David Kerler, Martin Middeke (Eds.)

Romantic Ecologies

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

Christoph Bode, Ralf Haekel, Frank Erik Pointner (Hg.)

STUDIEN ZUR ENGLISCHEN ROMANTIK

(Neue Folge)

Band 24

David Kerler, Martin Middeke (Eds.)

Romantic Ecologies

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

WVT Wissenschaftlicher Verlag Trier

Romantic Ecologies.
Selected Papers from the Augsburg Conference of the German Society for English Romanticism. -
David Kerler, Martin Middeke (Eds.)
WVT Wissenschaftlicher Verlag Trier, 2023
(Studien zur Englischen Romantik, 24)
ISBN 978-3-98940-003-0

Cover illustration: Snow Storm – Steam-Boat off a Harbour's Mouth, 1842.
Joseph Mallord William Turner.
© Tate, Photo: Tate

Cover design: Brigitta Disseldorf

ISBN 978-3-98940-003-0

WVT Wissenschaftlicher Verlag Trier
Postfach 4005, 54230 Trier
Bergstraße 27, 54295 Trier
Tel. (0651) 41503, Fax 41504
Internet: https://www.wvttrier.de
E-Mail: wvt@wvttrier.de

Acknowledgements

The origin of this volume harks back to the 19th conference of the German Society for English Romanticism (GER) held at the University of Augsburg from September 29 to October 2, 2022.

A collaborative effort such as this is fueled by and needs to pay tribute to various sources of encouragement, inspiration, and support. Our thanks go to all the participants of this conference, as well as to their vibrant discussions and productive cooperation. We gladly extend our thanks to Dr. Erwin Otto at Wissenschaftlicher Verlag Trier. For generous financial support we would like to thank the German Research Foundation (DFG) and the Society of the Friends of the University of Augsburg. We would also like to thank the board of the German Society for English Romanticism, Jens Martin Gurr, Christoph Bode and Frank Erik Pointner, for their idealistic and financial support. Many thanks go to Dorothee Velten and Christoph Teichner for their impressive performances of Romantic music. We would very much like to acknowledge the insights we gained from many discussions with our Augsburg students during two research seminars on the topic of "Romantic Ecologies". Finally, warm thanks go to our team of research staff – Lotte Lange, Julia Wittmann, Alina Geiger, Isabel Fernandez Mayor, Viktoria Rossi, and Daria Flockau – for their reliability, diligence and dedication, without which neither the conference nor the preparation of this volume would have been possible. Any errors and shortcomings, of course, remain all ours.

David Kerler and Martin Middeke
Augsburg, August 2023

Contents

David Kerler and Martin Middeke

Romantic Ecologies: Introduction

Introducing the subject matter and the aims of the present volume, we shall take our cue from William Turner's painting *Snow Storm – Steam-Boat Off a Harbour's Mouth* from 1842, which we have also chosen as the front cover illustration of this book. The painting is a dramatic and, in the truest sense of the word, turbulent portrayal of a snowstorm at sea, with a steamboat struggling against powerful waves and a sense of chaos in the natural elements. Swirling clouds, mist, and foamy waves capture the intensity and violence of the storm. Turner's use of light and color creates a vivid and almost abstract depiction of the scene. Not only is *Snow Storm* a brilliant example of capturing the sublime – a topic which will feature prominently throughout the present volume – and the power of nature, *Snow Storm* also showcases Turner's ability to convey intense emotions and the sheer forces of nature through his unique style. Furthermore, and more poignantly even, the painting, we feel, has an obvious ecological quality. The ecological aspect lies in how the painting reflects the interconnectedness and power of natural forces, emphasizing the relationship between humans and the environment. The steamboat is struggling against the strength of the snowstorm and the turbulent sea. This highlights the interconnectedness of human activities and the natural environment. The steamboat (for this motif, see also the contribution by Ute Berns below) is a human-made entity, navigating through the elements of wind, water, and weather underscoring how human actions are deeply intertwined with natural forces and systems. The steamboat's precarious situation in the storm also points up the vulnerability of human activities in the face of powerful natural events. This vulnerability serves as a reminder of the limits of human control over nature and the environment – a topic thoroughly reminiscent of such notorious Romantic overreachers as Victor Frankenstein. Nature's forces, thus Turner, are able to impact and disrupt human endeavors, emphasizing the importance of understanding and respecting the environment, and its sublime charging draws attention to the vastness and majesty of the natural world. The storm's magnitude evokes a sense of humility in the face of nature's grandeur encouraging viewers to contemplate their place within the larger ecological framework. In short, the painting depicts a dynamic interaction between humans and the natural world as well as an emphasis on the sublime and sensory engagement. Hence, it contributes to a Romantic cultural ecology by encouraging viewers to contemplate the intricate connections between human actions and the environment, and promoting a broader awareness of ecological dynamics.

