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## Romantic Prose Fiction (review)

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## Review Essays

Gerald Gillespie, Manfred Engel, and Bernard Dieterle, eds.,  
*Romantic Prose Fiction* (A Comparative History of Literatures in  
European Languages, Volume 23)

Amsterdam: John Benjamins, 2007, xxi + 733 pp.

When the International Comparative Literature Association made the decision to launch its landmark *Comparative History of Literatures in European Languages* in 1967, the ICLA was still a relatively young organization (it had been founded just a decade earlier), and the study of Comparative Literature had not yet fully established itself as a central academic discipline, especially in European universities. Given those circumstances, it seems in retrospect not only farsighted, but indeed audacious, for the early leaders of the ICLA to have undertaken such an ambitious and unprecedented scholarly project. That this undertaking has flourished is testimony not only to the energy and acumen of those who have guided the project over the decades, but is also a recognition of the respected place the series has earned among comparatists and in the scholarly world at large.

The ICLA standing committee that oversees the CHLEL series and commissions new volumes has over the years made some significant and appropriate adjustments to the scope and compass of the project, expanding it to include, for example, several volumes specifically dedicated to the literatures of the Caribbean and the literatures of East-Central Europe. Like the groups of volumes in the series that focus on specific geographical areas, the five-volume Romanticism “cluster” (of which the present volume is the fifth and final part) constitutes a kind of project-within-a-project, and not merely a topical subdivision. *Romantic Prose Fiction*, moreover, is in some respects the capstone of the Romanticism project, adding the final strands to the dense and extensive web of connections and parallels among the contributions to all five volumes. Like its companion volumes, *Romantic Prose Fiction* is neither a handbook, an encyclopedia, nor a narrative history—it is, rather, a deftly shaped and unusually multidimensional collection of individual topical studies. Its editors sensibly eschew any attempt to define Romanticism itself, choosing instead to treat it as a concept or phenomenon whose contours and meaning may be vigorously contested but whose importance and continuing resonance cannot. To some extent, of course, this was a tactical—indeed practical—choice, given the extent of

the scholarly and critical literature on the nature of Romanticism and the inevitable futility of trying to “settle” the issue, especially from a comparative or transnational perspective. Similarly, the editors have wisely chosen not to encumber their project by reviving and belaboring all the controversies that have swirled—and continue to swirl—around the term “comparative.” As Gerald Gillespie succinctly puts it in his editorial statement:

[O]ur “history” of Romantic prose fiction is “comparative” in several regards. It routinely crosses linguistic, cultural, and geopolitical boundaries, and it deliberately recontextualizes Romanticism in multiple generic strands and at many historical-cultural junctures. The present volume does not limit itself to monumentalizing Romantic imaginative writing and discourse as something marooned in the past, even though the peculiarities of its “pastness” are important in several chapters. Rather, the volume provides, at least in the form of a sketch or outline, a sense of how certain powerful moments or factors in culture—here in the instance of Romanticism—become built-in as active elements of the cultural repertory, maintain a certain discursive potency, inspire new imaginative writing, and serve as motivation or pretext for attempts to veer away in new directions. (“Introduction” xx)

It should be acknowledged at this point that many readers—particularly those who were trained in departments of Comparative Literature at Anglo-American universities in the last decades of the twentieth century—may be somewhat surprised to find a number of contributions to this volume in which neither the vocabulary nor the theoretical frameworks they have come to expect in much of contemporary comparative practice seem to be at play (in many of the bibliographies attached to the individual chapters they may also notice the relative absence of the ritual—and often preemptive—deference to certain canonical names). This is no accident: the editors have made a “conscious effort to distance themselves from the Romantics” and any “subservience to Romantic theorizing.” They did not wish to defer to any “ideological construct” or critical agenda, or to what the editors call “later brands of theory recycled or heavily derivative from the Romantic thinkers” (xvii), a category that would seem to include much recent critical and cultural theory. That having been said, the editors have set out a capacious tent indeed, welcoming an impressively diverse range of approaches (several of them in fact quite theoretically-oriented).

