



## Romantic Shades and Shadows / Romantic Ambiguities: Abodes of the Modern

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## BOOK REVIEWS

**Romantic Shades and Shadows**, by Susan J. Wolfson, Baltimore, Johns Hopkins UP, 2018, xiv + 255 pp., 16 illustrations.

**Romantic Ambiguities: Abodes of the Modern**, edited by Sebastian Domsch, Christoph Reinhardt, and Katharina Rennhak, Trier, Wissenschaften Verlag Trier, 2017, iv + 301 pp.

Shades, shadows, echoes, reflections: ghostly presences—mere apparitions, often, chimeras and whimsies—that come like Percy Shelley’s intellectual beauty, unseen shadows of some unseen power that pass unseen among us. We’ve all been aware of them countless times: sometimes they are at our arm (or our ear, our eye) as we read, hovering there just outside recognition, or just inside; at other times they breathe upon the aeolian harp of our consciousness as we talk in class, their names and faces floating there, reminding us of other reading, other speech, other lives and times. The longer our time in the profession, it seems, the more numerous this numinous crowd, this cloud of resonances and reminders. Nor can we speak their names, most times, nor paint their faces in those teaching spaces we occupy, our students too young still, too scantily read, to reckon those resonances that visit us in mid-lecture, unbid, hid to them and barely visible in the mist of time and history amidst which we strut and fret our hour. But they are there, surely, so long as we are there, sharing and belonging, even as they pass unseen from the scene.

This is the shifting milieu which Susan Wolfson invites us to explore with her in her characteristically witty way, her easy erudition worn lightly as always, so that we might almost miss the presence in her words of so many of the very shadows she summons from a lifetime of reading, thinking, and listening. Early on, we tend to read hastily: there is much to be read, after all, and we fear to speak too soon, lest we reveal how little we have yet digested. Increasingly, too, our age is so data-driven that we forget what it means to *read*—to do so much more than merely “input the data.” Early on, for example, we read Dickens rapidly, to learn what happens (and perhaps why and how). But eventually we read more slowly, the way we sip and savor a fine scotch, because to “read” Dickens aright is to “know” him in a way that takes time, a leisurely absorption seasoned with eye and ear and mind and memory and attentive to all our prior reading experiences and their discrete times and circumstances. Finally, eventually, blessedly, one relaxes into a sort of reading that is more telepathic than data-driven, in which one comprehends comprehensively, understands understanding, “enters into” what Blake called the “lineaments” of the characters he painted, the “Minute Particulars” where wisdom resides, waiting to welcome us to our own more sentient selves.

So too with reading William Wordsworth along with Susan Wolfson. Her chapter (the book’s second) on the extraordinary ways in which that singularly protean poet embedded his name, word by word, for what it’s worth, and even syllable by syllable, sometimes explicitly and sometimes covertly, and in playful puns and earnest importance, stands for all. Like the other chapters, this witty meditation on the complex textual admixture of the intentional and the unintentional reveals both how much various writers know and how much they don’t seem to know (or remember) that they know. Consuming their work, the sentient reader (whom Wolfson models for us) grows ever more aware of the mind-bending complexity of the referentiality of words that have been used, abused, reused, refashioned, repurposed in ways that trace their shadowy prior lives in the wordy works of any writer’s contemporaries and predecessors. As T. S. Eliot observed in “Tradition and the Individual Talent” (1919),

every new poem reformulates all of literary history by its mere being because, as Barry Commoner's first law of ecology reminds us, "Everything is connected to everything else" (33). Moreover, it projects that implicated history forward, anticipating future readers (and reading experiences) even as it shapes them. Keats got it right at the beginning of *Endymion* (1818): "A thing of beauty is a joy for ever; / *Its loveliness increases*" (my emphases, of course).

