

James Vigus (Ed.)

Informal Romanticism

Christoph Bode, Frank Erik Pointner, Christoph Reinfandt (Hg.)

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James Vigus (Munich)

Introduction: Informal Romanticism

This volume presents the revised proceedings of a conference with the same title held at the Center for Advanced Studies of the Ludwig-Maximilian-University, Munich, 6-8 September 2011. Through the variety of topics and approaches offered by the individual contributions, the general aim of the volume is to introduce the concept of *informal* writing into Romantic studies.

British Romantic writers, like their counterparts on the European continent, famously tried out diverse, frequently new or unusual literary forms; the original, 1798 "Advertisement" to *Lyrical Ballads* announced programmatically that "The majority of the following poems are to be considered as *experiments*" (emphasis added). As the radio presenter Melvyn Bragg has recently glossed Wordsworth and Coleridge's enterprise, using a term aptly relevant to the present collection: "they wanted to eradicate formality from poetry." Moreover, the spontaneous overflow of emotions and ideas in this period did not result only in those works of poetry, drama and fiction that went on to establish themselves in the twentieth-century university canon. The Romantics also experimented with a great variety of informal modes, including notebook jottings, diaries, letters, travel journals, marginalia in books, and draft reminiscences. Such texts were not always published or even intended for publication, and they generally resist convenient assignment to any individual genre – though many of them can reasonably be enlisted in the heterogeneous category of non-fictional prose. Yet they are no less fascinating and worthy of study than formal works, which – as this volume explores – they may also illuminate, complement, or complicate. *Informal Romanticism* conducts the 'experiment' of suggesting that there may be sufficiently strong family resemblances between these miscellaneous types of writing to allow them to be treated (in the loosest sense, to be sure) as a group.

Accompanying recent efforts towards 'canon expansion,' especially in scholarship on the British Romantics, new editorial projects are now making informal writings accessible to an unprecedented extent. To name just a few such editions to which reference will be made again in the course of this volume: William Godwin's diary has now been published online and his letters in printed form; we also have a website containing the theatre diaries of John Waldie; Robert Southey's early letters have appeared online; a collection of *Nonconformist Women Writers, 1720-1840* provides a rich source of 'new' works, including several spiritual diaries; the extensive Henry Crabb Robinson Project, the first publication of which was *Essays on Kant, Schelling, and German Aesthetics*, will eventually disseminate a vast amount of writing on a considerable range of topics. Such publications join familiar series such as *The Notebooks of Samuel Taylor Coleridge*, the fifth and final volume of which was published just a decade ago, in 2002. As projects like these advance, superseding older and more selective editions, it becomes apparent that informal writings manifest an integrity of their own: marginalia, private scribbles, lecture notes and other such writing need not be approached as the poor relatives of more established forms, but frequently offer both aesthetic pleasure and unique information.

The need to consider informal writings seriously even in areas of study in which a formal canon may seem to be firmly established, such as the history of philosophy, is borne out in a recent work by Dieter Henrich, romantically entitled *Werke im Werden*. Henrich's thesis is that the essential idea informing major works of philosophy often occurs to the writer in a very brief, intense experience of illumination – a *eureka*-moment that typically follows a prolonged period of study and reflection. The detection of such momentary insights in a philosopher's biography may in turn provide a key for interpreting the major works – and it is often informal writings that most intimately reveal the genesis of an idea. Henrich's resulting call for a "literary history of philosophy" would thus point to a fresh prominence for informal writing, especially in its autobiographical manifestations – these being centrally concerned with 'drafting' versions of the self and narrating personal development, in a more or less fragmentary style. In this way, informal writing can represent a point of convergence where literary and philosophical discourses meet.

Further, the notion of the 'informal' tends to imply sociability, including the kind of intellectual and sentimental exchange in small groups that could, at least potentially, overcome boundaries of nation and language. Much recent scholarship has drawn attention to such 'conversable worlds,' above all with regard to the Dissenting milieu, refining the formerly dominant paradigm that distinguished between a monolithic public sphere on the one hand and the isolated artist on the other. The scrutiny of various social scenes in this volume, then, joins a wealth of recent work (notably that by Russell and Tuite, Wolfson, and Mee) that has underlined the extent to which the traditional myth of the solitary Romantic genius was one-sided and sometimes even misleading. In this respect, as in the convergence of literature and philosophy just mentioned, the spirit of informalism involves questioning and crossing generic, conceptual and social boundaries rather than cementing them. For this reason, too, it seemed especially important to include a strong comparative aspect in this collection, so reinforcing the focus of the *Studien zur Englischen Romantik* series to date on the European dimensions of Romanticism (see especially Bode/Domsch). The research on German and Italian texts presented in this book again builds on manuscript research and on pioneering editions of informal writings, including the autobiographical fragments and the *Zibaldone di pensieri* of Giacomo Leopardi prepared by the Leopardi Centre at Birmingham University, as well as the Schopenhauer Source Manuscripts website.