The volume is divided into three parts, corresponding, more or less, to what Gillespie has called the editorial team’s “central interest in the sharing of themes, the emergence of newer text types, and the renovation of discourses in Romanticism.”<sup>1</sup> The first of these sections, entitled simply “Characteristic Themes,” includes chapters on such themes and motifs as the Double, the Wanderer, childhood, music,

history, and sexuality. The second section, "Paradigms of Romantic Fiction," which is in turn subdivided into a subsection entitled "Generic Types and Representative Texts" and another entitled "Modes of Discourse and Narrative Structures," includes under the former rubric contributions on, for example, the Gothic novel, the fairy tale, the *Bildungsroman*, the idyll, and the detective story; under the latter heading essays on the fragment, the roles of myth, and the relation of Romantic prose writing to historical narrative and social discourse, among other topics. The volume closes with a section on the afterlives of Romanticism entitled "Contributions of Romanticism to 19th and 20th Century Writing and Thought," which contains articles on a range of topics, some concerned with the legacy of Romanticism (its reception, influence and *Wirkung*, to use the older terms), some with its spread to, and resonance in, diverse sites and texts, and a closing survey of screen adaptations of Romantic fiction. In short, this is not only a volume of considerable breadth and ambition, but a physically imposing volume as well. Its thirty-six chapters, together with the introduction, the three editors' "Conclusion" and the back matter comprise over 730 pages of text.<sup>2</sup> No merely synoptic account could do it justice.

It is fitting that the editors chose to open the volume with Gerhart Hoffmeister's essay on the French Revolution and European Romanticism. Hoffmeister, whose wide-ranging work on Romanticism is well known, is here specifically interested in the relationship(s) between "the narrative treatment of the Revolution" and the "transposition of history into fiction" in representative novels in England, France and Germany. His article, like Bernard Dieterle's chapter on Wertherism, which follows, exemplifies the editors' belief that Romanticism has to be viewed both within and beyond its historical context. Dieterle enlarges Hoffmeister's Western European purview to include—appropriately, given his subject—observations on Pushkin and Mickiewicz. In the next chapter Gregory Maerz (who extends the discussion yet further to include American literature), takes on the Romantic idealization of the artist, arguably one of its most powerful and lasting legacies. These essays are followed by a pair of interrelated chapters which are among the volume's most suggestive: Mihály Szegedy-Maszák's "'Unheard Melodies and Unseen Paintings': The Sister Arts in Romantic Fiction," and Claudia Albert's "Music and Romantic Narration," which in fact references Szegedy-Maszák's essay. These two articles are followed, in turn, by another pair of thematically connected essays. One is Wilhelm Graeber's "Nature and Landscape Between Exoticism and National Areas of Imagination," which outlines two parallel mutations in the conception and treatment of nature in Romantic prose: from the exotic to the familiar, on the one hand, and from a idealization of nature to an eventual "overcoming" of this "romantic concept" in favor of "a more realistic reproduction of locality" in a specific national context. The other is Paola Giacomoni's "Mountain Landscape and the Aesthetics of the Sublime in Romantic Narration," which examines that relationship in the fiction

of Rousseau, Goethe, Tieck, Foscolo, and Mary Shelley. After a felicitously-placed transitional chapter by André Lorant entitled “The ‘Wanderer’ in Romantic Prose Fiction,” which contends that the Wanderer theme had a self-limiting lifespan, and, though it may not have disappeared altogether with the end of Romanticism, that the “myth of wandering” had lost “all its timeliness” by the age of Balzac and the Realists. There follow two important essays which reach to—or into—the heart of Romantic thematology: Monika Schmitz-Emans’s “‘Night-sides of Existence’: Romantic Madness, Dream, Etc.,” which makes the case that one of the greatest contributions of Romanticism to modern consciousness has been its exploration and validation of madness; and Ernst Grabovszki’s “Doubling, Doubles, Duplicity, Bipolarity,” which should be read not only together with Schmitz-Emans’s essay, but also in conjunction with Sabine Roszbach’s chapter in Part II. The thematic section of the volume closes with another grouping of closely interrelated chapters: Bettina Kümmerling-Meibauer’s “Images of Childhood in Romantic Children’s Literature,” Michael Andermatt’s “Artificial Life and Romantic Brides,” and Thomas Klinkert and Weertje Willms’s “Romantic Gender and Sexuality,” perhaps the most theoretically engaged essay in the book.