The Anthropocene and British Romanticism

We are living in unprecedented times of technological innovation and progress. Our lifeworld is ever-more-complex and differentiated, structured (and to a large extent constituted) by "air travel, oil and gas pipelines, electrical wires, highways, train tracks, fiber optic cables, and satellite connections" (Jamieson 2017, 14). On the downside, however, this rapid (technological and economic) progress over the last 300 years comes at a high price. From the mid-twentieth century on, human activity's drastic alteration of the environment has aggravated to the point that natural scientists diagnose a paradigmatic shift in the Earth's geological history, called the "Anthropocene" (Heise 2017, 3f.; Jamieson 2017, 13f.). Human agency – in particular, the extraction and use of natural resources, fossil-fueled industrialization (see Rigby 2021, 11) and mass production – has had (and still has) an incisive impact on the environment, especially with regards to climate change. The destructive effects and consequences arising from the highly complex entanglements within/between (the) ecosystem(s) and societies are almost innumerable. To take some examples: global warming, rising sea levels, the depletion of the ozone layer and shifting seasonal patterns have extensive destructive effects on the environment, biodiversity, human settlements, cities and human health (see Davies 2016, 1f. and the recent IPCC report at <https://www.ipcc.ch/report/ar6/wg2/about/factsheets>). The earth "seems to react to our actions" (Latour 2017, 2) and, in doing so, reveals "a crisis in human's relationship with their surroundings" (Morton 2007, 9).

This crisis is a central topic within the field of the *Environmental Humanities* (see exemplarily Heise et al. 2017; Emmett/Nye 2017; Cohen/Foote 2021), where the study of literature and culture using ecological approaches is a growing area of study. To the same extent that the Anthropocene is a massive, multiply entangled phenomenon, the environmental humanities are likewise multi-facetted, drawing on various critical approaches from philosophy, history, geology, sociology, political science, theology, cultural and literary studies, and many more academic disciplines. Not least, the very concept of "the" Anthropocene has not been uncontested since it is a too "homogenizing term" (Rigby 2021, 9), which, for instance, marginalizes issues of class and race (Rigby 2021, 9). As a consequence, not only alternative concepts have been proposed (such as "Symbiocene", "Chthulucene", "Plantationocene" or "Ploutucene") (Rigby 2021, 9–13), but also the very term "Anthropocene", first coined by Eugene F. Stoermer and Paul J. Crutzen in 2000, has been conceived in numerous different ways, "each implying different concepts and commitments" (Davies 2016, 41) and thus affecting the respective critical approach and its presuppositions (cf. Davies 2016, 41–68).

Against this backdrop, the 18th and 19th century – in particular, Britain and the Romantic period – constitute an important object of study since this period is characterized by colonial and economic expansion, as well as human dominance over nature. The technological advancements of this time, and their (critical) reflection in Romantic literature, had a significant impact on our current lifeworld and modern subjectivity. From the year 1750 to 2011, 500 billion metric tons of carbon (as CO_2) were blown