While in many cases making use of such editions, in a spirit of encouraging further archival research in the period, the essays in this volume do not, of course, exclude consideration of 'formal' or established canonical works. Indeed, *Informal Romanticism* is a deliberately open-ended and inclusive title: one of the advantages of approaching a topic that cannot be dealt with in an encyclopaedic manner is the scope it allows for a stimulating variety of themes and approaches. I hope that the following bill of fare will encourage readers to devise their own path through the book, since although the contributions appear in a logical sequence, they can also be read in *any* order. As Coleridge described the process of (informal) reading: "The reader should be carried forward, not merely or chiefly by the mechanical impulse of curiosity, or by a

restless desire to arrive at the final solution; but by the pleasurable activity of mind excited by the attractions of the journey itself" (*Biographia Literaria* 2: 14).

Felicitas Meifert-Menhard draws on some recent theoretical approaches to a relatively new field of study: marginalia. Writing in books could seem a perfect example of the most casual kind of informality, yet the Romantic margin was, as this chapter shows, an important site for reception and readerly response, and hence also for experimental self-fashioning. Central to Meifert-Menhard's conception of marginal annotation is the observation that such comment tends to have the effect of subversively undermining a position of textual authority. Meifert-Menhard then turns to a splendid example of a marginal conversation between Coleridge, Wordsworth, and Coleridge's son, Hartley Coleridge. Coleridge's insistence that a pencil comment made by Wordsworth on a page of Shakespeare's sonnets should be preserved for posterity is curiously echoed by a bombastic note to the same effect made underneath by the inheritor of the volume, Hartley, a note whose level of irony is tantalisingly difficult to gauge.

Informal notes on animals come under the microscope in **Cecilia Muratori's** contribution. Muratori begins from discussions of experiments on animals in the correspondence of Johann Friedrich Blumenbach with writers such as Albrecht von Haller and Georg Christoph Lichtenberg. Muratori points out that *eyes* feature prominently in such letters, in a twofold sense: the eyes of the observer or vivisector are portrayed as an essential instrument of scientific research that ought to be sharp and penetrating, whereas the eyes of dissected animals are treated as mere objects of study. Blumenbach's approach did elicit ethical concerns and objections, notably from a student who attended his classes at the University of Göttingen, Arthur Schopenhauer. In the second part of her essay, Muratori finds evidence in the lecture notes taken by Schopenhauer of the latter's distinctive application of the principle of keen observation. Emerging from his sharp comments on scientists' practice, Schopenhauer's own speculations on the lives of animals tend to include them in the ethical realm. In this way, as Muratori shows, Schopenhauer introduces a new principle: observations and experiments on animals should not be disinterested, but rather informed by "Mitleid": compassion, or feeling-with the creature.

Christian Deuling reveals a rich manuscript source of informal commentary on the British Romantics and their publications. Over many years, Johann Christian Hüttner sent extensive reports on the British literary scene to Duke Carl August in Weimar, who shared them with Goethe and other members of his court. Characterised by sharp journalistic wit, the reports contain summaries of new works with selected translations into German, in addition to items of literary news and gossip. Hüttner's choice of certain texts for commentary, especially travel writing, was partly determined by the requests of his recipients and specifically by Carl August's desire for information he could utilise in building his library. Yet as Deuling argues, the reports at the same time provide a kind of barometer of contemporary taste in Britain. Following a selection of Hüttner's comments on Romantic authors, Deuling provides a tabular summary of the number of mentions received by each Romantic, detailing which of their books appear in Hüttner's pages.

We now make the transition from a German mediator of English literature to an English mediator of German literature; **Philipp Hunnekuhl's** paper emerges from his research in the Henry Crabb Robinson manuscript collection at Dr. Williams's Library in London. Robinson tended to present his own informal writing as essentially subordinate to the works and ideas of other writers greater than he; yet Hunnekuhl is able to identify a distinctive 'voice' of his own that has been occluded in part by overly selective editions. Hunnekuhl revisits Robinson's pioneering philosophical studies in Jena at the beginning of the nineteenth century, citing a manuscript letter to Catherine Clarkson that casts new light on Robinson's own speculative stance in 1804. Using this evidence, Hunnekuhl shows that the idea of *love* is central to Robinson's approach to philosophy, finding that it reappears in Robinson's later comments on the ways in which moral ideas may find expression in art. By linking his engagement with the contemporary theory of physiognomy to modern theories regarding the way we actively shape the structure of our brain, Hunnekuhl lays the foundation of a comprehensive reassessment of Robinson's informal prose.

