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Beyond Locations and Genres: The Romantic Ideology Revisited

1 Alternative Romanticisms

"Alternative Romanticisms": the very title of this conference suggests that we all know what the alternative to these alternative Romanticisms is. And in a way we do: from our literary perspective "Romanticism proper" is still and in spite of everything first and foremost poetry, and so many of the promised alternatives in the conference programme are treatments of alternative genres. We are looking forward to talks on "The Novel in the Romantic Era," on "Re-Reading Shelley's Letters," on travel-writing, and on drama. The conference subtitle's second suggestion of where to look for alternative Romanticisms, the challenge to explore Romantic locations, is presumably directed against, on the one hand, exclusive notions of *English* Romanticism, and, on the other hand, the traditional and seemingly escapist bond between Romanticism and nature. This challenge is taken up with relish: the Romantic will be located in prison, in Bulgaria, in Germany, on the page and on the stage, and in the ruins of Kloster Nimbschen. And on yet another level, the Romantic will be located in non-literary discourses such as politics and sexuality.

All this suggests that A.O. Lovejoy's early call for a "Discrimination of Romanticisms" (1924) has not gone unheeded: there is no lack of Romanticisms, both alternative and proper, and the numbers seem to be ever increasing (cf. Ferguson 1991). While there can be no doubt that what the Call for Papers diplomatically referred to as "the gradual broadening of our understanding of 'Romanticism' in English-language literature" is an important achievement of recent Romantic studies, there is always the danger of rendering the term "Romantic" utterly meaningless in the somewhat contradictory process of extending the canon and aiming at an all-inclusive view of the period between, say, 1780 and 1832. We have come a long way from the early 1990s, when it was still possible to attempt an overview of the field in a book entitled *The Cambridge Companion to British Romanticism* (Curran 1993), to the more relativistic stocktaking at the end of that decade, when Oxford University Press

could only muster the nerve to publish its all-inclusive package of *British Culture, 1776-1832* under the somewhat defensive title *An Oxford Companion to the Romantic Age* (McCalman 1999).¹ It is certainly not by mere chance that this encyclopaedic volume does not have an essay on "Romanticism" in its otherwise exhaustive essay section, while the brief entry in the book's alphabetical section ends in programmatic resignation, stating that in its "intrinsic hesitation between the categorical claim for unity and a realist loyalty to diversity, the concept proceeds on its properly uncertain path" (McCalman 1999: 683).

The question is: what is the use of a "properly uncertain path" in literary scholarship, to paraphrase René Wellek's programmatic essay from the late 1940s (Wellek 1949). Or to put it differently, as Esther Schor did in her *TLS* review of the *Oxford Companion*: "Do we still call it 'the Romantic Age'?" (1999: 23). According to Schor, the "Princely [acronym] PFKAR – Period Formerly Known As Romantic" has already been coined on up-to-date websites, so are we not just "Clinging to the Wreckage," as the title of her review suggests? Her answer is both no and yes and illustrates the point I made about the title of this conference. On the one hand, there are few people today who would doubt that the historical period in question was much richer in cultural fabric than traditional accounts of the period of English Romanticism have suggested. As Schor puts it:

That a historical period dominated by two decades of war, huge population increases, rampant industrialism and a rapidly expanding publishing industry should borrow the name which Victorians gave to a handful of poets – poets of two distinct generations, whose contemporaries assigned them to three distinct 'schools' – does seem a bit of a stretch. (Schor 1999: 23)

On the other hand, it does not seem easy to abandon the term "Romantic" altogether. Even the *Oxford Companion to the Romantic Age*, which illustrates this historical complexity and the concomitant cultural diversity in exemplary fashion, retains it in its title. Esther Schor pinpoints this problem in her conclusion, and it is well worth to quote this in full:

