

Jens Martin Gurr and Berit Michel (eds.)

Romantic Cityscapes

Selected Papers from the Essen Conference
of the German Society for English Romanticism

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

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Jens Martin Gurr, Berit Michel (eds.)-
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juggling on stage. Hand-coloured etching. 20. March 1822.
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Jens Martin Gurr (Duisburg-Essen)

By Way of Introduction: Towards Urban Romantic Studies

In a much-cited passage in *The Prelude*, Wordsworth states that his interest in London theatre, despite some enthusiasm, "passed not beyond the suburbs of the mind" (1805 *Prelude* VII, 507). A second illuminating passage which, in its implications, complexifies an understanding of the city in Wordsworth's poetics is from the "Prospectus to *The Recluse*," where Wordsworth within a few lines laments the state of being "barricaded evermore / Within the walls of cities" (ll. 79f.) and ascribes to the muse, the "prophetic Spirit! that inspir'st / The human Soul [...] / A metropolitan temple in the hearts / Of mighty Poets" (ll. 83f., 86f.).¹ The equation of the city centre with the most central part of consciousness, the mind, the creative impulse implied in both passages points far beyond Wordsworth's familiar complaint about the "the encreasing accumulation of men in cities" ("Preface" 597) – or the 'dominant' reading of Book VII of *The Prelude* – and alone lends itself as a starting point to exploring the centrality of the city to anthropological and poetological thought in the period.

Trott pithily summarizes the seeming paradox as follows: Wordsworth, "popularly regarded as an unbudgeable Grasmere fixture," is a "confirmed ruralist [who] is also an avid metropolitan, making regular sorties to London throughout his life" (15). In a recent reading of Book VII of *The Prelude*², Stelzig cites this assessment and goes on to make what I believe is too simple a distinction between "Wordsworth the 'avid metropolitan' [who] enjoyed his visits to London" and "the poet Wordsworth [who] tends to script the city according to the Romantic valorizing of the rural over the urban" (181). Stelzig does read Wordsworth's depiction of the city as "complexly ambivalent" (191), but it is precisely the facile equation of Romanticism with a "valorization of the rural over the urban" that is the issue here: The long familiar assumption that "one of the chief, if not *the* chief characteristic of [Romanticism] is its almost obsessive engagement with the natural world" (Peer 1) – and that this is concomitant with a lack of interest in and even a turn away from the city – has long been questioned, and the role of the city has been foregrounded in a number of important studies. After Raymond Williams's important forays in *The Country and the City* four decades ago, among the many more recent studies exploring the centrality of the city to Romanticism, I specifically want to mention Julian Wolfreys's 1998 *Writing London: The Trace of the Urban Text from Blake to Dickens*, James Chandler and Kevin Gilmartin's ground-

¹ Both passages are also referred to in Mark J. Bruhn's essay in this volume. In fact, the phrase "beyond the suburbs of the mind" provided the title of an earlier symposium of our society over 25 years ago: "Beyond the Suburbs of the Mind: Exploring English Romanticism" in Mannheim. This Symposium was held in honour of Hermann Fischer, the society's founding president. Cf. the obituary for Hermann Fischer by Michael Gassenmeier and Martin Seletzky concluding this volume.

² From among the innumerable discussions of London in Book VII of *The Prelude*, cf. for instance Williams, *Country and the City* and "Metropolitan Perceptions"; Gassenmeier, "Faszination und Angst" and "Poetic Technique"; Gassenmeier/Gurr; Stelzig.

breaking 2005 collection *The Romantic Metropolis: The Urban Scene of British Culture, 1780-1840* (cf. especially their excellent introduction on various expressions of a "Romantic metropolitanism," 31), Vic Gatrell's 2006 *City of Laughter: Sex and Satire in Eighteenth-Century London*, Ian Duncan's 2007 *Scott's Shadow: The Novel in Romantic Edinburgh*, Larry Peer's collection *Romanticism and the City*, which appeared in 2011 or, most recently, Gregory Dart's *Metropolitan Art and Literature, 1810-1840: Cockney Adventures*. These works have, each in their own way, contributed to a re-thinking of the connection between Romanticism and the city and have made the city more central to an understanding of literature and culture in the decades around 1800. Thus, it has become clear that "the cultural production of the Romantic period in England cannot be adequately understood in the absence of detailed attention to the metropolis from which it gained motive, structure and orientation" (Chandler and Gilmar-tin 33).