The second part of the volume, in which morphological and structural matters take center stage, opens with Hendrik van Gorp’s essay on the Gothic novel as a Romantic narrative genre, which emphasizes that the Gothic is not defined solely by its formal, structural, and thematic features, but was also significantly shaped by the unique world of literary texts and practices into which it emerged and flowered. Manfred Engel, one of the volume’s editors, contributes a chapter on the *Bildungsroman* (“with a short note on the ‘artists novel’”), which attempts a taxonomy of the various types of *Bildungsromane* and sets them within the genre-system of longer Romantic fiction. (Engel uses his editorial perspective to advantage by making specific reference to other contributions to this volume.) Markus Bernauer then addresses the concepts of historical novel and historical romance, highlighting the seminal role played by Walter Scott’s novels (his article should be read in conjunction with Virgil Nemoianu’s related contribution, below). A chapter on the fairy tale and fantastic tale by Jörn Steigerwald next outlines the break, around 1815, when the literary tale—the fantastic tale—splits off from versions of the “original” tales and migrates, as it were, to other national contexts, with Steigerwald emphasizing in the process that the fantastic tale itself “does not constitute an evolution of the fairy tale, or a transformation, or an adaption to modern times, but exhibits an intentional transgression of the limits of the fairy-tale to establish a new literary genre.” Another of the editors, Gerald Gillespie, has contributed a chapter on detective fiction, which, though later often relegated to a secondary role, embodied and helped to shape a number of important Romantic themes. Gillespie’s article is followed by Santiago Rodriguez Guerrero-Strachan’s “Récit, Story, Tale, Novella,”

which offers an overview of the terminology used for various forms of short fiction in many literatures, beginning with German, and moving to French, Anglo-American, Spanish, Latin American, and Russian, perhaps of necessity simplifying things somewhat in the process (for example, in the section on the American short story). The generic subsection of the volume closes with a chapter on the literary idyll in Germany, England, and Scandinavia by Sven Halse, who provides a useful look at a relatively neglected Romantic genre, though one wishes Halse's list of secondary sources extended beyond the 1980s.

The subsection "Modes of Discourse and Narrative Structures" opens with the late Frederick Garber's "Address, Relation, Community: Boundaries and Boundary Crossing in Romantic Narration." Building on the anthropology of Viktor Turner, Garber's essay, itself boundary-crossing, examines the role of temporal and spatial relations, particularly liminality and "outsiderness," in *Werther*, *The Mysteries of Otranto*, *Der Goldne Topf*, and Poe's tales, particularly "Ligeia." Monica Spiridon's "Torn Halves: Romantic Narrative Fiction Between Homophony and Polyphony," employs a semiotic approach, looking to the Romantic theory of poetry to understand the interplay of univocality and multivocality as "instruments of intensive literary self-reflection" in Romantic narrative. In the next chapter, Remo Ceserani and Paolo Zanotti discuss the fragment as structuring force, thereby taking on one of the key developments in Romantic fiction and poetics, and attempting to construct a "typology of fragmentary prose writings in Romanticism." Sabine Roszbach's chapter, entitled "Mirroring, Abymization, Potentiation (Involution)" treats an aesthetic most often associated with E.T.A. Hoffmann, in which the artistic imagination is conceived as a transforming, anamorphous mirror, whose potentialities are awakened (or "ignited") by intoxication, but which was eventually displaced by those of the abyss. That chapter is followed by John Isbell's graceful essay "Romantic Novel and Verse Romance, 1750–1850: Is There a Romance Continuum?" which concludes that the line between Romantic poetry and prose is "less formal than epistemological," and that, in constructing its romances, "the age chose prose, verse, or both according to circumstance." Dorothy Figueira's "Myth in Romantic Prose Fiction" discusses the Romantic "sacralization of the world," and the double-edged legacy of that sacralization in the rise of national ideologies. In the chapter "From Historical Narrative to Fiction and Back: A Dialectical Game," Virgil Nemoianu, who understands the complexities of Romanticism better than most, explains the emergence and appeal of the historical novel during Romanticism as the product of three forces: the perennial contest between poetry and history, the "explosive" emergence of history as a central learned discipline, and the dearth of a form that could "tame" or lend structure to the revolutionary changes which characterized the age. And finally Annette Paatz, in her "Romantic Prose Fiction and the Shaping of Social Discourse in Latin America," presents a balanced overview of an un-

