

Ralf Haekel, Julia Heinemann (Eds.)

Romanticism and its Media

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

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

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Ralf Haekel & Julia Heinemann

Introduction: Romantic Media and Romantic Mediations

This living hand, now warm and capable
Of earnest grasping, would, if it were cold
And in the icy silence of the tomb.
So haunt thy days and chill thy dreaming nights
That thou would wish thine own heart dry of blood,
So in my veins red life might stream again.
And thou be conscience-calm'd. See, here it is
I hold it towards you. (Keats 384)

“This Living Hand,” one of John Keats’s final poems, was written while he was suffering from tuberculosis. The poem explores several related topics through its key image of the hand and its functions. In this context, the “living hand” can prompt a number of meanings. It is the literal hand of the human being John Keats who, though presently still “warm and capable,” might soon lie “in the icy silence of the tomb” following the poet’s expected death. This hand can still threaten violence, but as becomes clear in the final lines, it can also be held out as a sign of reconciliation. It can be a hand offered in marriage, making it a touching and loving hand. Yet, at the same time, the shift from thou to you signifies a growing distance. But of course, a poet’s hand is also a writing hand, arguably crafting this very poem. Accordingly, the short poem can be interpreted in many different ways: as a disappointed, even menacing love letter to Fanny Brawne, who turned down his offer of marriage. It can be read as a poem directed at the critics who savagely attacked Keats’s works in their reviews. But most of all, this poem is concerned with posterity, asking what remains of a poet and his works after death. In this sense, “This Living Hand” joins the long tradition of literary texts on the topos of *vita brevis – ars longa*.

It is in this final sense that we read this poem as a sophisticated reflection on its own status as medium, making it emblematic of the Romantic period’s broader concerns with media and mediation. Keats’s living hand is the hand writing the very poem that we, more than 200 years later, can still read. But his poetic image of the hand refers not only to the performative act of writing. As hand is also short for handwriting, it also turns the text into a living medium, making manifest and communicating the fruits of the poet’s labour. As a medium, the poem can cross time and space, becoming a “living hand” once again in every act of reading and thus retaining agency even after the poet’s death. In this way, the process of mediation hinges on the reader’s contribution. Like a cool medium in Marshall McLuhan’s sense, the poem depends on the reader’s active participation to come alive (22-32). Whenever we read Keat’s poem, the medium comes alive again and is invested with meaning.

What is striking about Keats’s short poem is that it reflects the many technological dimensions of what a poem can do, can be, and can become. To a critic, this poem takes on an entirely different meaning than in the eyes of Keats’s lover. But most im-

portantly, it draws a connection between the writing process, the storage of the poem, and eventually its reception in posterity. Only through technical storage in handwriting and in print can later readers re-create the vital process that led to its composition. In this sense, modern media theory is closely connected to the Romantic theory of the imagination, adding, however, a decidedly material dimension. A poem is only a poem because of the many channels of its mediation.

Until a few decades ago, media-theoretical approaches to Romantic literature occupied a marginal, if not eccentric position in the critical landscape. And yet, questions of mediation are central to the historical period and its literary concerns. In his important study *Romantic Mediations*, Andrew Burkett writes about key Romantic authors that “these intellectuals lived and worked during the generation just previous to the emergence of the media concept itself” (2). This media concept is usually associated with the invention of a set of new technologies in the later nineteenth century that would fundamentally change the concept of storage and representation: photography in the 1820s by Nicéphore Niépce, later to be improved by Louis Daguerre (1839), sound recording in 1877 by Thomas Alva Edison – preceded by Édouard-Léon Scott de Martinville who already developed a recording device in 1857. With the advent of these technologies, the possibilities to record, store, and represent the human voice and human appearance changed fundamentally.

The Romantics were, as Burkett remarks, the “*last* generation who were never photographed” and “whose voices were unable to be recorded” (4, 72). Despite the absence of photography or the phonograph, the Romantic age is profoundly marked by media change and medial acceleration, as the industrial printing press not only changed the literary landscape, but also led to pre-technological reflections on media and mediation. This creates a strangely dichotomous understanding of the Romantic media concept. As John Guillory remarks, although the concept of mediation was only emerging at the time, works of art were already frequently “transposed” into media in a process of remediation:

The very fact of remediation, however, suggests that premodern arts are also, in the fully modern sense, media but that for some reason they did not need to be so called, at least not until the later nineteenth century. The emergence of new technical media thus seemed to reposition the traditional arts as ambiguously both media and precursors to the media – the aggregation of forms indicated by use of the definite article. (322)

Although the technological devices developed later in the nineteenth century undoubtedly changed the media landscape, the modern concept of the medium can be used to describe any means of communication since the origin of human civilisation. If we leave aside the manifold theoretical conceptions beyond the technological device, such as cultural techniques and media ecology (see Bayerlipp, Haekel, and Schlegel) and focus on literary media as the “bearers of writing” (Assmann 63), we uncover a much longer history of the mediated word. Aleida Assmann lists clay tablets, papyrus rolls, parchment, and, finally, paper as pre-technological devices. Already in 1984, Gumbrecht sketched a media history of literature from the twelfth century onwards.