To continue this line of inquiry and to come to a fuller understanding of the role the city played for Romantic literature and culture was a central aim behind the conference and is even more central to this selection of papers. Thus, it is not so much simply Romantic representations of the city – or even literary strategies of representing the complexities of urban life – we are concerned with here (for the latter, cf. Gurr, "Literary Representation"). Rather, the more intriguing questions at the intersection of urban anthropology and urban poetics are central to this volume: How does *la condition urbaine* affect human individuality, society, cultural production? It is also precisely this interest in urbanity and specifically urban forms of cultural production and representation that has made us refrain from choosing as a cover illustration for this volume one of the 'obvious' visual representations of London or, say, one of George Scharf's delightful London sketches, for instance. Rather, the "Looking Glass Curtain at the Royal Coburg Theatre," installed in 1821, with its spectacular "metatheatrical" reflection on the urban game of "seeing and being seen" that Frederick Burwick discusses in his essay, seemed a much more evocative choice.

In this vein, Ann Bermingham's assertion in an essay on "Urbanity and the Spectacle of Art" is telling: "With urbanism came urbanity, and London's confident assertion of its own urbanity was matched with a behavioural aesthetic of individual elegance and sophistication" (156). Commenting further on the notion of an emerging sense of "urbanity," Bermingham notes that "the perfume of urban chic that hung about the London shops could be bottled and sold in the provinces. [Ackermann's] magazine *The Repository of the Arts* (January 1809) disseminated the new spirit of London urbanity to the rest of the kingdom" (158). Bermingham here addresses two related issues which have recently received a lot of attention in urban studies but which can be traced back to classical antiquity, namely the various implications of 'urbanity' and 'metropolis' as well as the question of the connection (or lack thereof) between urbanity and the city (for a more in-depth discussion of both, cf. Gurr, "Urbanity"): Both 'metropolis' and 'urbanity,' it seems, are not merely descriptive terms, but more or less strongly imply normative elements, even a cultural promise – and this, I would argue, is largely a *cultural* promise that is difficult to categorize. However, the concepts of 'metropolis' and 'urbanity' of course are not *only* normative: It does make sense to classify cities according to various criteria, and many attempts to define the metropolitan

character of cities are very enlightening (the most widely influential contribution is of course Sassen's). Thus, the term 'metropolis,' for instance, curiously oscillates between designating a populous city, a status of centrality as a financial centre, a traffic node, a centre of research and education or of publishing on the one hand, and a far less tangible '*je ne sais quoi*,' a metropolitan 'feel' of cultural promise on the other hand. Even in scholarly discourse, the descriptive and the normative components of the concept of 'metropolis' are not always neatly distinguished.

Moreover, throughout its history (cf. for instance Ramage), the term 'urbanity'³ has had strong evaluative implications. With Cicero in 55 B.C., '*urbanitas*' was etymologically tied to '*urbs*,' the city, and thus obviously to Rome, but from the very beginning it was a clearly positive term designating elegant manners, intellect, *esprit*, experience, sophistication, and thus a refined – urban(e) – lifestyle, which could, however, also be cultivated in a country residence. There is no space here to retrace the complex conceptual history of *urbanitas*, but as late as 1788, Friedrich Nicolai, after taking the waters there, noted on Pymont (even then hardly a metropolis):

When, for reasons of health, I stayed in Pymont in July 1787, I had the good fortune there to live in a small circle of estimable men and witty dames, whose knowledge, fine manners, grace, gaiety, wit and goodnatureddness endowed conversation with that urbanity and unselfconsciousness that can so enliven and cheer the spirit. (vii)⁴

At times, the term thus appears to have been largely dissociated from the physical space of the city. Given the question of what makes a 'metropolis,' one might thus ask more generally to what extent the quality of 'urbanity' is tied to the physical space of the city as a densely populated agglomeration. Though one can generally assume an empirical – if not an inherently necessary – connection between 'urbanity' and the city (at least since early modern times), a dissociation of urbanity and city is possible under specific historical, socio-cultural and geographical conditions, and an 'urbane' habitus can to some extent be cultivated in the country.⁵ Many forms of cultural expression, for instance, while empirically strongly associated with the city because they rely on urban density for the number of potential spectators, are potentially also possible in the country.

The connection between the city and urbanity *today* is generally seen in the context of the debate on the potentially decreasing role of cities and metropolitan regions in a process of de-spatialization in many areas of life, particularly with the idea of the "global village" brought about by technological means of communication which make spatial distance increasingly irrelevant. In this vein, it has been argued that cities are losing their privileged role altogether. Siebel, for instance, has argued that, given recent

³ For a helpful survey of recent theories of urbanity, cf. Dirksmeier 21-81.

