

Sebastian Domsch, Christoph Reinfandt, Katharina Rennhak (Eds.)

## Romantic Ambiguities

Abodes of the Modern

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

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## Introduction: Romantic Ambiguities – Abodes of the Modern

Even in Wordsworth's famous and forthright definition ("poetry is the spontaneous overflow of powerful feelings [...] recollected in tranquillity"; Wordsworth 251) the aesthetics of Romanticism is imbued with ambiguity: a poem re-presents something spontaneous for future re-enactment, which is then anything but spontaneous but shall nevertheless capture the experience of spontaneity? As one can see here, Romanticism's turn to subjective experience is based on a new awareness of the language- and media-related complexities of authentic representation. It anticipates modernist concerns and, on a more general note, the linguistic and medial turns of the twentieth century. Following James Chandler's insight that Romanticism constitutes "a cultural idiom, a whole way of being in the world" (2), the contributions to this volume ask what is specifically modern in this cultural idiom, and in how far the modernity of Romanticism depends on ambiguity as a paradigm of modernity as defined in Christoph Bode's *Ästhetik der Ambiguität*.

Bode's reflections on ambiguity are available in two versions, the monumental monograph *Ästhetik der Ambiguität*, written in German and published in 1988, and in a highly condensed and easily accessible essay written in English. At the outset, Bode clarifies that he uses ambiguity "as an umbrella term which covers all sorts of linguistic and literary phenomena having more than one possible interpretation or meaning" ("Aesthetics" 73). More specifically, he distinguishes between 'Ambiguity Mark I' and 'Ambiguity Mark II', drawing on Russian formalist and structuralist models of devotional aesthetics, which explain that literary texts always consist of two planes of meaning: one guided by the "rules and patterns of everyday language" and another, "secondary structure", which establishes its own, rather "idiosyncratic codes" that have to be tackled and deciphered by readers who want to engage in a truly aesthetic reading experience of the literary text (74). As Bode clarifies,

[t]his is exactly where ambiguity comes in: As no secondary structuring of language can totally obliterate the customary and deeply ingrained referential meanings of these elements but can only, by various devices, loosen their formal ties, these elements now characteristically oscillate between what they usually mean and the new meaning they are striving to constitute. Therefore, all poetical language is inevitably ambiguous – I should like to call this "Ambiguity Mark I" –; this is just another way of saying that literary or poetical texts are written in such a way that we are led to surmise there is a secondary plane to them, an "extra" meaning. (74-75)

While Bode regards 'Ambiguity Mark I' as a defining characteristic of "all literature" (78), 'Ambiguity Mark II' is a feature of only certain literary texts and, more specifically, "the hallmark of modernist literature" (78). If an author strives to leave "the

shackles of mimesis behind" and to rid his text, as best s/he can, of all referential impulses (which can never be shaken off completely in the linguistic medium), then

[...] after a certain point, something entirely new happens: the liberated signifiers become multiply interpretable. Their free play does not allow just one reading, it cries out for multiple decoding. This is the point of semiotic take-off. The accumulation of subversive-creative energy has so heated up the linguistic atoms that a new quality is achieved. Not more of the same, but a new kind of game. [...] Such a] meaning-productive [text ...] will produce whole strings of differing meaningful configurations which do not rule each other out but which complement each other and all together constitute the richness of that literary text. The text has thus turned into a meaning-generator, which feeds on the energy you as a reader are willing to invest. (78)

Christoph Bode's early reflections on ambiguity in *Ästhetik der Ambiguität* and "The Aesthetics of Ambiguity" are firmly embedded in a discussion that traces a literary historical development. As stated above, 'Ambiguity Mark II' is regarded as the feature which differentiates modernist literature from the literature of earlier periods. Bode goes so far as to claim a categorical difference for modernist ambiguity, since

modernist ambiguity is fundamentally different from the ambiguity in the literature of former times, different both in genesis and function, and, above all, in significance. This theoretical assessment is borne out by a diachronical survey and reconstruction of the literary practice and aesthetic theories predominant in bygone epochs of European writing. Ambiguity has always played its part in the aesthetic activation of the reader, but it is only in our age that it has moved right to the core and become, in its increased form, a principal, irreducible feature of literature. ("Aesthetics" 79)

