

Stefanie Fricke, Felicitas Meifert-Menhard, Katharina Pink (Eds.)

Romanticism and Knowledge

Selected Papers from the Munich Joint Conference
of the German Society for English Romanticism
and the North American Society for the Study of Romanticism

Christoph Bode, Jens Martin Gurr, Frank Erik Pointner (Hg.)

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Stefanie Fricke, Felicitas Meifert-Menhard, Katharina Pink (Eds.)
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Contents

<i>Stefanie Fricke, Felicitas Meifert-Menhard, Katharina Pink</i> Introduction: The Forms and Formations of Romantic Knowledge	9
<i>Richard Holmes</i> Romantic Science: The Deepening Echo	23
<i>Tilottama Rajan</i> Smooth and Tangled Systems: Philosophy as Metadiscipline in German Idealism	37
<i>Paul Hamilton</i> A Grand Narrative	55
<i>Ian Duncan</i> Kant, Herder, and the Anthropological Turn	63
<i>Nicholas Halmi</i> The Theorization of Style	73
<i>Mark J. Bruhn</i> Wordsworth, Cudworth, and the Empirico-Idealist Philosophy of Fitness	87
<i>Christoph Bode</i> Georg(e) Forster and the Epistemology of a Viewpoint in Motion: A Composition in Five Movements	97
<i>Noah Heringman</i> Blake with Forster: Ancient Systems and the Fallen Body of Knowledge	115
<i>Mihaela Irimia</i> Eur-Africa and the Romantic Other: An Imagological Reading of Vasile Alecsandri's <i>Voyage to Africa</i>	125
<i>Norbert Lennartz</i> Educating the Romantics: the Romantics and their Quixotic Attitude towards Books and Learning	135

<i>Catherine Ross</i> New Views into the Mind of the Romantics: The Educational Debate over Classic vs. 'Modern' Curricula	145
<i>Maximiliaan van Woudenberg</i> The University of Göttingen and Anglo-German Interchanges of Knowledge	157
<i>Rolf Lessenich</i> Erasmus Darwin, New Natural Science, and the Uses of Poetry and Myth	167
<i>Timothy Heimlich</i> "Mass of Ruin": Deconstructing Empiricism in Charlotte Smith's <i>Beachy Head</i>	177
<i>David Duff</i> Preludes to Knowledge: The Poetics of the Encyclopædia Prospectus	189
<i>Ralf Haekel</i> Encyclopaedic Knowledge in Romantic Britain – The Case of the "Soul"	201
<i>Pascal Fischer</i> Isaac D'Israeli's Anecdotal Approach to Knowledge and the Question of Postmodernism	213
<i>Noriko Naohara</i> The Development of Coleridge's Idea of Reason	223
<i>Timothy Michael</i> Reason in the Court of Justice: The High Arguments of Wordsworth and Kant	233
<i>Jennifer Wawrzinek</i> 'What Can a Body Do?': Keatsian Plasticity and the Event of Knowledge	241
<i>Arkady Plotnitsky</i> Apollo's Brain: Keats's <i>Hyperion</i> Poems, Hegel's "Tarrying with the Negative," and the Sciences of the Brain	251
<i>Joseph Albernaz</i> "A Fellowship with Essence": Experience, Contingency, and Retroactivity in Keats and Hegel	263

<i>Eugene Stelzig</i>	
Henry Crabb Robinson's Advocacy of Wordsworth's Poetry in Germany – And a Signal Instance of His Failure to Do So	275
<i>Timothy Whelan</i>	
Crabb Robinson and Wilhelm Benecke: Questions of Pre-existence and "Rational Faith"	285
<i>Johannes Schlegel</i>	
The Devil in the Printing-House: The Medium of Literature and the Knowledge of Evil in James Hogg's <i>Confessions of a Justified Sinner</i>	293
<i>Tamara Gosta</i>	
The Boundaries of Historical Knowledge: James Hogg, Scottish Romanticism, and the Palimpsest	303
<i>Mirka Horová</i>	
Know Thine Enemy: Names and Knowing in <i>Werner</i>	313
<i>Frederick Burwick</i>	
Talleyrand and the Revolt of the Silk Weavers: <i>The Minister and the Mercer</i>	321
<i>Sebastian Domsch</i>	
Romantic Probability	331
<i>Theresa M. Kelley</i>	
Contingency, Futurity, and Romanticism	343
<i>Stefanie Fricke</i>	
Knowledge and Time: Problems of Transmission and Reception	361