into the atmosphere (Davies 2016, 38). Britain's Industrial Revolution has a large share in this massive pollution, especially fossil-fueled industrialization together with capitalism. As Andreas Malm points out, the transition from water power to steam power in the British cotton industry was based to a large extent on a capitalist logic (which, in a wider context, up until today inhibits the large-scale transition to green energy) of surplus value and "power over labour" (Malm 2013, 15): while water power was at the time indeed cheaper and less prone to malfunctions, coal not only facilitated the accumulation of workforce (factories could be erected anywhere, especially in the cities, whereas water power demanded an increasingly centrifugal shift to marginal rural areas, where workforce was scarce), but also was independent of time (i.e. not bound to seasonal cycles and weather) and thus contributed to the efficiency of work shifts. In other words, coal's superiority over water power lay to a large degree in facilitating capitalism's triumph over time and space, turning them into "*abstract time*" (Malm 2013, 55) and "*abstract space*" (Malm 2013, 54) independent from the said limitations. Accordingly, around 1820 steam power successively replaced water power, and eventually replaced it after the 1830s not only in the cotton industry but also in British manufacturing in general. By 1850, Britain's burning of fossil fuels caused more than 60% of the CO2 emissions in the world (Malm 2013, 15–20; 26–36; 39–49; 53–56; 58–61; also see for a more detailed account Malm 2016). Not least, these developments must be also seen on a larger, global scale. As Jeremy Davies notes (2016, 95–97), Britain's Industrial Revolution is part of the reorganization of a global trade network that "metabolized South American silver, Caribbean sugar, North American cotton, African slaves, and the consumer goods that flowed into and out of the advanced population centers of northwest Europe, China, and India." (Davies 2016, 96). A thorough analysis of the Anthropocene, hence, must also take into account transatlantic and (post)colonial perspectives (cf. Rigby 2021, 8–13) for "these [environmental] harms have been knowingly exported to black and brown communities under the rubric of civilization, progress, and capitalism" (Yusoff 2018, viii).

A literary and cultural movement that emerged amidst these alienating modernizing processes, British Romanticism (critically) mirrors and questions these developments,[1] and constructs imaginative counter-discourses that aim at reconnecting with nature. In her dystopic novel *The Last Man* (1826), for example, Mary Shelley exposes the complex interrelations of biosystems, society, politics, economy, science/medicine and religion out of a (fictional) long term perspective spanning almost three decades. *The Last Man* indeed testifies Jonathan Bate's assertion "that humankind is not self-

1 See also Davies (2018, 20): "Romantic writers witnessed and responded to the restructuring of local and global ecosystems. That implies a new answer to the question of why the British Romantic period matters so much to ecocriticism, or, as we might now say, why it matters to the 'environmental humanities.' The new Romantic ecocriticism promises to tackle the cultural entailments of eighteenth- to nineteenth-century environmental changes in Britain, its colonies and its trading networks: changes that were integral to the British industrial revolution."

sufficient" as it is embedded into complex ecosystems (1993, 161) – an interrelation which also comprises numerous "non-natural", human made "ecosystems" together with their fragile and precarious (inter)dependencies. In so doing, Shelley points to central aspects that have pervaded scholarship on Romantic ecology. Jonathan Bate (1991) and Karl Kroeber (1994) initiated with their seminal studies – a "preliminary sketch towards literary ecocriticism" (Bate 1991, 11) – a large interest in ecological questions in Romantic studies revolving around the idea to see them as "proto-ecological" (McKusick 1997, 123) and to "rethink trough the Romantics what it means for post-industrial human society to reconnect to the environment" (Bate 1993, 161). Together with James McKusick (1997; 2000), these authors represent an "idealist" ecological approach to Romanticism, whose focus, however, lies more on "how their chosen writers foreshadowed modern environmentalism" (Davies 2018, 8) together with a revivified Romantic moral spirit rather than scrutinizing their respective literary/aesthetic, philosophical, socio-historical and natural-material contexts (see Davies 2018, 5–10). From the 21st century on, scholarship in Romantic ecology not only critically engaged with this idealist ecocritical legacy (e.g. Clark 2015) but ramified into three major areas, i.e. into philosophical approaches to nature (e.g. Timothy Morton), studies on space/place and animal studies (see Davies 2018, 10–19).[2]