On such grounds, can an investigation of 'Romantic Ambiguities' yield interesting results at all? Can the articles collected in this volume deal only with the rather uninteresting (because pervasive) form of 'Ambiguity Mark I' or with pretty tame forms of 'Ambiguity Mark II'? As it turns out, the historical demarcation line that Bode posits in the carefully developed argument of his work on ambiguity inevitably becomes increasingly blurred and seems to recede ever further into the past the closer one looks at the literary texts of that "prehistory of modernism" which, for the Bode of "The Aesthetics of Ambiguity", "basically [offers] little more than the gradual erosion of textual codes which make the reader believe the text but mirrors life" (77). As the contributors to this collection demonstrate, and as Bode himself has put it more recently, however, it turns out that 'as with all evolutionary histories, such attempts to pinpoint absolutely new qualities can be doubted as well as they can be defended' ("wie bei allen Evolutionsgeschichten sind solche Fixierungen absolut neuer Qualitäten ebenso gut begründ- wie bestreitbar"; *Selbst-Begründungen* 8). This volume, then, sets out to look more closely at and probe deeper into the "little more" that modernism's pre-history has to say about ambiguity in general and about Bode's 'Ambiguity Mark II' in particular.

It is no coincidence, of course, that the focus of this scholarly inspection of the "little more" of the pre-history of modernist ambiguity would fall on the period commonly known as Romanticism. As we will see shortly, Bode himself has, in the dec-



ades since the publication of *Ästhetik der Ambiguität*, considerably expanded our understanding of the ways that authors created and debated meaning in this period and has demonstrated that their literary texts, too, are veritable "meaning-generator[s], which feed[] on the energy" its readers are "willing to invest" ("Aesthetics" 78).

There are two aspects that connect Bode's ideas about modernist ambiguity with his later work on Romanticism: auto-referentiality and processuality. The first, auto-referentiality, is already centrally discussed in his 'Aesthetics of Ambiguity': "'Auto-referentiality' could be called the sister term of 'ambiguity', as both describe two sides of the same coin." Since "all poetical and literary texts [...] are [...] **by definition** ambiguous, [they] demand the reader's **special** attention and refer him to their very own composition when he asks for their meaning" ("Aesthetics" 75; original emphases). The fundamental ambiguity (Mark I) of literary texts forces readers to attend to their non-referential processes of meaning making and are, thus, "auto-referential in the sense that you cannot answer what they 'mean' until you have looked closely at **how** they are done, and this of course means – these are the two sides of the coin – that they are auto-referential in the sense that they direct the reader towards their essential and fundamental **ambiguity**" (75; original emphases). Unsurprisingly then, for Bode, a particularly high degree of auto-referentiality is another characteristic feature of modernist literature:

*The central thesis of this paper and of the study of the same title therefore is: The conspicuous high degree of ambiguity in modernist literature can be identified as an unavoidable spin-off effect of a superordinate tendency or evolution towards higher auto-referentiality discernible in all arts. (79; original emphasis)*

