of digital textuality, where are we now? As a vibrant engagement with this question, rather than an attempt at definitive answers, the *Handbook of British Romanticism* constitutes both a useful introduction to students new to the field, pointing them toward current theoretically and canonical concerns, as well as to scholars looking for a sense of the directions scholarship in the field is currently taking.

At 715 pages, and with contributions from thirty-nine authors, this handbook is indeed a vast undertaking. It is divided into the three sections of "Systematic Questions," "Romantic Genres," and "Close Readings," each of which is comprised by a number of individually authored essays. The editor, Ralf Haekel, himself contributed a chapter on Sydney Owenson's *The Wild Irish Girl*, to the "Close Readings" section, as well as the introduction in which he lays out the practical and theoretical intentions of the handbook itself, positioning it within the context of twenty-first century Romanticism studies. As the titles of the three sections suggest, the handbook is organized systematically, moving from the theoretical/historical, to the generic, to the

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particular. Following the practice of German academic publishing, the sections and essays are organized by number and decimal sub-divisions (1.2, 1.3, etc.). Each essay is headed by an abstract and a list of key terms, then followed by its own bibliography. There is no general bibliography for the book as a whole. Great care has been taken to cross reference the articles, directing readers of a particular essay to others that mention the same terms or authors. Following the articles, we find indexes of both "Subjects and Places," as well as of "Names and Works." A list of contributors, with brief information on each, concludes the volume.

While acknowledging the inherent difficulties, Haekel does not shy away from attempting a definition of Romanticism that can function as a theoretical starting point for the handbook. The only reasonable way to do this, he suggests, is by recounting the history of the term itself—taking a look at where we have been in order to gain a clearer understanding of where we are now. His working definition thus attempts to be largely *descriptive* rather than *prescriptive*. The narrative he recounts will be quite familiar to scholars of Romanticism, centering on the establishment of the Big Six at midcentury through the efforts of Wellek, Abrams, et al, with a nearly exclusive emphasis on lyric in terms of genre and on "imagination, subjectivity, nature, and the original genius" in terms of theme (4). This "narrow" and "very masculine" canon dominated for a few decades until the rise of literary and cultural theory in the 1980s began to fracture its support structures (6). Once feminist theory, poststructuralism, postcolonial theory, New Historicism, queer theory, among others, had their day, the narrow canon, along with an emphasis chiefly on masculinist subjectivity, appeared wholly inadequate to the task of constituting a definition of Romanticism either as a cultural movement or as a field of study. Suddenly a host of authors once considered "minor," if considered at all, began to draw intense scholarly attention and to appear in new editions. Drama, prose fiction, travel narratives, and popular culture took their place alongside the "greater Romantic lyric" as genres that define the object of study.

There are many ways one might tell this story, and many players one could highlight. In his succinct version, however, Haekel views "the historical turn" as having the greatest impact. This seems accurate to me since, despite the influence of French deconstruction and psychoanalytic theory—Lacan, Derrida, Kristeva, etc., or, more specifically for the story of Romanticism, of the Yale school with J. Hillis Miller and Paul de Man—in the end the "historical turn" of Cultural Studies and New Historicism (which accommodates a vast range of social-theoretical concerns, including feminism, eco-criticism, race theory, etc.) left the most lasting impression on the field. And here the central player for Haekel, quite understandably, is Jerome McGann with his *Romantic Ideology* of 1983. But 1983 was some time ago, and Haekel wants to make a case for his version of the current *Stand der Dinge*.