In another chapter Wolfson presents William Hazlitt recollecting in 1823 his first acquaintance with Coleridge as he remembered him from January 1798: astonishing, electric, irresistible. Writing in 1823, though, Hazlitt is dealing in chimeras and illusions, for that hypnotic poet is no more, having been replaced by the mere echo of his former self. Here Wolfson invokes J. H. Prynne's claim that literary language bears a "heightened sense of the accumulated layers and aspects of association which form the signifiatory resonances of previous usage" (qtd. in Wolfson 70), a fancy way of saying that every word that plays on the field of literary production comes, like Wordsworth's infant, "trailing clouds of glory," not from heaven but from literary history. Hazlitt's verbal portrait of Coleridge conflates the magnetic young republican with the elder fallen angel, Hazlitt's bitterness inflecting his haunting (and haunted) eulogy for that which is no more and yet remains, conjured back into being by the verbal fireworks that nevertheless dismiss him back to that darkness he now inhabits. Ironically, Hazlitt was onto something with his contradictory allusiveness: for Wolfson's Hazlitt's Coleridge, dejection (both the mood and the ode) ultimately became "Coleridge's signature, and a self-haunting" (97), a form of self-reflexivity that Wordsworth could turn toward confidence and self-assertion and that Percy Shelley took in a wholly different direction in the phantoms and phantasms of his political poems of 1819.

If Shelley is the poet of Promethean possibility, of shadows of the things that *may* be in a world yet to be born from the Volneyan ruins of empire and the realities of post-Waterloo imperialism, Wolfson's Byron is the extravagant purveyor of ghosts and ghost stories from Childe Harold's hollow hallowed halls to the spectral apparitions—verbal and visual—of *Don Juan's* fragmentary seventeenth canto. And on, finally, to Keats, and to some of the remarkable resonances that Wolfson discovers in William Butler Yeats's complicated colloquy with that fated young poet. When he was invited to write something for the *John Keats Memorial Volume* (1921), she reminds us, Yeats flatly refused to "fill [his] mind with him" in order to do so, choosing instead to epitomize, in what he thought was a largely off-handed letter to the editor (George Williamson), this "one pure artist" of the Romantics by describing what he was *not*, by praising the apparent absence from his poetry of "any intermixture of doctrine of fanaticism" (158). Yeats recognized the immanent aestheticism of Keats's greatest poetry, its preoccupation with itself and its spectral verbal and visual impressionism, its extraordinary capacity for revivifying what is latent in the past within those purposeful repurposings of its elements and effects that constitute Keats's extraordinary art.

But Yeats's relationship with Keats was fraught with all sorts of ghostly hauntings, in Wolfson's telling: moving away from the lush Romanticism of his early, pre-1900 poetry, Yeats deliberately broke with what seemed to him the "puerile sensuousness that a proper 'modernist' poet must purge" (162). And yet, as with all good hauntings, things are never quite so simple, nor are the breaks so clean and permanent. Like Hazlitt reconfiguring a spectral Coleridge who fits his ghostly post-Coleridgean ideal, Yeats found himself setting up a straw-youth in the fatally sensuous poet succumbing (or seeming to do so) to the siren sensuality to which the hardening modernist Irish poet had by mid-career committed himself to rejecting and defeating. And yet, Wolfson tells us, the Romantic root cannot be eradicated: Yeats and Keats become opposing but inseparably welded poles in a post-Freudian tug-of-war, each latent in the other despite their separation in mere chronology. Here Wolfson's words are the ones to hear:

poetry survives in these particulars of shades and shadows. Such are the circuitous routes—and bypasses—of literary history that there remain debts that cannot be acknowledged or repaid in kind but get productively reinvested in both the haunts and the visible grain of making new. (187)

Like all good ghosts, the ghost of Romanticism is a ghost of All, a sort of *Ur-* and *Über-geist*, a spirit at once of “airy nothings” and of all things, an immanence that is always both imminent and accomplished, in-process and finished—but never completed. This is why our own reading acts are inevitably both revelations and revisitings of things which we once knew—or did not know—and which we now come to know again—or not to know again—in a process of continual creation and re-creation. And when we delete that spritely hyphen we recognize one of the motives that drives Susan Wolfson in her puckish pursuit of those ghostly presences—those awful shadows of some unseen Power that float though unseen among us—that haunt us as we read, pursuing them in the endless process of refashioning not just our readerly selves but also, *pace* Eliot *et al*, the entirety of literary history itself. It’s recreational in every imaginable sense of the word—and then some.