Bode takes up this point about auto-referentiality and 'the modern' in his more recent work on Romantic literature. Thus, in "Absolut Jena" he writes that "because of its auto-referentiality and its self-reflexiveness [this kind of literature] displays a feature that is observable in all self-referential systems of sufficient magnitude and complexity – it becomes inexhaustible by finite interpretations so that, provoking ever new ones, it triggers off a series of progressive readings that, however, invariably fail to arrest 'the' meaning of the text." (32) His transit from modernist narrative prose to Romantic poetry ties in nicely, of course, with his conviction (already elaborated in his work on ambiguity) that "[p]oetry characteristically lacked some of the semiosis-restricting conventions of narrative prose", and that therefore, "[h]istorically, prose entered the race with a handicap; poetry, it is a fact, arrived there [at Ambiguity Mark II] earlier, for the conventions of its genre offered less resistance to the tendency towards auto-referentiality." ("Aesthetics" 78) His studies in Romanticism, however, do not leave the matter at that. Rather, the genre-specific argument is supported and significantly enlarged by Bode's fine-tuning of his definition of a literary aesthetics that is circumscribed by the closely related concepts of ambiguity, auto-referentiality and, more recently, processuality. This fine-tuning will, eventually, allow him to encompass Romantic prose, in general, and Romantic travel writings, in particular, in reflections about (pre-)modernist aesthetics and Romantic ambiguities (see his *Fremd-Erfahrungen*).

Building on his original ideas about the new quality of literary texts that can be detected by the literary historian at a certain point in time, Bode suggests once again in his studies on British Romanticism that literature's auto-referentiality is the enabling factor that makes modernity possible: 'There are good reasons to assume that auto-referentiality is an enabling precondition of modernity' ('Einiges spricht dafür dass Autoreferentialität [...] die Ermöglichungsbedingung von Modernität ist'; *Selbst-Begründungen* 10). In his book on the discursive construction of personal identities in British Romantic poetry, *Selbst-Begründungen* (2008), his focus shifts, however, from modernism to modernity, or, from high modernist literature to Romantic poetry. While productively engaging his interest in the self-referential quality of literature once again, Bode's work on Romanticism enlarges on one aspect of the literary text which is closely connected to his concept of ambiguity, but which has only been hinted at in his earlier work. In "The Aesthetics of Ambiguity" Bode explains that "the literary text is [...] always a palimpsest, it cannot help it: it is always written over or against the primary meaning of its elements" (76). With hindsight, this can be regarded as an early trace of his focus on the fundamentally processual nature of writing in his studies in British Romanticism. The image of the palimpsest as Bode uses it in his "Aesthetics of Ambiguity" already contains a notion of processuality. As the layers of the palimpsest are not created simultaneously, but one after the other, with each new layer (only ever partially) cancelling out the older ones, the concept has a temporal dimension which is as important as the slightly more obvious spatial one. As Bode writes, "The literature of modernism foregrounds what is basic to all language, viz. to signify through dynamic relations. Modernist literature is language in the making." ("Aesthetics" 80) As Bode has amply demonstrated in a number of major studies, so is Romantic literature.

Bode has thoroughly investigated and conceptualized the processual nature of Romantic writing through close readings of works that are or have recently become central to the canon of Romantic literature. It is impossible to do justice to the full breadth of these readings, but a few prominent examples will highlight major aspects of Bode's reflections on the fundamental modernity of Romantic ambiguities.

His analysis of *Lamia* in *John Keats: Play On* (1996) for example focuses on the central ambiguity in the text, the evaluation of Apollonius. But instead of trying to resolve the ambiguity, e.g., by trying to prove that Keats wanted us to see the superficiality of Lamia's magic, or on the contrary wanted to warn us about over-rationalization (as other critics have suggested), Bode emphasizes both the inevitable unresolvability of the ambiguity and the self-referential function that it serves:

And what was it all about? About the fact that the ambiguities and particularizing perspectives of the poem (which is why it is so important that the narrator is personalized) encourage ever new interpretations while showing the 'truth' of each interpretation as limited, as merely an opinion, as a mode that within the text has already been criticized as *destructive*. (Und worum ging es? Darum, daß die Ambiguitäten und partikularen Perspektivierungen des Gedichtes (deshalb ist es so wichtig, daß der Erzähler personalisiert ist) immer wieder zu Deutungen anregen und doch zugleich auch die 'Wahrheit' je-