How to explain, then, [the editor's] reluctant decision to affirm the habit by which the period "[takes] its name from the canonical group of writers who crystallized many of its key changes"? Why does the phrase "Romantic" "best [encompass] our conception of British cultural transformation"? The answer suggested by these essays [in the *Oxford Companion*] is, quite simply, that it doesn't, but perhaps we still need it to do so. To sever the term "Romantic" from the period that coined the term "mental fight," is simply untenable; it is to acknowledge that postmodernism has stranded us on one side of a gulf between words and the world. What we cling

¹ A counter-example without such qualms would be *The Oxford Companion to British History* (Cannon 1997).

to, in clinging to "the Romantic Age," is a world in which the stakes attached to intellectual commitments were high and the temperature of opinion even higher. Clearly, the Romantic notions that words can bend the world to our being, that what we think can be convictions, have not lost their attractions for us. But are we the last of whom this will be said? (23)

Here we could add another question, which might take us some steps towards unravelling the strange dependence of "alternative Romanticisms" on the unspoken assumption of a "Romanticism proper": who is hiding behind the "we" of Esther Schor's final sentences? Is it the readers of the *Times Literary Supplement*? Is it us? I guess these are fair guesses. But can this outlook really be taken for granted for all people? Is it not rather determined and limited by cultural factors such as, say, economy, education, gender? Is this not an inadmissible generalisation of an hegemonic idea of culture privileging language, writing, and the powers of the imagination? These are exactly the questions that have driven revisionist Romantic scholarship since the 1970s, and, with typical revisionist thrust, these attempts have not only tried to put Romanticism in historical perspective, but they have also tried to discredit or even exorcise it. But, as these introductory remarks have tried to illustrate, Romanticism did not go away, the exorcism was at best (or worst) only partially successful. The current state of Romantic studies seems to be characterised by a kind of doublethink which simultaneously denies and employs the notion of "Romanticism proper," resulting in the "properly uncertain path" which seems to present to be generally accepted as the last word on the issue.²

But is this necessarily so? This is the question around which the following observations will revolve, and they will do so in three steps: first, I will revisit the Romantic Ideology, which provides the theoretical backdrop of many a revisionist critique of Romanticism. In the light of the problems which arise in conjunction with the notion of a Romantic Ideology, I will then consider the possibilities of historicising Romanticism under the more general headline "The Historicity of the Aesthetic." And finally I will return to the title of my paper and present my own bid for an alternative Romanticism on a, perhaps, less "properly uncertain path."

² For an instructive stocktaking of the "material conditions" behind these conceptualisations, i.e. the current state of the institutionalisation of Romantic studies in the United States, see Rzepka (2001).

2 The Romantic Ideology Revisited

"The major achievement of Romantic studies in the last twenty years," writes Richard Cronin in his recent stocktaking of *The Politics of Romantic Poetry*, "is to have transferred to 'history' that glamour that was once routinely attached to the word 'imagination'" (2000: 2). Nevertheless Cronin strives to re-establish the imagination as an historical category, and he sets out to do so by singling out the inconsistencies and contradictions of Jerome McGann's influential attack on the Romantic imagination as a (seemingly) a-historical category in his book *The Romantic Ideology: A Critical Investigation*, published in 1983. So what are McGann's points and what charges does Cronin level against him?

The "ground thesis" of McGann's book is that "the scholarship and criticism of Romanticism and its works are dominated by a Romantic Ideology, by an uncritical absorption in Romanticism's own self-representations" (1983: 1). "[K]ey Romantic self-conceptualisations" of this kind are captured in terms like "spirituality," "creativity," "process," "uniqueness," "diversity," and, most importantly, "reconciliation" and "synthesis" (32). In combination, these terms render the Romantic world "a good and happy place: a place of enthusiasm, creative process, celebration, and something evermore to be" (27). In accepting these terms, this kind of scholarship on Romanticism – and obviously M.H. Abrams' seminal books are the principal target (Abrams 1953 and 1971), but McGann also includes work with a stronger focus on the sceptic and ironic dimensions of Romanticism (such as, for example, Hartman 1970, Mellor 1980) – accepts and affirms the central ideological construct of Romantic poetry, which combines an insistence on the autonomy of the imagination with an insistence on the autonomy of art. The resulting artistic programme is highly effective and powerful, either because or in spite of its paradoxical foundation. "The polemic of Romantic poetry," observes McGann, "is that it will not be polemical; its doctrine, that it is non-doctrinal; and its ideology, that it transcends ideology" (70). Against this background McGann calls for a revisionist historical criticism which reflects upon its own hindsight and the complex mediation of historical difference and continuity this implies. With regard to Romantic poetry itself, this type of historical criticism should examine textual strategies as indicators or symptoms of the Romantic Ideology, and in view of the fact that "not every artistic production in the Romantic period is a Romantic one" (19) this procedure could also mark the historical limitations of the concept.

