

Romantic Prose Fiction by Gerald Gillespie; Manfred Engel; Bernard Dieterle
Review by: James Hodgkinson
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The letters tell the story of how Ruskin gradually made over the running, management, and even ownership of Brantwood to Joanna and her husband Arthur Severn. 'Letters from Ruskin to Joan have only previously been published as excerpts and are not generally available for research' (p. 4). The editors of the Library Edition of Ruskin's works included only a handful of these letters, and they failed to keep the idiolect, perhaps out of concern for Ruskin's reputation. This reviewer, like Dickinson, finds the letters endearing rather than embarrassing.

For instance, Ruskin writes that he 'wants his di ma to take care of his money for him' (p. 215). He asks Joanna to 'please [. . .] begin keeping my pockywocky money for next year' (p. 217). In Letter 210 he signs off: 'Me's oos poo old Donie —' (p. 223). In Letter 206 he shows his poetic side:

Oh di ma, if I only could build oo a palace with diamond windows and golden doors. and put on a story [sic] every birth day, as the shells do in the sea, and fill it with music like the seashells. and have my di ma to sing to me up at the top. (p. 218)

Ruskin asks Joanna: 'fot sood ve have done to understand each ovy if vee'd nevy learnt baby tawk?' (p. 214).

With its 'Idiolectical Glossary' and a Chronology, this volume of letters may be seen to contribute to what one may call Ruskin's 'autobiography', including comments on painting, on figures, some of them public ones, and on the events of his own life. Rachel Dickinson has therefore performed an unusual, useful, and interesting service. The letters shed light on Ruskin's own personality and psychology, and on how he saw himself. He insisted that none of his letters to Joanna be destroyed, which suggests that he may have considered them to be a part of his 'autobiography', to complement or supplement what Dickinson describes as the 'crafted and censored' *Praeterita*.

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Romantic Prose Fiction. Edited by GERALD GILLESPIE, MANFRED ENGEL, and BERNARD DIETERLE. *A Comparative History of Literatures in European Languages*, 23. Amsterdam and Philadelphia: Benjamins. 2007. xxi + 733 pp. €198.00; US\$297.00. ISBN: 978-90-272-3456-8.

Collections of essays dealing with European Romantic culture face something of a challenge: the topic is difficult to map, the dates of the so-called 'period' are disputed and in constant flux, and the 'movement' continually crosses linguistic, generic, and disciplinary borders. As a result, such volumes can fall into one of two traps: either they seek to encompass broader trends and end up lacking in close textual readings, or they are so sharply focused that they may be of limited appeal to more general readers. At over 700 pages, this volume of thirty-six essays, together with an Introduction and Conclusion, is more than comprehensive and makes a good attempt at circumventing such pitfalls. The fact that the collection belongs to an integrated sub-series — the others are dedicated to Romantic irony, drama, poetry, and non-fictional prose — helps to ensure that no single volume takes on too much.

The collection opens with lengthy editorial deliberations, which track the genesis of the project that gave rise to the volume and also, more usefully, offer conceptual

reflections on the sub-series, the position of the volume within it, and the rationale behind the book's internal organization. The essays are divided into three sections, dealing with Romantic prose themes, the broad notion of paradigms (including representative texts, issues of genre, and narrative technique), and the later nineteenth- and twentieth-century reception of Romantic prose and its influence on later thought and writing. Throughout these sections the discussions traverse the Romantic prose of Germany, France, and England, although they also chart the legacy left by this writing in Scandinavia, Spain, Latin America, and Japan. Similarly diverse is the treatment of other media and discourses, or, more precisely, their intersection with the genres, themes, and techniques of prose, such as Mihály Szegedy-Maszák's study of representations of the 'sister arts' of music and painting in Romantic prose. Set against this rich backdrop are the essays one might expect, although they remain essential: there are thematic contributions, such as Gerhart Hoffmeister's analysis of how international Romantic prose treats explicitly (Victor Hugo) and implicitly (Goethe) the progression and failure of the French Revolution; and Monika Schmitz-Emans's discussion of the irrational realms of madness and dream, which shows how Romantic prose dealing with such issues laid the foundations of key aspects of modern thought and writing, such as the rejection of 'any superior level of reasoning from which one could distinguish between truth and lies' (p. 165).