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Introduction: The Forms and Formations of Romantic Knowledge

The Romantic age is an age of seeking and contemplating new forms of knowledge. What distinguishes the period that begins in the 1770s is a sustained reflection on what constitutes knowledge and what its borders are. The nature of knowledge, whether it is an 'art' or a 'science,' whether it should be 'philosophical' or 'historical' or 'empirical,' whether there can be a 'disaggregation of disciplines' or whether the boundaries between disciplines are fluid – these issues were very much under negotiation during the Romantic period. As such, knowledge in the Romantic era was not only generated and proliferated by scientific discovery and progress, but it also became a proper subject of theoretical and disciplinary reflection, creating self-reflexive metadiscourses that shaped the understanding of how knowledge is created, defined, systematized, stored, and communicated. It is such discourses that the present volume is interested in and explores from a variety of theoretical and methodological angles.

At the beginning of the Romantic age, most people believed that the earth was approximately 6,000 years old.¹ At its end, due to discoveries and theories of geologists such as James Hutton (*Theory of the Earth*, 1795) and Charles Lyell (*Principles of Geology*, 1830-33), it became obvious that the age of the earth was so high as to strain human imagination: "Revolutions still more remote appeared in the distance of this extraordinary perspective. The mind seemed to grow giddy by looking so far into the abyss of time." (Playfair 73) Geology, as well as the rising study of fossils, changed the perception of the earth and its past, calling into question biblical certainties and the place of humankind in nature and history. It was not only geology, however, that fundamentally altered the way of seeing the world. In astronomy, advances in technology made previously invisible heavenly bodies visible and opened up unimagined depths of space. William Herschel, together with his sister Caroline, revolutionized the study of astronomy by offering radical hypotheses on the nature of galaxies and detailed surveys of the skies which led to the discovery of the planet Uranus in 1781 (the first new planet to be discovered since antiquity), along with several previously unknown comets and thousands of star clusters – the amazement that this astronomical discovery roused at the time was poignantly reflected a few years later in Keats's "On First Looking Into Chapman's Homer" (1816): "Then felt I like some watcher of the skies / When a new planet swims into his ken." Just as in geology, the depths of space, and the growing number of discovered stars, called into question the relative significance of humanity and human history.

¹ This number, which was also included in some editions of the King James Bible, had been established by the Irish bishop James Usher (or Ussher) (1581-1656) who claimed that God had created earth on 23 October 4004 BC (cf. Oldroyd 49).

During the Romantic age, important discoveries were also made in chemistry, physics, biology and electromagnetism, justifying the designation of this period as the second scientific revolution. Moreover, what was previously known as 'natural philosophy,' a generic term for scientific knowledge of nature, heavily tied to theology, now transformed into 'science.' This change in terminology encompassed fundamental alterations in the structure of how science was practiced and perceived: it became more professional, more institutionalized and specialized, leading to the emergence of distinct disciplines such as geology, chemistry, palaeontology, physiology, anthropology, comparative anatomy, botany, and zoology with different agendas, methods and concepts. The very term 'scientist' was coined in 1833 by William Whewell by analogy with 'artist,' and first used in his 1834 review of Mary Somerville's *On the Connexion of the Physical Sciences* published in the *Quarterly Review*.²

It was, however, not only the natural sciences which generated new knowledge during the Romantic age: "Romantic science can be dated roughly, and certainly symbolically, between two celebrated voyages of exploration. These were Captain James Cook's first round-the-world expedition aboard the *Endeavour*, begun in 1768, and Charles Darwin's voyage to the Galapagos islands aboard the *Beagle*, begun in 1831." (Holmes xvi) Their voyages, as well as those of explorers such as Mungo Park and Alexander von Humboldt, widened the Western horizon with regard to geography, non-European cultures, plants and animals. Such exploration, and the knowledge they created, also furthered European imperial expansion, for – as Fulford, Lee and Kitson note – "'exploration' was – and is – a social and political construct, one that is bound up with the history of imperialism" (3). Indeed, encounters between eighteenth-century explorers and 'the Other' more often than not "carried the freight of conquest and colonisation" (*ibid.*). Exploration was, however, not the only motivation for travelling in the Romantic era – travel and tourism were widespread and popular phenomena since ever more people wanted to 'see the world.' It is no coincidence that all major Romantic poets travelled extensively both at home and abroad. Romantic excursions almost always fuse a literal journey with an inward one: the Romantic writer travels, ultimately, in search of self-knowledge. *The Prelude* is perhaps the most prominent example of this kind of self-exploration: "A traveller I am, / And all my tale is of myself" writes Wordsworth in Book III of the 1805 version.