⁴ My translation; the original reads as follows: "Als ich im Julius 1787, meiner Gesundheit wegen, in Pymont war, hatte ich das Glück, dort in einem kleinen Zirkel von schätzbaren Männern und geistreichen Frauenzimmern zu leben, deren Kenntnisse, feine Sitten, Anmuth, fröhliche Laune, Witz und Gutmüthigkeit, der Konversation jene *Urbanität* und Unbefangenheit gaben, die den Geist so sehr aufheitern und erhellen kann."

⁵ For this cf. Dirksmeier.

developments in society, the city is no longer the privileged "site of a way of life impossible elsewhere": "In highly urbanised societies such as that of western Europe, the difference between city and country, as far as a way of life is concerned, has shrunk to a difference of more or less of the same. It no longer designates something qualitatively different" (Siebel 32, my translation). However, given Bermingham's observations about the "new spirit of London urbanity [being disseminated] to the rest of the kingdom" (158), which is also borne out by several contributions to this volume, we might ask whether this dissociation of 'urbanity' from the metropolis might not be historicized and traced, not least, to the period we are concerned with here.

The 14th International Symposium of the *Society for English Romanticism*, hosted by the Department of Anglophone Studies of the University of Duisburg-Essen, took place under the theme of "Romantic Cityscapes" precisely to discuss these and related issues. From October 6 to October 9, 2011, some 60 Romanticists from ten nations assembled at the *Katholische Akademie DIE WOLFSBURG* in Mülheim an der Ruhr to discuss, for instance, the role of the city in Romantic culture and the impact of the city on cultural production in the period.

In addition to the inherent interest of the topic outlined above, a few words on the choice of this conference topic in an institutional context might be in order: The University of Duisburg-Essen, like many others, has designated a number of Priority Research Areas. As scholars in literary and cultural studies, we do not have much to contribute that would be vitally interesting to the scientists centrally involved in the majority of these areas (such as nano-technology or biomedical sciences). One of these Main Research Areas, however, is "Urban Systems," in which over 70 researchers from all eleven faculties of the university – from medicine and the natural sciences via urban planning and engineering, economics and the social sciences to the humanities and educational sciences – engage in interdisciplinary urban research. And here, the humanities indeed have a significant contribution to make – we are fortunate to have far-sighted and enlightened colleagues in engineering, urban planning and the natural sciences who know that a city is not primarily an ensemble of technical infrastructures but is essentially a *social* phenomenon made up of people and shaped by their needs, aspirations and images of themselves. To study the metropolis in any meaningful way therefore involves the need to look at urban imaginaries and how they shape perceptions of the city. Much as the humanities here – like elsewhere, I am sure – may sometimes feel like the unloved basement children of the university, the "Joint Centre Urban Systems" allows us to do what we do best in literary and cultural studies without having to betray our interests, while at the same time enabling us to make a significant and welcome contribution to a field central to the self-perception of this university.⁶ That interdisciplinary urban research centrally needs comparative as well as historical perspectives is, I am happy to say, part and parcel of how the Centre defines itself. In other words, literary and historical research on the city, and thus a conference such as "Romantic Cityscapes," is seen as a central activity of the Centre rather than as something marginal, an add-on to what our engineers are doing.

⁶ We are, after all, in the middle of one of the largest metropolitan regions in Europe with, depending on how one draws the boundaries, either about 5.1 million ("the Ruhr Region") or some 10 million people ("the Rhein-Ruhr Metropolitan Region").

In line with this view of how central urban imaginaries in literature and culture are to an understanding of urban systems past and present, let me draw attention to one of the most ambitious recent attempts to provide interdisciplinary urban research with an integrating approach, urban sociologist Frank Eckardt's masterful 2009 *Complex City: Orientations in the Urban Labyrinth*. Eckardt here begins his reflections on urban complexity with a discussion of literary representations of complexity. It was a central assumption behind the conference that approaches from urban studies can significantly enrich literary and cultural research on the Romantic city, just as research in Romanicism can centrally contribute to urban studies.

Considering a broad range of forms of cultural expression – poetry, the novel, drama, the essay, religious tracts, travel writing, political commentary, but also medical literature, caricature and the visual arts, architecture and various forms of urban performance – this collection of essays thus seeks to go "beyond the suburbs of the mind" in further exploring this field.

In his wide-ranging opening essay "'Otherwise in London' or, the 'Essence of Things': Modernity and Estrangement in the Romantic Cityscape," **Julian Wolfreys** explores central issues at the intersection of modernity, urbanization and personal identity. Engaging with writers such as Wordsworth, Southey, Pierce Egan, Sarah Green, De Quincey and others, he discusses London as a place of visual and acoustic excess stifling any attempt at totalizing comprehension or representation. The London experience of constantly overstretched human mental capacities and endangered individuality, he compellingly shows, required "new modes of perception and expression."