As this brief summary indicates, the general sweep of McGann's argument amounts to a programmatic formulation of the central interests of revisionist scholarship of Romanticism since the 1980s, and in this sense Richard Cronin is right to point out that "after a brief regency in which the realm was governed by Paul de Man, Jerome McGann has succeeded M.H. Abrams as the most

influential critic of Romanticism, and *The Romantic Ideology* is his most influential book" (2000: 5). However, Richard Cronin is equally right to point out that this is "unfortunate, because although McGann is severe on 'confusion of thought,' 'the mortal sin of every form of criticism,' it is a sin from which *The Romantic Ideology* does not seem exempt" (5). Cronin proceeds to dissect the "somewhat suspect manoeuvres that McGann undertakes when he tries to work his programme out" (5) and objects first of all to shifting viewpoints. Hegel, for example, appears as quintessentially Romantic when McGann approaches him from his own perspective which is modelled on Marx's *Die deutsche Ideologie* and Heine's *Die romantische Schule*. When Hegel is compared to Coleridge, however, he becomes quite the opposite. The result of such shifts is that "throughout *The Romantic Ideology* the word 'Romantic' changes its meaning with a rapidity and an unpredictability rare even in the traditional critics whose confusion of mind is McGann's principal target" (6). It is indeed unfortunate that this mutability of the term "Romantic" is not even avoided at the very heart of McGann's argument, i.e. with regard to Romanticism's attitude to history. On the one hand, we read that the Romantic Ideology is "characterised originally by a powerful historicism and an orientation towards the past as the locus of the secrets of the historical process" (McGann 1983: 10) or, with regard to poetry, that the "Romantic imagination emerges with the birth of an historical sense, which places the poet, and then the reader, at a critical distance from the poem's materials" (79). On the other hand, we read that the Romantic Ideology introduces a preference for "artistic means with which to occlude and disguise [...] involvement in a certain nexus of historical relations" (82). Given this, it does not come as a surprise that McGann's attitude to Romantic poetry itself is fairly ambivalent. The Romantic Ideology seems to be recognisable enough when he is talking about the "false consciousness" of (other) critics, but poetry is another matter. Here McGann cannot quite make up his mind as to whether poetry "embodies" ideology, so to speak, in which case it would be the critic's task to uncover and expose the contradictions of that ideology, or whether poetry engages with ideology from an at least partly independent position, in which case the poems themselves provide a lever for deconstruction or even perform the task to a certain extent through their make-up. Needless to say, the latter position sounds suspiciously close to those a-historical claims of the Romantic Ideology which McGann tries to historicise elsewhere in the book.

This, of course, is untenable in terms of exorcism, but it is also an indicator of the special qualities of what has come to be called Romantic discourse (cf., for example, Rajan 1980 and Siskin 1988). Commenting on another groundbreaking book of revisionist and historicist Romantic scholarship, Marilyn Butler's *Romantics, Rebels, and Reactionaries* (1982), Richard Cronin points out that the "system of values" underlying this external critique of Romanticism, "if

consistently applied, would support the view that Erasmus Darwin is a better poet than Wordsworth" (2000: 9). McGann, on the other hand, strives for a critical distance similar to Butler's, but he shies away from exactly these uncomfortable consequences. The aesthetic dimension which is crucial in this respect, however, is so inextricably bound up with Romantic discourse that it subverts his critical argument to the point of inconsistency. The problem, then, is how to do justice to both the historical *and* the aesthetic dimensions of a given text.