usually complicated subject, especially informative for those readers who are more familiar with the literatures of other regions. The author emphasizes that in the Latin American novel, “literary form and sociopolitical function are related in a very complex and at times even contradictory way.”

The third section of the volume, entitled “Contributions of Romanticism to 19th and 20th Century Writing and Thought,” contains eight essays on the afterlives of Romantic prose fiction, examining some of the extensive traces it has left—and continues to leave—in various nineteenth- and twentieth-century texts, movements, forms, and practices. The titles of the essays in this section attest to the heterogeneity of its subject matter: they include Jüri Talvet’s “Narrative Maneuvers in the ‘Periphery’: The Spanish and Latin American Novel during Romanticism,” Jeanne Smoot’s “Romantic Thought and Style in 19<sup>th</sup> century Realism and Naturalism,” Joel Black’s “Romantic Legacies in Fin-de-siècle and Early Twentieth-Century Fiction,” Steven Sondrup’s “Framing C.J.L. Almqvist: The Narrative Frame of *Törnrosens bok* and Romantic Irony,” José Ricardo Chaves’s “Romanticism, Occultism and the Fantastic in Spain and Latin America,” Yokota-Murakami Takayuki’s intriguing “Romantic Prose Fiction in Modern Japan: Finding an Expression Against the Grain,” the late Owen Aldridge’s “Ludic Prose from Sterne to Carlos Fuentes,” which is grounded in Aldridge’s lifelong engagement with the eighteenth century, and Elaine Martin’s “Rewrites and Remakes: Screen Adaptations of Romantic Works,” which also includes an extensive filmography. Each of the chapters in this section examines a noteworthy aspect of a continuing Romantic presence, though it does not include any chapters that explicitly and directly confront the question of whether the characteristics we identify or associate with Romanticism would mark it as a kind of pre-postmodernism, as a number of contemporary critics have alleged (and as Monica Spiridon’s chapter, among others, indirectly suggests). Given that the volume attempts, as the editors contend, to view Romanticism from a metahistorical optic, it might have been worthwhile to have solicited one or two contributions which take on this and similar issues.

But Dieterle, Engel, and Gillespie are well aware of the fact that their volume would have exceeded all reasonable bounds if they had not imposed some limits on its scope. In their “Conclusion,” they especially regret not having been able to include contributions in two major thematic areas: “religious and spiritual expression,” on the one hand, and “literature which tries to define nationhood or to advocate the cause of specific peoples and their claim to [a] natural community of interests,” i.e., issues of national or ethnic identity, on the other (they refer the reader to the volume *Nonfictional Romantic Prose*, which contains a number of essays dealing with these questions). The editors also admit that they have “ceded more extensive work on the literatures of Central, Eastern and Southeastern Europe,” where such issues loom especially large, to the separate project on those literatures in the

CHLEL series. Though their list of regrets is long (it includes, for example, the lack of a chapter on the Faust materials), on the whole they seem to have achieved an equitable and successful balance: the absence of a substantial body of commentary on Central and Eastern European literatures is compensated for, it seems to me, by the extensive attention paid to the literatures of Latin America. But some of the omissions they acknowledge loom larger, such as the absence of any chapters on “the fundamental cosmological and psychological” models promulgated by the philosophers and theorists of the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries and their impact on Romantic texts and discourses, especially aesthetic discourse, and most especially perhaps on the modes and genres of Romantic literary expression. (The editors do note that these issues are treated at some length in a number of the other volumes in the Romanticism subseries of the CHLEL.) Some readers may also wish that there had been more engagement with the “reading trade,” i.e., with the changing nature of the reading public and the role of the literary marketplace in the rise and spread of fiction and fictional genres (perhaps especially “popular” fiction and fiction by and for women) in European Romanticism. Though a number of the essays in this collection allude in passing to the importance of these relationships, the accumulated body of scholarship on reading, authorship, and the role of “print culture” in the various national literatures has by now become vast and compelling, and a look at these matters from a comparative perspective would be illuminating.