Closer to home, a new interest in national history made the British collect knowledge and material remnants of their nation's past. Excavations in Pompeii, Herculaneum and Rome, as well as Napoleon's invasion of Egypt, brought new insights into antiquity. Relics of ancient cultures such as the Elgin Marbles were brought to Britain and displayed in a growing number of museums. Knowledge of the past was not only seen as interesting per se, but it also seemed to hold answers to current questions, for history was perceived as "the Letter of Instructions, which the old generations write and posthumously transmit to the new; nay it may be called, more generally still, the Message, verbal or written, which all Mankind delivers to every man" (Carlyle 15). Historicity as a concept, moreover, was debated and reformed, as "a new sense of historical time" (Kitson 43) began to emerge during the eighteenth century, privileging

² See Ross for the development of the term 'scientist.'

linear progress over reiteration and repetition. The course of time was thus perceived to be determined by discrete, singular events rather than recurring cycles.

Though such changes in historical and temporal understanding can be attributed, in some measure, to reactionary tendencies in Romantic thought against Enlightenment epistemology, the Romantics also continued methods and trends originating in early eighteenth-century knowledge production and negotiation. In the Enlightenment, the need to measure and order, to create schemata to make sense of the world, was one of the most influential aspects of scientific productivity, which led, among other things, to Carl von Linné's classification of nature (1735) and the first naturalistic account of the earth in Buffon's *Historie naturelle* (1749). Such taxonomical efforts carried on in the Romantic age with Caroline Herschel's *Catalogue of Stars* (1798) and the first census in 1802. The Enlightenment has been described as 'the age of the encyclopaedia,' and the Romantics continued to expand the encyclopaedic systematization and classification of the world. To cope with and present the ever growing amount of old and new knowledge, several encyclopaedic ventures were expanded and new ones begun: Adam Rees's *Cyclopaedia* (1778) and *New Cyclopaedia* (1802-19), or the *Encyclopaedia Britannica* from its first (1769-71) to its third (1788-97) edition, for example.

The Enlightenment's understanding of knowledge acquisition and systematization also informed and shaped Romantic philosophical debates on how the human mind experiences and processes the world around it. While Lockean empiricism, in which "[t]he human mind is [...] originally passive, and knowledge is arrived at by relating the ideas left in the mind by sensation" (Kitson 36) was challenged and even outright rejected by figures such as Blake and Coleridge, the latter found himself, together with Wordsworth, deeply influenced in his early years by the associationist philosophy of David Hartley, himself an admirer of Locke (cf. Kitson 37). The towering philosophical authority affecting Romantic aesthetics was, of course, Kant, whose *Critique of Pure Reason* (1781) "attempt[s] to reconcile the claims of empiricism with those of rationalism and Platonism, or the idea that there exist[s] in the mind certain innate or *a priori* ideas" (Kitson 38). Kantian philosophy grants the mind an active and creative role in the formation of human knowledge, something that proved a considerable attraction to Romantic thinking (cf. Kitson 39). It is perhaps no coincidence that an important discovery in the history of neuroscience overlapped with this philosophical identification of the human mind as the centre of active knowledge creation: the human brain was definitively established as the organ of thought in the Romantic era (cf. Richardson 1).

Access to knowledge also changed during the Romantic era. Debates on education questioned and ultimately altered how different kinds of knowledge were valued and what was transmitted to an audience broadened by growing literacy and changes in publishing. In contrast to the first scientific revolution in the late seventeenth century, which, due to the use of Latin as *lingua franca*, for example, had only had a small, elite audience, new discoveries and theories were now communicated to and eagerly taken up by a great number of people. There were public lectures, laboratory demonstrations and introductory textbooks, and scientific works were now written in a way that made them accessible also to laymen. New universities were founded as well, such as the Humboldt-Universität zu Berlin in 1810, which proposed a new form of

education (*Bildung*) based on reformist ideas of Friedrich Schelling, Johann Gottlieb Fichte, and Friedrich Schleiermacher. Trans-national interchanges ensured that knowledge spread and was shared all over Europe.