The breadth and diversity as well as sheer quantity of Robinson's writing again come to the fore in **Frederick Burwick's** "Henry Crabb Robinson: Informal Theatre Critic." Throughout his life, Robinson recorded his spontaneous responses to plays in his diary, exercising his judgment with what William Godwin had stipulated as a cardinal virtue: unrestrained candour. Burwick takes us on a behind-the-scenes tour of Robinson's long career as a spectator, especially at the London theatres, all the way up to the last years of his life when his weakened hearing and eyesight prevented him from appreciating performances as he had formerly done. Burwick assembles Robinson's comments on stage celebrities, including Sarah Siddons, who gave him 'more delight' than any other actress, and whose decline he witnesses with nostalgic regret. Drawing on his own lifetime of study of Romantic drama, Burwick contextualises Robinson's remarks in relation to the commentaries of John Waldie. He also draws comparisons between Robinson's informal responses to certain plays and published reviews, generally judging Robinson's comments to be the more penetrating. In reading Burwick's account, we watch Robinson watching himself: "my interest *for* the play was greater than *in* the play," as he admitted of Coleridge's *Remorse*.

James Vigus traces a little-known interest shared by Coleridge and Robert Southey over a long period, which they discussed with considerable ambivalence. As the revolutionary decade of the 1790s drew to a close, these Lakers were enticed by the ideal of informal religion they saw as represented by the seventeenth-century founder of the Quaker movement, George Fox. For a certain period, Quakerism came to seem a possible replacement for what Joseph Priestley's version of Unitarianism had promised but not quite delivered: a return to the minimalistic doctrinal simplicity of the early church. Yet both Coleridge and Southey tended to contrast modern Quakerism, supposedly entrapped in forms and ceremonies, with the liberating message and behaviour of Fox. They also began to turn against Quakerism at the height of the Napoleonic wars, believing that its peace testimony destroys its claim to moral purity. Having identified a source for Coleridge's record of gratitude to Fox in *Biographia Literaria*, this chapter concludes with an analysis of Southey's manuscript fragment on "The Life

of George Fox" (1821), in which this Laker's condemnation of Quaker enthusiasm reaches its zenith.

Franco D'Intino builds on his own achievements as an editor of Giacomo Leopardi's informal writings as he directs attention to the Italian poet's habit of ironising and even undermining expectations that he should appear as the author of an immaculately structured *opus*. Observing parallels with Coleridge's "Kubla Khan" and other Romantic works, D'Intino emphasises the ostentatious incompleteness of many of Leopardi's texts, in which the Plato-conscious motif of the imperfect recollection of erotically charged song regularly reappears. In particular, D'Intino examines Leopardi's notes towards an autobiographical novel, entitled "Vita abbozzata di Silvio Sarno" – "abbozzata" signifying 'sketched' or 'drafted.' Invoking Coleridge's above-quoted account of the activity of the mind in reading, D'Intino suggests that the peruser of these manuscript notes is required not so much to read as to perform or 'execute' the text, as though it were a song score, as it leaps from point to point in a series of 'etceteras' towards the inevitable death of the poet – and then ends in mid-sentence.

The theme of performativity is also central to **Angela Esterhammer's** contribution, the first of a mini-sequence of three essays focused largely on the 1820s, a decade that remains relatively neglected by scholarship on British literature. In her study of the silver-fork fiction of Theodore Hook, Esterhammer applies both the modern concept of 'remediation' (which can relate not only to the practice of adapting fiction to the stage, but also to literary devices that borrow techniques from theatrical representation) and the contemporary notion of 'speculation.' Ostensibly, Hook's tales are designed to match up trite, traditional proverbs to the modern world of getting and spending in would-be high society; yet Esterhammer detects in his nonchalant style a literary critique of sentimental novels, conveyed through a narrator who bears a certain resemblance to other fictitious personae of the period, such as Lamb's Elia. Hook's narrative world is one of theatre-like spectatorship, indulged in by narrator, characters and readers alike, and as Esterhammer shows, not only Hook's prose but also his life engage these remedial ironies.

David Duff reflects on the relationship between two of the forms most readily associated with Romantic literature, the ode and the 'familiar essay.' Charles Lamb's "Imperfect Sympathies," a controversial example of the latter, is in Duff's reading not primarily a manifesto for certain particular, outrageous dislikes, but rather a defence of 'imperfect' thought itself. Picking up an allusion to Wordsworth's "Ode: Intimations of Immortality" in Lamb's essay, Duff suggests that the essayist's art is one of *intimation*. In exploring (in suitably essayistic style) the full ramifications of that concept, Duff considers its implication for several of Lamb's 'Elia' essays of the early 1820s. His conclusion embodies a new assessment of this characteristic genre of that decade: even as the essay form offers itself as "a custodian of the 'visionary gleam'" now deserted by poets, it takes up the very creative energies celebrated by the ode.