Ian Duncan in "Human Habitats: The City and the Form of Man" continues these fundamental explorations in literary urban anthropology. He discusses how Edinburgh and London, as two different cities, are mapped in relation to each other in *Blackwood's Edinburgh Magazine*, which Duncan refers to as "the leading Romantic-era instance of a quintessentially urban genre." Identifying miscellanies as a token of the Romantic variety of genres and as testimony to new types of reading experience, Duncan traces these notions in a reading of John Galt's *The Ayrshire Legatees* and *The Steam-Boat*, which, Duncan argues, reflect the magazine's "infrastructure of production, distribution and reception" and its connection to the ascending world city London.

In "'The signs and shocks of a more radical event': Poetry After Urbanization in Shelley and Keats," **Tilottama Rajan** seeks to historicize Nancy's diagnosis of the impossibility of distinguishing between the city and the surrounding world or between country and city at a time of global urbanization and urbanizing globalization. The essay argues that poems such as Wordsworth's *The Ruined Cottage*, Shelley's *Alastor* or Keats's *The Fall of Hyperion*, which can by no means be regarded as 'urban' poetry in, say, Baudelaire's sense, might nonetheless be read as informed by an anticipated sense of this indistinction, as a distinctly 'modern' form of poetry obliquely engaging with the shocks of urbanization precisely at a time that is also associated with the beginning marginalization of lyric poetry.

Torsten Caeners in his contribution on "Romantic Urbanity and Urban Romanticism: The Metropolis as a Place of Romantic Imagination and the Case of Mary Robinson's 'London's Summer Morning'" discusses how notions from 20th-century urban theory relate to typically Romantic conceptions of the individual and its mind to argue that metropolitan conditions made possible Romantic concepts of nature and the imagination. Arguing against the possibility of a nature-city-divide, in a reading of Mary Robinson's "London's Summer Morning," Caeners sheds light on "the negotiations and adaptations of the Romantic individual" in a late-18th-century metropolitan environment.

In "The Suburbs of the Mind: Wordsworth's Cambridge and the City Within," **Mark J. Bruhn** argues that Wordsworth's mind was not only formed by the "natural regimen of fear and beauty," but just as much by what Bruhn describes as "the countervailing pressure of human communities." The essay identifies Wordsworth's years in Cambridge as an in-between-step between his experiences in rural Cumberland and in London. A reading of his Cambridge years as represented in the *Prelude*, Bruhn shows, points both to the hustle and bustle of London experienced later in his development and to the desire to retreat from the crowds.

Kiyoshi Nishiyama in "A Cityscape 'to One Who Has Been Long in City Pent'" charts Keats's development as a poet against the backdrop of the developing London cityscape in the early 19th century, around the time when the Prince Regent had Nash create a *rus in urbe* in London's West End. Nishiyama explains how such architectural developments undermined the neat dichotomy of city and countryside and shows how they can be regarded as staging questions about the role of the country and the city analogous to those raised in Romantic poetry. The essay discussed the relevance of the urban setting for Keats's writing by reading his poetry in light of his experiences in London – with the emerging suburban area of Hampstead apparently allowing for a compromise between country and city.

In his essay "'one ample cemetery': De Quincey and the Urban Space of Moral Management," **Joel Faflak** discusses de Quincey's *Confessions* and especially its sequel *Suspiria de Profundis* as well as a number of related writings against the backdrop of early-19th-century endeavors to morally and therapeutically manage the 'insane.' The essay retraces developments in the emerging psychological and psychiatric discourses and De Quincey's engagement with them in his treatment of dreams, for instance, as well as in highly symbolic "conjunction[s] of urban and psychic spaces." In a subtle deconstructive reading Faflak diagnoses De Quincey as engaging with "the uncanny other of society's inability to rationalize its own psychic life, a sign of psychiatry's defeat." This he finds symbolized in *Suspiria* in the submerged "colonial city in ruins at the bottom of the ocean" evocatively referred to as "one ample cemetery."

Gerold Sedlmayr in "The City as 'Hot-bed for the Passions': Romantic Urbanity and the Discourse of Hygiene" is interested in the role of the urban habitat and the ways 18th-century discourses on the state of health take into account the environment of the city. Sedlmayr points out how the 'discourse of hygiene' laid bare medicine's lack of empirical evidence for illnesses apparently provoked by urban surroundings. He elaborates on the impact this had on medical theory: Apart from an increased number of medical manuals, he observes a tendency in the 'discourse of hygiene' particu-