To the same extent that "Romanticism" is an utterly heterogenous movement, thus, the concepts of "nature", "environment" and "ecology" turn out to be similarly iridescent and heterogenous, if not paradoxical (see also Rigby 2014, 65). While Bruno Latour, among others, critically engages with the traditional nature/culture dualism (Latour 2017, 15–40), Timothy Morton tries to think "Ecology without Nature", arguing that the latter is an ideologically charged, static concept that "is getting in the way of properly ecological forms of culture, philosophy, politics, and art" (Morton 2007, 1), and Kate Rigby not only scrutinizes Romanticism's historical complicity through the lens of decolonization but also Romantic ecopoetics themselves (Rigby 2021). The present theoretical paradigm of the environmental humanities with its interdisciplinary approach, moreover, focuses on "human and nonhuman forms of agency" together with various aspects of materiality (Heise 2017, 4–8, here 6). Concepts such as "deep ecology", "dark ecology" (Morton 2016), "biosemiotics", "ecomimesis" and "ambient poetics" (Morton 2007), "the mesh" (Morton 2016, 81) or "*Gaia*" (Latour 2017) show that this is a thriving field of research and testify the complexity of the very notion of "ecology". Against this backdrop, it becomes clear that "Romantic Ecologies" have to be understood as plural and dynamic concept, comprising a multicity of theoretical approaches and readings, which reflect the heterogeneity of Romanticism and surface not in a unified "ecology" but in various "ecologies" instead (i.e. not only in theory but also in practice, as for instance in the differences between a Wordsworthian ecology of "rootedness" / "dwelling" in contrast to Byron's urban ecology of wandering; see Hubbel 2010).

2 For a thorough overview of Romantic ecocriticism and its desiderata see Jeremy Davies's excellent overview (2018).

Romantic Ecologies

As this cursory outline demonstrates, ecological past and present are mutually entangled. A proper understanding of our present ecological state requires viewing it through the historical and aesthetic lenses of the (Romantic) past, and similarly, the complex entanglements of the past can only be thoroughly comprehended retrospectively through the lens of the current ecological present. This view presupposes, drawing on Timothy Morton's *Dark Ecology* (2016), an awareness of the interconnectedness of all things (including humans), which, like a Möbius strip, challenges normative-binary orientations/relations in space, time and matter (8f., 81, 108f., 159f.). Furthermore, in his seminal 2013 publication *Hyperobjects: Philosophy and Ecology after the End of the World*, Morton introduces the term and the theory of "hyperobjects", which since then has become a major reference point within the field of environmental philosophy and object-oriented ontology. Hyperobjects, to give but a few ephemerally chosen examples here, such as climate change, nuclear radiation, plastic, global capitalism or biodiversity and its loss refer to entities that are massive in scale and exist beyond human perception, yet, at the same time, have a significant impact on our world and our understanding of it. Being both non-local and temporally dispersed, Morton argues that these entities challenge traditional modes of human thought and require us to rethink our relationship with the environment. Climate change as a hyperobject, for example, involves processes that occur over long periods and are not immediately perceptible. Its causal effects are pervasive and interconnected, influencing a wide range of phenomena and systems, which become manifest in different ways and phases depending on their context.

In this light, Romantic ecologies take a special position. For the interplay of various historical developments, such as the Enclosures, imperial expansion, urbanization, and industrialization, combined with a heightened appreciation of (sublime nature) result in an awareness of the complexity, temporality and fragility of the (natural) environment, whose ultimate incommensurability finds expression in a delicate balance between technological and aesthetically-imaginative domestication on one hand, and a sense of loss or an absence of control over the same on the other: Romanticism aims at overcoming a dualistic human/nature relation, acknowledging their interconnectedness and the agency of non-human living beings (as well as things). This notion very much underlies the reading of Romanticism as being "proto-ecological" (McKusick 1997, 123). However, Romanticism is not only situated within a historical period of modernization, during which humanity gained mastery over nature in the 18th and 19th centuries, but it also takes part in this mastery through its aesthetic, conceptual, and imaginative constructions of (an increasingly precarious, sometimes overwhelming and contingent, experience of) nature (e.g. by embracing the overwhelming complexity of the sublime while also attempting to aesthetically domesticate it; or as can be seen in the critique on William Wordsworth's so-called "egotistical sublime").[3]

3 See also Rigby (2021, 4f, 149), who focuses the colonial aspects in this idea, trying to decolonize Romantic ecopoetics.