Briefly put, having broken open the canon and worked their way through the rise of theory, along with McGann's accusation that the discipline of Romantic studies was itself firmly entrenched within *Romantic ideology*, currently

"supposedly outdated concepts such as the imagination or the symbol are again subjects of important studies, although in a strikingly new light" (2). Critics and theorists of Romanticism are returning in important ways to "key philosophical and aesthetic concepts developed in the Romantic age and to those problems tackled by the [Romantic-era] authors themselves" (2). Examples he cites for this more recent turn include Nicholas Halmi on the Romantic symbol and Allen Richardson on neuroscience and the concept of imagination. With these examples, among several others, as support he argues that we live in a time in which we are no longer seeking a theory to apply to literary texts in order to generate readings, but rather that we are returning to concerns (theoretical, poetic, philosophical, aesthetic) inherent to the works of the period themselves. "Romanticism" itself, if it requires a definition, can only have an "open" one: "Therefore, it is apt to apply an open definition of the concept of Romanticism that regards it as a period of transition, which 'tries passionately to come to terms with the modern world as it emerges through a series of wrenching changes'" (3). The quotation within the quotation is from Paul O'Flinn's *How to Study Romantic Poetry* (2001). The wrenching changes are things such the social upheavals of the period's revolutions, including the industrial one.

The idea that a definition of Romanticism requires a history, that its essence does not naturally emanate from the canon itself, speaks also to the tenor of the handbook as it emerges in the vast array of articles that follow the introduction: materiality, history, and contextualized readings are the order of the day. Even within the section titled "Close Readings" (twenty six of them), which comprises the bulk of the handbook, we are not talking about *close* in the sense of the New Critics or Paul de Man, but about readings that imprecate literary texts in such things as material culture, gender, economics, science, nationalism, etc., as even a cursory glance at the "Key Terms" that head each chapter makes evident.

It is obviously not possible to consider each of the handbook's thirty-eight essays, plus introduction, within the confines of this brief review. I will attempt instead to delineate the central concerns of each section, while turning to a few examples. As Haekel defines his working editorial principle for the articles, his desire is always to orient readers to the current trends in the field: "These readings always represent state-of-the art scholarship regarding the respective authors, and they critically engage with the most recent trends. The overall aim is to provide orientation—without attempting to simplify or unify—in an increasingly diverse field of study" (21).

Part I, "Systematic Questions," is comprised of eight articles focused on general topics that function as background to the articles that follow, always seeking to embed Romanticism in material culture and history. Topics include political and social history, gender and class, regional romanticisms, urban romanticism, philosophy of religion, popular culture and media, science, and the European context. Clearly this is not meant to be an exhaustive list of current trends. Any scholar could likely add a topic or two without difficulty

("disability studies" comes to mind), but it does provide readers with a vibrant introduction to the general concerns that engage scholars in the first quarter of the twenty-first century, post "historical turn."

Ina Schabert, in her essay "Gender and Class," for example, argues that Romantic-era literature is intimately tied to political tension and transformation, "an important agent in public life, both for the revolutionary, 'Jacobin' party and for the conservative side" (49). Tying poetic form to material culture and its upheaval, she notes that working-class poets toward the end of the eighteenth century began to appropriate blank verse and employ it in a manner that tended "to modulate from didactic seriousness [of Milton, Pope, and Thomson] to subtle mimicry" (63). Reflecting the open canon of our time, she cites as examples poets such as Ann Yearsely, Elizabeth Hands, and E. J. Blanford, along with Burns, Blake, and the pair of poets who produced *Lyrical Ballads*. Poetic form is not simply the choice of individual genius, nor is it dictated by literary tradition alone, but remains intimately caught up in intense social transformations of class and gender from which it can never be cleanly extracted.