At the end of the eighteenth century, changes in public transport (e.g. the turnpike-system and later the mail-coach) accelerated the speed with which not only individuals, but also news and knowledge could travel around Britain. Later, the introduction of the railway and the first telegraphs seemed to shrink distances even further, causing Heinrich Heine to remark in 1843: "Durch die Eisenbahnen wird der Raum getötet, und es bleibt uns nur noch die Zeit übrig" [space is killed by the railways, and all that remains for us is time; translation ours] (360). All this was part of what John Stuart Mill perceived as the "Spirit of the Age" in 1831:

The "Spirit of the Age" is in some measure a novel expression. I do not believe that it is to be met with in any work exceeding fifty years in antiquity. The idea of comparing one's own age with former ages, or with our notion of those which are yet to come, had occurred to philosophers; but it never before was itself the dominant idea of any age. It is an idea essentially belonging to an age of change. Before men begin to think much and long on the peculiarities of their own times, they must have begun to think that those times are, or are destined to be, distinguished in a very remarkable manner from the times which precede them. [...] The present times possess this character. A change has taken place in the human mind; a change which, being effected by insensible gradations, and without noise, had already proceeded far before it was generally perceived. When the fact disclosed itself, thousands awoke as from a dream. (228)

Romantic art, of course, could not remain untouched by all these changes, even though it is often perceived as hostile to science and rationality. As Richard Holmes shows in *The Age of Wonder*, as well as in his essay included in this collection, this is far from true: "The notion of wonder seems to be something that once united them, and can still do so." (*Age of Wonder* xvi) New discoveries and theories influenced the ways in which Romantic authors perceived the world, and many of them were interested in or even fascinated by the new developments in science. Shelley's enthusiasm for balloons as a new invention for travel testifies to this (cf. Fulford, Lee and Kitson 1), and he was equally intrigued by the potential and possibilities of electricity: "What a mighty instrument would electricity be in the hands of him who knew how to wield it" (qtd. in *ibid.*). As becomes clear from Shelley's example, scientists and poets

were not poles apart [...]. Poets and natural philosophers thought they were lifting the veil that covered the workings of nature. They made common cause: poets would give new insight into human nature; men of science would reveal the processes of physical nature. Their methods were different, their goal the same: they would discover the forces that animated the 'one life' within us and without us, revealing the dynamic interplay of creative powers that made humankind and the world. (Fulford 90)

Accordingly, Romantic writers included references to new scientific discoveries in their works, and Erasmus Darwin, in *The Botanic Garden* (1789-91), presented natural science in the form of poetry. William Wordsworth and Samuel Taylor Coleridge were well acquainted with the great chemist (and poet) Humphry Davy, who corrected the proofs of the second edition of the *Lyrical Ballads* for publication, and the plot and

figure of Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein* owed a great debt not only to new discoveries in chemistry and electrochemistry, but also to a new, very 'Romantic' image of the scientist as a "solitary scientific 'genius', thirsting and reckless for knowledge, *for its own sake and perhaps at any cost.*" (Holmes xvii) This is the risk of seeking knowledge: the price that must be paid in order to quench the 'thirst' for knowledge may sometimes be higher than anticipated.

The 15th International Symposium of the German Society for English Romanticism was a joint conference with the North American Society for the Study of Romanticism, combining the regular biennial GER conference with a supernumerary NASSR conference. It was the first of its kind, uniting the world's largest scholarly association for research into Romanticism (NASSR, 1991) and its oldest (GER, 1974). Also, it was the hitherto biggest symposium in the history of the *Gesellschaft für englische Romantik*, with three times the usual number of speakers. Hosted by the Ludwig-Maximilians-Universität München and the *Internationales Begegnungszentrum der Wissenschaft* (IBZ), it took place under the broad theme of "Romanticism and Knowledge." From October 10 to October 13, 2013, more than 90 Romanticists from all over the world convened in Munich to discuss the various relations and interactions of knowledge and the arts in panels dedicated to "Romantic Thought and the Natural Sciences," "Poetic Knowledge," "Education and Learning in the Romantic Era," "Romantic Philosophy and/on Knowledge," "Speculation, Probability and Uncertainty," and "The Rise of New Disciplines" – to mention only a few.

Consequently, the essays featured in this collection cover a broad range of genres, texts, and institutions concerned with thematizing, organizing, disseminating, and transferring knowledge in the Romantic era. Considering the way in which knowledge of the most diverse disciplines has been represented and refracted not only in poetry, fiction and drama, but also in travelogues, essays, encyclopedias, scientific tracts, prospectuses, and even play bills, this volume seeks to further explore how the very concept of knowledge is negotiated in Romantic writing.