All books have minor flaws, of course, and *Romantic Prose Fiction* is no exception. It is to the credit of the project’s directors that in this volume (and its companions in the CHLEL series) all the contributions appear in English, whether they were originally composed in that language or not, but it is also clear that several of the contributions that were originally written in a language other than English or by contributors for whom English is not the customary working language unfortunately did not make the transition seamlessly. In most cases, this is a matter of nuance, but in scholarly or critical discourse nuance can play an important role.<sup>3</sup>

Whatever this creature is that we call European Romanticism—a cultural epoch, a cluster of themes and practices, or a way of apprehending and reshaping the world—it has become and remains, in all its iridescent complexity, something that every literary critic and scholar—and not only those working in the Euro-American sphere—must contend and come to terms with. (It is hardly a coincidence that Harold Bloom’s *The Anxiety of Influence* emerged from the reflections of a scholar/critic deeply immersed in the problematics of the Romantic inheritance.) Yet even though we now have journals with titles like *The European Romantic Review*, which encourage interdisciplinary perspectives, most scholarly work on Romanticism in literature is still devoted (even in those journals) to the authors, texts, and cultural practices of specific national literatures. And while there have also been in recent years several noteworthy collections of essays on broad and transnational literary



subjects, such as Franco Moretti's multi-volume compendium on the novel, there are still relatively few truly comparative and collaborative studies of the kind represented by the volume at hand (and its counterparts in the ICLA's CHLEL series). The continuing—indeed possibly even increasing—insularity of so much work in literary studies, despite all the cross-cultural name-dropping and second-hand allusion, is not worthy of an age, or a learned profession, that claims to have recognized the need for a heightened level of global awareness. That, if nothing else, is a compelling rationale for projects like *Romantic Prose Fiction* and the other volumes in the ICLA CHLEL series, and for their widest possible distribution and circulation.

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#### NOTES

- 1 See his article "Comparative Literary History as an Elitist Metanarrative," in *Neohelicon* 32.2 (2005): 59–64, which was essentially a progress report on the current volume.
- 2 A word about the back matter: there is an invaluable index of names and titles, a table of contents for all four previously published volumes in the ICLA romanticism project, but no unified bibliography—each of the individual contributors has provided his or her own bibliography, in most cases actually a "works cited" list. Given that the roster of contributors includes scholars from some fifteen countries, it might have been useful to include a short bio-bibliographical note on each of them. While some are prominent figures whose work is well known throughout the world of comparative literary studies, others may be less familiar to an international audience.
- 3 In a volume of this size and complexity, small errors, especially typos, are also bound to occur, but rarely has one made this reviewer smile as broadly as when, writing this review in the midst of a hotly-contested American election, he noted that, according to the editors, there are those who feel that "the Caucuses" [sic] deserve closer scrutiny.

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Harold B. Segel, *The Columbia Literary History of Eastern Europe since 1945*

New York: Columbia University Press, 2008, xviii + 406 pp.

Building on Segel's *Columbia Guide to the Literatures of Eastern Europe since 1945* (2003) and on his other studies in Slavic and comparative literature, the present *History* reconstructs the historical narrative of post-1945 literary changes in Eastern Europe. While not the first multicultural treatment of post-World War Two Eastern European literatures (see especially the *History of the Literary Cultures of East-Central Europe*, eds. Marcel Cornis-Pope and John Neubauer. Vol. 1. Philadelphia and Amsterdam: Benjamins, 2004. pp. 39–176), Segel's volume includes a