Part II, "Romantic Genres" is the book's shortest section, with four articles: "Lyric," "Theatre and Drama," "Fiction," and "Travel Narratives." In similar fashion to the preceding section, these chapters generally attempt to imbed the genres in question within material culture and changing forms of representation in the years around 1800, rather than focusing on themes—such as self, nature, etc.—or on poetics alone. For example, Frederick Burwick's essay on "Theatre and Drama" looks to "social assemblage theory" in order to connect Romantic-era theatre to the "material conditions" from which it emerges, "economic, legal, social" (201). As Burwick clarifies: "as assemblage, the drama is the nexus not only of commercial trade, but also of social, legal, or political concerns" (211). It is an extremely useful essay for anyone desiring to know how theatre of the period actually came into material form. Sandra Heinen's chapter on fiction likewise situates the rise of the novel within changing economic conditions, literary markets, and the rise of new groups of readers/consumers. Here we also encounter an expansive view of the "canon." Even Michael O'Neill's chapter on the most traditional of Romantic genres, the lyric, moves beyond the Big Six to include considerations of lyric poems by Felicia Hemans, John Clare, Mary Robinson, Charlotte Smith, Mary Tighe, and others. The list of poets and poems under scholarly consideration, a list that has now long embraced women writers and others once considered minor, is open and vital, always able to incorporate new voices because it is no longer anchored in a narrow view of what the Romantic lyric is meant to be.

The bulk of the handbook is comprised by the twenty-six articles that make up the "close readings" of section III. These are arranged chronologically according to the authors they treat, beginning with Robert Burns and concluding with Thomas Carlyle. Here we indeed encounter the Big Six, including articles on Blake's *America*, *Lyrical Ballads*, *Rime of the Ancient Mariner*, *The Prelude*, *Don Juan,* selected poetry of Percy Shelley, and John Keats' odes.

Frankenstein, not surprisingly, is also the subject of its own essay. Beyond Mary Shelley we find a range of women poets, playwrights, and novelists: Ann Radcliffe, Joanna Baillie, Maria Edgeworth, Mary Tighe, Sydney Owenson, Charlotte Smith, Anna Letitia Barbauld, and of course, Jane Austen (*Pride and Prejudice*). The remaining essays treat generally well-known, if less traditionally canonical, male writers: Robert Burns, William Godwin (*Caleb Williams*), Thomas Moore, Sir Walter Scott, Charles Maturin, James Hogg, William Hazlitt, Thomas Lovell Beddoes, and finally Thomas Carlyle.

Of course, in our *post-canon* era a central issue of a handbook that includes chapters devoted to individual authors is the question of who makes the cut. We do not find Robert Southey, Thomas De Quincey, or Letitia Elizabeth Landon, for example (to mention a few of the more obvious exclusions). The editor does not attempt to delineate principles of selection, other than to suggest that "the focus is on well-known authors [and here he lists the Big Six minus Blake], but also on still lesser known writers," with Mary Tighe, Lady Morgan, and Thomas Lovell Beddoes cited as examples of this category. This appears to suggest that any list of British Romantic authors can only be representative. Having blown up the canon, scholars must now make their own case for which "lesser known writers" most deserve critical attention.

As an example of this struggle for inclusion, I note that in their piece on Thomas Moore's *Irish Melodies*, Frank Pointner and Dennis Weißenfels complain about Moore's lack of representation in scholarly investigations generally, as well as the fact that he does not find a place in the latest edition of Duncan Wu's anthology. Wu, they write, "does not even find it worthwhile to include one of Moore's poems, while incorporating, no doubt for the sake of political correctness, a whole variety of women writers who left little mark on the history of English literature" (474). These surprising comments might cause the reader to wonder if it was also "for the sake of political correctness" that Ralf Haekel chose to include essays on a "whole variety of women writers" in this handbook. Not knowing exactly which writers the two authors have in mind, I believe that "political correctness" (whatever that actually means in this context) has little to do with it and that Haekel (and Wu) understand that British Romanticism is no longer comprised solely of texts and authors that supposedly "left [a] mark on the history of English literature" (whose history?), but that if we want to get an idea of what Romanticism not only *was* but *is*, it is essential to include authors and texts not considered traditionally to have left much of a "mark." Their understandable plea for including Moore, however, is a sign that the list of meaningful Romantic texts and authors is still very much open to debate. I applaud the editor's decision to include such polemical remarks, as they remind us that, whatever Romanticism may be, it is not a fixed collection of themes, authors, or texts.