There are generic studies, such as Manfred Engel's remarkably clear and linear study of the labyrinthine genre of the *Bildungsroman*, and also less obvious discussions, such as Gerald Gillespie's treatment of the crime novel: while crime in literature was 'nothing new', Romantic prose in Spain, England, and elsewhere became the forum for 'a new genre in which crime fighters and crime solvers were central' (p. 345). The volume's third section is particularly illuminating, as shown by Elaine Martin's study of cinematic makes and re-makes of Romantic literary works, and Takayuki Yokota-Murakami's discussion of the complex reception and influence of European Romantic writing in Japan, characterized by both enthusiasm and rejection, as that nation opened itself to Western culture in the course of the nineteenth century. Such a wide and international focus ties in with the editors' aims. As the Conclusion states, the volume does not seek to imply that readings of Romanticism as expressions of national experience are wholly irrelevant or even spurious; rather, its intention is to 'explore strands of literary experience that often were common on a larger regional scale' (p. 700).

The texts are lucid, readable, and contain valuable contributions that simultaneously offer an overview of their material, draw together important threads of scholarship, and re-frame discussions in fresh contexts. Sabine Roszbach, for example, offers a fascinating sweep of the notion of 'mirroring' in English, German Romantic and post-Romantic prose embracing E. T. A. Hoffman, Coleridge, and Poe: whilst mirroring functions as allegory or as the philosophically grounded ideal of the 'potentiation' of reality in Jena Romanticism, in later and post-Romanticism it serves to reflect the subject's intoxication, madness, and descent into a psychological abyss. Roszbach's study is refreshingly well grounded in historical discourses of the time, whilst speaking to modern concerns. However, the contributors employ a variety of methodologies: Monica Spiridon, for example, examines how Romantic prose alternates between

homophonic and polyphonic tendencies so as to 'draw attention to its own fictionality and rhetoricity' (p. 450). She evokes Bakhtin to underpin her discussion, though perhaps neglects more recent historically grounded scholarship, for example on the polyphony of Novalis's *Heinrich von Ofterdingen*; even so, her discussion is cogent and illuminating.

A collection of this size is no concise guide, nor is it to be read in one sitting, but it provides a wealth of resources, references, and discussions for those seeking an interdisciplinary and transnational approach to Romantic prose and its legacy. The volume is neither too limited nor too narrow, and its strength is perhaps a truly Romantic one, namely its ability to be both universalizing and particular at one and the same time.

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William Hazlitt: The First Modern Man. By DUNCAN WU. Oxford: Oxford University Press. 2008. xi + 557 pp. £26.00. ISBN: 978-0-19-954958-0.

Duncan Wu, or his agent, should think again about his publisher. That William Hazlitt is a critically important figure and that he led an intriguing and eventful life are facts that provide this biographer with a sound platform from which large claims might be made; but there are, or should be, limits. When the subtitle ('the first modern man') is put together with OUP's preposterous launch leaflet describing Hazlitt as being 'at the centre of Romanticism', knowing 'virtually every major writer of the time', interacting with 'the movers and shakers of his era', or worse, that the life story here presented is 'full of sex, drink and political outrage', readers might justly question whether marketing and hyperbole have displaced serious scholarly endeavour entirely. Moreover, the Hazlitt that emerges in Wu's very good biography is precisely not central to the conventional definition of Romanticism: indeed, he is one of its fiercest critics, so evidently not embraced by its inner circles, and despised, repelled, and feared in turn by figures of authority and power.

Why is it important to be exacting about such things? Literary biography has of late become a genre afflicted by a perverse understanding of popularization. It is apparently more tempting to present the subject as sensational or outrageous rather than pursue historical veracity or any serious interest in the writings. Most recently, such indulgence has produced for TV audiences the sight of John Ruskin pimping his wife by way of waving a homespun condom at a bunch of maniacal, carousing Pre-Raphaelites. A number of factors are now combining in new ways to confirm or legitimate poor practice. Funders of UK university research are emphasizing 'impact', which in the arts and humanities has been foolishly defined in the ensuing debate by way of popular dissemination; there has been a spate of scholars complaining about how their work has been used or contorted by others, without acknowledgement or source citation, to produce books that will sell and may be readily adapted; academic research in English is pressurized to compensate for a couple of decades of work that has been unintelligible to everyone outside the profession and to many within it. One consequence of all this, perhaps, is OUP's decision to launch Wu's biography through a crudely written and erroneous flyer.

They should know better, and hopefully the readers of Wu's work will do so, for this book deserves a much higher level of service. This is a major, definitive biography that