3 The Historicity of the Aesthetic

How can this problem be addressed? It seems to me that the inconsistencies of McGann's study stem from two weaknesses. First, there is a lack of conceptual clarity. McGann's notion of ideology remains fuzzy and undertheorised. Elucidating one conceptual muddle ("Romanticism") with the help of another conceptual muddle ("ideology") does not seem a very promising idea. The resulting problems are exacerbated by the fact that McGann is bent on keeping Romanticism as a period term, while the ideological side of his argument suggests a far greater significance. In this respect, and that is its second weakness, McGann's approach seems underhistoricised. Although McGann acknowledges that the significance of the ideological dimensions of Romanticism unfolds only in the course of the nineteenth century, he seems to think that the continuity of the Romantic Ideology takes place only on the level of criticism. The poetry, on the other hand, is viewed strictly within the limits of what is conventionally referred to as "the Romantic period."³ While it is true that the term "Romanticism" was coined and established only retrospectively in the mid-nineteenth century (cf. Perkins 1990 and 1992), it seems that McGann should have taken his own claim that the Romantic Ideology persists to this day more seriously, especially in view of the fact that a fully-fledged ideology could be expected to move beyond the comparatively narrow realm of poetry. This is precisely the point that Clifford Siskin addresses in his 1988 study of *The Historicity of Romantic Discourse*. "I have turned from the concept of periods," Siskin writes,

for it has come to carry an assumption of abrupt beginnings and endings that has led almost all critics to write Romanticism off as of the second or third decade of the 19th century. However, that was precisely the time at which the constructs and strategies of Romantic texts became normal for the entire culture, not only constituting the new formal and thematic criteria of literariness but also – as the

³ Cf., for example, McGann (1992), where Tennyson's "The Lady of Shalott" is interpreted as "the sign of a new epoch" (749).

newly charged literary institution took up the cultural work of defining 'real language' and the 'common man' – transforming the prosaic self into what we now think of as the modern subject. (9-10)

In other words, it seems more fruitful to address the historical phenomenon of Romanticism in terms of its "discursive power [...] in both its time and ours," as Siskin puts it (3), than to restrict it to aspects of ideological correctness in late-eighteenth- and early-nineteenth-century poetry and later critical approaches to these texts.

For reasons of space I can only give a very sweeping overview of the main components of such a programme. The most important points are the following:

1) A closer look at the *Oxford Companion to the Romantic Age*, which I take to be the most ambitious and inclusive survey of the field, reveals a strong emphasis on historical change (cf. McCalman 1999). Its essays fall into four categories, and three of the chosen headlines emphasise the *transformation* of polity and nation, the *reordering* of social and private worlds, and the *emergence* of new knowledges. This emphasis is so pervasive that the lack of this marker in the section on culture, consumption, and the arts seems decidedly odd. However, in spite of this emphasis, the "postmodern" distrust of all kinds of metanarratives, which can be discerned in all contributions to the *Companion*, has led to a systematic rejection of attempts to formulate a conceptual framework for dealing with historical change in this particular period. Thus, there is no essay on, or entry for, "modernisation," and this is unfortunate because it could have served as a backdrop against which a functional view of Romanticism could have been formulated.⁴

2) Romanticism in this functional sense is inextricably bound up with the emergence of specifically modern notions of the aesthetic and of culture. Both the aesthetic and culture are in turn inextricably bound up with notions of subjectivity, individuality, authenticity, and originality. Furthermore, these notions emerge, or perhaps one could say "realise themselves," under specifically modern conditions of mediality: language, writing, printing, the electronic media, the institution of literature, its historically variable criteria of literariness, its relation to other arts or fields of cultural production, etc. The connective element in this complex network is the emergence of the modern individual, and the Romantic contribution to this larger process could be termed, in Clifford Siskin's words, "the Lyric Turn," by which he means "that feature by which creative and critical narratives, from the past and from the present, veer from the generic and historical to the natural and transcendent, metamorphosing all analysis into claims for Imaginative vision" (Siskin 1988: 12). As the use of the term

⁴ Such a view need not be reductive with regard to the aesthetic dimension. Cf., for example, Seeber (2001).