David O'Shaughnessy uses William Godwin's *Diary*, which he has recently edited, to challenge the traditional assumption that after the heady decades of the 1780s and 1790s, the author of *Political Justice* descended into anonymous obscurity. Although Godwin's influence certainly did decrease, O'Shaughnessy traces his continued attendance at important events in Dissenting circles – occasions for which

invitations were not handed out lightly. In particular, Godwin took a close interest in the 1820s in the new London University, largely a product of the Whig reformist circles who had admired Godwin's own work towards the end of the previous century. Not only was Godwin personally acquainted with many of the members of the university council and professoriate, but he also took part in their social gatherings, including a series of soirées in the 1830s. In *The Spirit of the Age* (1825), William Hazlitt dismissed Godwin as to all intents and purposes already dead and buried; O'Shaughnessy's portrait of an elderly Godwin, whose conversation was by some still considered an 'intellectual treat' even at such a late date, calls that judgment cogently into question.

Timothy Whelan's discussion of three generations of a hitherto little-known circle of Dissenting women writers is based on his own discovery of a manuscript collection in two Oxford libraries. These informal writings tell us far more about the lives and interactions of the Steele circle than their relatively few published works. Whelan's investigation focuses on Elizabeth Coltman, correcting a previous misattribution of several of her works by recourse to an important manuscript inscription. Whelan draws attention to Coltman's "Journal, written during a hasty Ramble to the Lakes" (1796) – perhaps the first travel piece on the Lakes written by a woman to appear in a London periodical. By drawing on the manuscript journal of the same tour written by Elizabeth Coltman's admirer, Samuel Coltman, Whelan completes the picture of this tour in search of the picturesque and sublime. He concludes by discussing a laudatory poem by Mary Steele to Elizabeth Coltman. In this way, this chapter brings to light the strong personalities as well as literary identities of a group whose works and life have hitherto suffered an unjustified neglect.

Rosa Karl's essay analyses the ways in which the ubiquitous Romantic practice of tourism involved – and still involves – a certain kind of gaze. Evidence of what Karl terms the Romantic tourist gaze is to be found not only in canonical works of poetry of art but also in such informal pieces as Elizabeth Coltman's "Journal, written during a hasty Ramble to the Lakes" (with which we are already familiar from Timothy Whelan's chapter). In Karl's discussion a paradox clearly emerges: although the Romantic gaze has generally been figured as solitary, that is to say the opposite of a collective gaze, the success of this paradigm nevertheless played a major role in the development of mass tourism. Drawing both on recent theories of tourism and on the aesthetic theory of Kant, Karl teases out the assumptions about taste involved in the tourist's never-ending pursuit of authenticity, the real thing – 'unspoiled' nature.

It seems fitting that *Informal Romanticism* should conclude with a wide-ranging reflection on Romanticism that extends beyond the confines of the period and of any single type of writing. **Paul Hamilton** negotiates poetics alongside post-Kantian idealism in order to construct a sophisticated defence of 'political Romanticism' against critiques associated with Carl Schmitt. Occasional poetry might seem slight or lacking in weight if judged by the criteria of high Romantic aesthetics; yet as Hamilton suggests, all good poetry is arguably occasional in the sense that it rises to an occasion, as when Wordsworth hears an interior music above Tintern Abbey (a music that would bear comparison with the Leopardian song discussed in an earlier chapter by Franco D'Intino). Hamilton suggests, however, that such a "hypothetical adequacy to all occasions as such" becomes in Romanticism a philosophical understanding of the mechan-

isms of the self, such that theories of the latter can in turn inform our understanding of the kinds of verse Romantic poets write. Hamilton's investigation of the Romantic 'sense of occasion' focuses on the Congress of Vienna, an event identified in the poetic reflections of Byron, Shelley and others as a moment of rupture in the presumed continuity between poetic and political imagination. Romantic occasionalism emerges, *pace* Schmitt, as a realistic, imaginative effort in the direction of a non-authoritarian politics.

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A number of archival sources are cited throughout the volume, always with acknowledgement to the library or archive which granted permission for the respective extracts to be used. One such archive in particular has been drawn upon in multiple chapters in this collection: I thank David Wykes, Director of Dr Williams's Library, London, for his kind permission on behalf of the Trustees to publish quotations from the Henry Crabb Robinson collection here.

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James Vigus, Munich
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