Such a view thus draws the *intra-actions*[4] between nature, humans, power, ideology, history, culture and object/matter together, unveiling their (reciprocal) entanglements and also their contingencies (see for example Dewey W. Hall's article in this volume, which traces the influence of the Pico-Viejo volcanic eruption in 1798 on both the climate and W. Wordsworth's writing). In the context of Romantic ecologies, this proves to be especially relevant in the following areas: Firstly, British Romanticism has a strong proclivity to challenge the dominant Nature/Culture dualism. As Bruno Latour argues, Western society and culture (along with its philosophical and scientific traditions) are not only highly influenced by the supposed binary of these realms but, in so doing, also perpetuate and reinforce them. A thorough understanding of humankind's intricate relation with nature, hence, requires an alternative perspective that reconceives this binary as complex network of living and non-living entities. That is, as actors/actants within a self-regulating superordinate totality/system, for which he draws, among others, on James Lovelock's *Gaia* theory (Latour 2017, 14–20, 130–136). In his poem "Lines Written in Early Spring", for example, William Wordsworth contests the said Nature / Culture binary by bewailing a man-induced ("And much it grieved my heart to think / What man has made of man" l. 7–8), artificial separation from nature ("To her fair works did Nature link / The human soul that through me ran;" ll. 5–6), hence proposing the notion of interconnectedness instead, i.e. that humankind is an integral part of the natural world (see also Potkay 2008, 392).

Secondly, the (Romantic) past and the present, the local and global, synchronicity and diachronicity, need to be likewise regarded in the light of their complex entanglements. Against the backdrop of Timothy Morton's concept of the *hyperobject* (Morton 2013), the Anthropocene is characterized by a non-locality that exceeds conventional temporal-spatial relations and rather "'sticks[s]' to beings that are involved with them" (2013, 1). Past and present are closely entangled inasmuch as "the appearance of things" (2013, 90) – which Morton identifies as "indexical signs" (2013, 90) – are "the *past* of a hyperobject" (2013, 90) together with its flowing "causal traces" (2013, 90), overall constituting its "aesthetic dimension" (2013, 90). The future, in turn, is already inscribed into the supposed present (things) in that the "very large finitude of hyperobjects" (2013, 94) constitute the irreducible "essence" (2013, 91) of the hyperobject's very teleology, thus making the notions of "the present" or "presence" highly elusive (2013, 91–95). Such "causal traces" permeate the very materiality of the origin story of the Industrialization for, as Kathryn Yussof argues (2018; here 14–22) for instance, "coloniality and anti-blackness are materially inscribed into the Anthropocene" (2018, 19): in the context of the plantations, "sugar was the conversion of inhumane slave energy into fuel, then back into human energy, plus inhuman energy, to produce industrialization. Coal was the inhuman corollary of those dehumanized black bodies" (2018, 15). A thorough analysis of Romantic ecologies must therefore also engage with their colonial complicity and heritage, both from a contemporary and retrospective perspective as well as taking its local and global entanglements into account. This

4 For the concept of "intra-action" see Barad 2008.

comprises, among many other things, the alteration of local ecosystems and their respective population by importing and exporting biological lifeforms, the Empire's entanglement in a global network of (slave) trade and politics, and also the impact of environmental factors on settler colonialism (Hutchings 2009, 17f., 26f.). Likewise, Romantic ecopoetics themselves must be subjected to critical scrutiny, both in terms of their colonial-ideological impact (see Rigby 2021, 5, 149) as well as of their co-constructive role with regards to contemporary concepts of nature, which Timothy Morton links to the logic of (Romantic) consumerism and commodity (Morton 2007, 14–26, 79–139; Morton 2016, 120–158).