"narrative" suggests, the "lyric turn" need not be generically restricted but could be viewed generally, as Richard Cronin comments, as "the turn by which the self is established at the centre of the text" (2000: 9). It is important, however, to note that this is not a one-way street in which a pre-existing self usurps the text. Rather, the modern self comes into existence within the parameters of the complex cultural network of media-related and institutional factors mentioned above. Just like Romanticism, it is only in retrospect that it appears as a more or less stable entity and the origin of all meaning.

3) All these factors can only be negotiated in a larger evolutionary framework spanning the trajectory of modernity from "early" to "postmodern." In such a framework, the concept of Romanticism is closely related to the emergence of specifically modern author functions with their evolving strategies for legitimising authority. Broadly speaking, a movement from a recourse to supra-individual (i.e. religious, traditional, etc.) authority through subjective authority (frequently referred to in terms of the imagination) to linguistic/textual/discursive authority can be observed, but in practice all three dimensions tend to overlap in the complex network of modern mediality. It is in this abstract but temporalised space that the location of Romanticism as opposed to other discursive formations such as, say, enlightenment or neo-classicism should be explored, and here it seems that it stands for a specifically modern notion of the aesthetic which, in the course of its future development, proliferates beyond its traditional abode in art and literature to become a first principle in popular culture and in the *reception* of cultural artefacts. The evolution of specialised fields of art and literature, on the other hand, moves well beyond this first principle, but this development is to a certain extent restricted to the *production* of "highbrow" artefacts. So my argument does not suggest, as Jerome McGann fears, "that Romanticism comprises all significant literature produced between Blake and the present – some would say between Gray, or even Milton and the present" (McGann 1983: 20). Instead, the perspective adopted here could even be used to justify the use of "Romantic" as a conventional period term by making the reasons for doing so explicit: "the Romantic Age," or perhaps more modestly "the Romantic period," could in spite of its cultural diversity be justifiably called "Romantic" because at the time a segment of the period's culture established new parameters of cultural production and of cultural hindsight. Nevertheless, there is a continuity between then and now which should be addressed, and in this sense the use of "Romantic" as a period designation precludes an adequate definition of the concept.

4 Beyond Locations and Genres

To conclude: while there can be no doubt that the project of "Exploring Romantic Locations and Genres" beyond the traditional confines of English Romanticism has yielded interesting results, it has also pushed the long-standing debate about the definability of the term "Romanticism" into an even deeper "morass of difficulties" (McCalman 1999: 3). In synchronic perspective, the cultural artefacts in question become ever more diverse and yield ever more complex possibilities of definition, not to mention the fact that books like the *Oxford Companion* put them in the context of British culture at large. Here a re-differentiation of the cultural scene could only be attained on the basis of an at least heuristic definition of Romanticism, which could perhaps be achieved by employing a diachronic perspective. This, however, is hindered by an insistence on the use of "Romantic" as a period designation. In short, beyond locations and genres, there should be a renewed (and historicised!) attempt at conceptual clarity. There is a lack of theory in the field, and while this is perhaps understandable in view of the current dislike of definitions and metanarratives, it is all the more worrisome as contemporary theories are inextricably bound up with a Romantic heritage (cf., for example, Simpson 1993, Wheeler 1993, and Bowie 1997). It seems that we cannot really escape this heritage, but we should at least reflect upon it with what benefit of hindsight our so-called "postmodern" condition affords us and try to sort this out in a more systematic way than, say, Jerome McGann. Theory, mind you, is a way of asking, not of introducing new essentialisms and metanarratives.