It opens with **Richard Holmes'** wide-ranging and comprehensive essay "Romantic Science: The Deepening Echo," in which he identifies the age of Romanticism as being marked by an explosion of new scientific knowledge. Recapitulating the numerous inventions and discoveries in astronomy, geology, physics, aeronautics, meteorology, chemistry, and geography at the time, Holmes traces their reverberations in many literary and artistic forms of the period and explores what science meant to Romantic writers, poets, and musicians. Hence, he not only engages with works of Byron, Keats, Shelley, and Wordsworth, but also with the travelogues of Alexander von Humboldt and Joseph Banks, the scientific poetry of Erasmus Darwin, as well as Haydn's famous oratorio *The Creation*.

The subsequent contributions reflect on the issue of Romantic knowledge from a philosophically informed perspective. Focusing on the issue of Romantic disciplinarity, **Tilottama Rajan**, in "Smooth and Tangled Systems: Philosophy as Metadiscipline in German Idealism," considers the very 'architecture' of Romantic knowledge, taking as her starting point Latour's distinction between 'smooth' and 'tangled' objects. She ap-

plies this distinction to the development and differentiation of scientific disciplinarity in the Romantic age, focusing on Hegel's encyclopedic project *Encyclopedia of the Philosophical Sciences* as an attempt to synthesize different forms of knowledge, with philosophy as unifying 'metadiscipline.' Rajan asks the question of what is at stake in this entanglement of philosophy with the real sciences, and how this changes the Romantic (and our contemporary) understanding of science or 'Wissenschaft.' **Paul Hamilton** then embarks on a "Grand Narrative" of critical theory on reason, knowledge, ethics, and aesthetics from the age of Kant to the twentieth century. Engaging with the theoretical as well as poetical developments and negotiations of Kant's legacy – from Walter Benjamin's doctorate on Romantic art-criticism, Horkheimer and Adorno's critical *Dialektik der Aufklärung*, Rancière's political redistribution of sensibility, to the writings of Kleist and Baudelaire – this paper offers new perspectives by connecting a re-evaluation of Romantic philosophy with new directions in the reading of Romantic poetry.

Considering the full naturalization and historicization of the human condition in the wake of Buffon's *Natural History* (1749-88) and the conversion of Hume's 'science of man' into an emergent anthropology in the second half of the eighteenth century, **Ian Duncan** looks at "Kant, Herder, and the Anthropological Turn" of late-Enlightenment thought. His essay undertakes a comparative assessment of Kant and Herder's commitments to anthropology as a mode of knowledge without reducing one to a foil for the other. Instead, the focus lies on the crux of their inquiries: the relation between the investigation of what nature makes of man and the investigation of what man can, or should, make of himself. Buffon's conceptualization of historicity and its analogical relation to science also provides the point of departure for **Nicholas Halmi's** contribution on "The Theorization of Style." Starting from a reflection on the contemporary privileging of simultaneity over sequence in terms of temporal and historical understanding, Halmi offers a broad investigation into eighteenth-century conceptualizations of temporality and historicity, comparing Johann Gottfried Herder's approach to history in terms of nationally bound periodization to Johann Joachim Winckelmann's historical and national classification of ancient art, and focusing on the similarities but also the differences between their methods of historicism.

Turning to the relation between knowledge acquisition and the philosophical formation of individual Romantic thinkers, **Mark Bruhn** traces William Wordsworth's philosophical development in "Wordsworth, Cudworth, and the Empirico-Idealist Philosophy of Fitness." Bruhn reads Wordsworth's argument of natural and developmental 'fitness' against the background of the poet's study of Ralph Cudworth's *True Intellectual System of the Universe* (1678). Challenging the common assumption that the development of Wordsworth's philosophical ideas and concepts was largely the product of his companionship and collaboration with Samuel Taylor Coleridge, Bruhn presents Cudworth as a formative influence on the poet's philosophical position, as pivotally rendered in *The Prelude*.

Exploration and travel, as well as the resulting contact with 'the Other,' are at the heart of the next group of essays. **Christoph Bode** traces Georg Forster's position on knowledge in "Georg(e) Forster and the Epistemology of a Viewpoint in Motion: A Composition in Five Movements." Echoing the distinctly mobile perspective of Forster's