At the basis of the foregoing considerations lies, thirdly, a strong new materialist perspective. For the critique on the Nature/Culture binary together with the(ir) complex spatio-temporal (inter)dependencies within the notion of the hyperobject requires a shift in perspective that not only revolves around humans as agents but that also emphasizes the agency of matter/objects and non-human lifeforms (cf. Coole/Frost 2010, 5–10). This equally necessitates a recognition of the entangled forms of material (self-) organization, i.e. "a materiality that materializes, evincing immanent modes of self-transformation that compel us to think of causation in far more complex terms; to recognize that phenomena are caught in a multitude of interlocking systems and forces and to consider anew the location and nature of capacities for agency." (Coole/Frost 2010, 9) At the same time, however, such a change in perspective from subject to object towards object to subject – or, more general, from discourse to matter – does by no means void the (social) discursive co-construction of our lifeworld (Coole/Frost 2010, 26f.) but rather acknowledges that "discursive and material forms are inextricable yet irreducible" (Coole/Frost 2010, 27). In his famous poem "Tintern Abbey", for instance, William Wordsworth stresses the "life of things" (l. 49) for "[a] motion and a spirit" (l. 100) not only animates "[a]ll thinking things, all objects of thought" (l. 101) but also "rolls through all things" (l. 102), hence suggesting an ontology "in which human and nonhuman activities are viewed as interanimate with objects, made and unmade" (Potkay 2008, 401). Similarly, London's personification in "Composed Upon Westminster Bridge" ("This City now doth, like a garment, wear"; "The very houses seem asleep"; "all that mighty heart is lying still!"; ll. 4, 13, 14) – which runs parallel to nature's personification in the poem – literally animates the city and, in so doing, unveils its entanglements with(in) nature and culture, while also stressing its own agency as a material ecosystem of things. Following the fact that Romantic (re)imaginations of nature are predominantly experiential rather than descriptive (see Hutchings 2009, 6), moreover, a further important aspect of this new materialist perspective on ecology is the notion of affect. As Kate Rigby notes, ecological aesthetics can evoke such affects by functioning "as a reminder of human psycho-physical susceptibility to environmental conditions." (2021, 73; see also 53–82) The affective impact in Wordsworth's "Composed Upon Westminster Bridge", for example, very much relies on a fleeting dissolution of the Nature/Culture binary via, among other things, their outlined mutual (metaphorical) identifications. In this way, Wordsworth evokes a pastoral stillness

amidst the chaos of industrialized London, thereby both juxtaposing and (albeit fleetingly) fusing subject, object and (natural) environment. Drawing on Timothy Morton's concept of "*ambience*" (Morton 2007, 32–63), this can be read as a poetic construction/evocation of an affective, sublime atmosphere between the lines, "which can only be glimpsed as a fleeting, dissolving presence" (Morton 2007, 51) and, in so doing, lets us "not merely figure out but actually *experience* the fact that we [are] embedded in our world" (Morton 2007, 64).

The Essays

The volume begins with articles that explore Romantic ecologies through political, socio-historical and technological perspectives. These perspectives encompass transatlantic dialogues as well as (post)colonial questions and issues of capitalism/consumerism. **Angela Esterhammer** scrutinizes in her article "Nature, Settlement, and History in John Galt's Transatlantic Tales", which exhibit the intersection of settler experience and the traditions of romance. Against the backdrop of the North American landscape in the 1820s and 1830s, she argues that Galt's tales provide a critical insight into the impact of colonial economies on the natural environment and Indigenous cultures, and, not least, the very representation of these processes. Representations of natural environments and their underlying structures of power and exclusion are likewise central aspects in **Marie Hologa's** contribution, "Imaginative Geography and the 'Planter Picturesque'". Hologa analyzes various plantocratic texts and visualizations, thereby critically exposing the white Britons' hegemonic gaze on the colonial, non-European landscapes of the West Indies, along with their marginalization (or even erasure) of slavery. In her paper, "Of Solitary Wanderers and Natural Entanglements: William Godwin's Socio-political Criticism as Romantic Ecopoetics", **Sophia Lange** reconsiders Romantic eco-politics and their (discursive) legacies in the 21st century through the perspective of William Godwin's socio-political criticism. Nature, accordingly, functions in Godwin's writings as an affective context to promote (the necessity of) ecological responsibility. Economic issues, ecopolitics and social questions likewise constitute central elements in **Ute Berns's** contribution, "Energy Ecologies in Joanna Baillie's 'Address to a Steam-Vessel' (1823)", in which she focuses on the impact of technological modernization processes. Published in a paradigmatic transitional period, i.e. within the technological and economic shift to fossil capitalism, Berns argues that the object of the steam-vessel in Baillie's poem exposes the arising social, economic, technological and ecological tensions both in a local and global, historical scale.

Revising the traditional nature/culture binary, the next group of articles focuses on the role of various biosystems, along with their (inter)dependencies and symbioses, from different critical perspectives. In his article, "Animism Has Always Mattered – Naturally Among the English Romantics", **Shinya Matsuzaki** re-reads the abounding personifications in Romantic poetry through the critical lens of "new animism", i.e. the notion that non-human entities share the same personhood as human beings. Taking examples