So finally, my bid for an alternative Romanticism in the context of this conference is simply the observation that there are too many traces of Romanticism in our present culture to confine the concept to its use as a conventional period tag. In observing this, one need not stray too far from the traditional core of Romanticism in literature, i.e. the genre of poetry, but I will nevertheless introduce an alternative location by taking my examples from the United States: there are, for example, those strands of postmodernist poetry which, however qualified, re-establish the authority of a discursive subject after the linguistic and textual turn of modernism. American poet Mark Strand's short poem "Keeping Things Whole," written in the early 1960s, can perhaps serve as an example of the continuity of the Romantic outlook, albeit on a level which is altogether more conscious of the insurmountable difference between subject and object. Such a postmodernist Romanticism "speaks" very clearly about its subject's difference from the world, but it still finds its synthesis in the word and the act of moving.

In a field
I am the absence
of field.
This is
always the case.
Wherever I am
I am what is missing.

When I walk
I part the air
and always
the air moves in
to fill the spaces
where my body's been.

We all have reasons
for moving.
I move
to keep things whole. (Strand 2000: 10)

Note, in particular, the use of "field" as an abstract Romantic location, the Romantic theme of lack or loss ("I am what is missing"), and the generalising or even universalising impetus of a poem which nevertheless finds its solution in the individual act of moving ("We all have reasons / for moving. / I move"). The resulting experience, however, and this is post-Romantic, acknowledges the unattainability of an ever-receding wholeness, which, as the outermost horizon of experience, is nevertheless imaginatively (and linguistically) "captured" or "arrested" in the poem.

The Romantic heritage is even stronger and less modified in the field of popular culture. I take my final example from a contemporary genre of pop and rock music commonly referred to as "singer/songwriter," which is probably closest to Romantic poetry in its general design, but more authentically oral in practice. Here, the authority of the text is at least partly anchored in the act of performance in a number of musical styles, many of which rely on a staging of authentic subjectivity in singing (cf. Frith 1996: 183-245 and Potter 1998: 133-57). In this respect, Jackson Browne's famous song "Running on Empty," written and recorded live on the road in 1977, is a perfect companion piece to Mark Strand's poem: less abstract, less focused, but nevertheless dealing with the same problems; not "moving before" in this case, but "running behind":

Looking out at the road rushing under my wheels
Looking back at the years gone by like so many summer fields
In sixty-five I was seventeen and running up one-o-one
I don't know where I'm running now, I'm just running on

Running on – running on empty
Running on – running blind
Running on – running into the sun
But I'm running behind

Gotta do what you can just to keep your love alive
Trying not to confuse it with what you do to survive
In sixty-nine I was twenty-one and I called the road my own
I don't know when that road turned into the road I'm on

Repeat Chorus

Everyone I know, everywhere I go
People need some reason to believe
I don't know about anyone but me
If it takes all night, that'll be alright
If I can get you to smile before I leave

Looking out at the road rushing under my wheels
I don't know how to tell you all just how crazy this life feels
I look around for the friends that I used to turn to to pull me through
Looking into their eyes I see them running too

Repeat Chorus

Honey you really tempt me
You know the way you look so kind
I'd love to stick around but I'm running behind
[more recent versions: I wanna know who you are but I'm running behind]
You know I don't even know what I'm hoping to find
Running into the sun but I'm running behind (Browne 1977)

Note again the use of "road/fields" as an abstract Romantic location, the Romantic theme of lack or loss ("I don't know," "People need some reason to believe"), and the generalising or even universalising impetus of the song ("Everyone I know, everywhere I go"). Here, however, the personal and biographical dimension of experience is more strongly emphasised than in Strand's rather abstract poem, and a fairly conventional love theme is introduced in the final verse. Nevertheless, the difference between the singer and the world (including other people) remains insurmountable ("I don't know about anyone but me") except in the movement of "running behind," or, imaginatively, in song (and performance). In view of these fundamental parallels it seems fair to state that both texts draw upon the continuity of a cultural outlook which reaches back to the period which is still and in spite of everything commonly called "Romantic" (cf. Rzepka 2001). And yet, against the background of the general

thrust of 'postmodern' attitudes, I am tempted to appropriate Esther Schor's question: are we the last of whom such things will be said?

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