The essays in *Romantic Ambiguities* are sterner stuff, owing partly to the diversity of more than a dozen and a half earnest scholars assembled here and partly to their disparate approaches to their collective subject matter. Neither a “chorus” nor a fully attuned choir of soloists, the contributors are in some respects analogous to jazz musicians who perform riffs and variations upon a fixed melody while taking it through an assortment of keys, rhythms, and other permutations. The risk of all such collections is, of course, an entropic one: the tendency for things to fall apart. Happily, this collection largely succeeds in cohering, the essays’ combined voices both interrogating and complicating the central subject matter while asserting, albeit from various perspectives, its endurance in Romanticism studies today and going forward. The authors address the centrality of the subjective experience to the nature of Romanticism, particularly in the wake of later twentieth-century literary-critical and cultural-theoretical explorations of ambiguity. What can be known, finally and definitively, in other words, and by whom, and under what conditions? It’s not quite the same issue that was crucial to poststructuralism, deconstruction, and allied lines of inquiry. Rather, it is a more well-seasoned issue whose roots (at least as they relate to Romanticism) lie in later Enlightenment Germany and which drove the efforts of Romantics on both sides of the English Channel to measure the actual dynamic tension between the subjective and the objective, the heart and the head, the emotions and the intellect. Taking their cue from Christoph Bode’s magisterial definition of ambiguity as the prototypical modern mode (*Ästhetik der Ambiguität* [1988]), the editors (Sebastian Domsch, Christoph Reinfandt, and Katharina Rennhak) have assembled a strong roster of contributors to explore the problematically ambiguous nature of Romantic aesthetics. Domsch and Rennhak put it this way: if, as Wordsworth would have it, poetry is the spontaneous overflow of powerful feeling, recollected in tranquility, then any poem “re-presents something spontaneous for future re-enactment, which is then anything but spontaneous but shall nevertheless capture the experience of spontaneity” (1). That is, in its adventurous reimagining of the complexities of authentic representation through the symbolic vehicle of language, Romanticism may be understood to anticipate (or to foreshadow) Modernism’s preoccupation with the unstable relationship between the conventions of everyday language and the idiosyncrasies of highly individuated personal protocols of “aesthetic reading.” For scholar-theorists like Bode and James Chandler, Romanticism marked a pivotal moment in the appreciation of how language was understood to operate, a moment at which the Enlightenment ideal of stability and consensus gave place to new conditions of radical instability and indeterminacy that had meaningful, consequential analogues in political phenomena, for instance. For the editors, as for Bode, the crux of the

matter is “auto-referentiality and processuality,” the latter being that phenomenon by which a text triggers a seemingly endless succession of readings and re-readings that “invariably fail to arrest ‘the’ meaning of the text” (3). Like Wolfson in *Romantic Shades and Shadows*, the editors and their contributors wrestle with the endless compounding of resonances within texts, resonances produced by the ghosts of prior articulations and cognitions, prior encodings and decodings, each of which draws the reader at once *toward* and *away from* the center and the circumference of meaning, to adapt Shelley’s figure. But where Wolfson’s dense texture of text and theory (as her lengthy bibliography suggests) is rendered with a characteristically light and witty touch, the essays in *Romantic Ambiguities* offer a more studiously “serious” voice and hand. As Oscar Wilde famously demonstrated, though, it is possible to treat seriously the Great Issues and Great Ideas of history and culture in works that nevertheless read as both sprightly and spritely.

*Romantic Ambiguities* is divided into four units: Poetry, Non-Fictional Prose, Drama and the Novel, and a set of post-Romantic reflections called “Afterlives,” a division by genre that necessarily struggles with the universalizing bifurcated-yet-paired theoretical paradigm of Romanticism/Modernism the volume frames for us. In a sense, this collection’s structure offers an elaborate conflation of (1) a complementary halved paradigm whose fluctuating poles are Romanticism and Modernism; (2) a four-part genre-delimited arrangement, one of whose parts are defined less by genre or period than by evolution and “processuality”; (3) a mixed chorus of twenty-three voices (including three pairs of co-authors); and (4) the presiding spirit of Christoph Bode, whose work both initiates and informs the complex interplay of voices and shadows toward which these numbers point. It’s a remarkably good metaphor, in fact, for the complex interplay of voices, echoes, allusions, and illusions that characterize so much of modern literary-cultural theory and an effective reminder that the tendency of all critical and theoretical discourse is ultimately toward not univocality but rather polyvocality, “heteroglossia,” and the myriad discords inherent in the insistently ambiguous nature of the modern human condition.

Fittingly, *Romantic Ambiguities* begins also with Wordsworth, with Mark Bruhn’s close rereading of “Simon Lee,” which Bruhn reads as radical (and radically modern) in its explicit invitation to the reader’s active participation in realizing—or “performing”—the affective subjectivity that in Wordsworth’s proto-modernist aesthetic replaces the sort of predetermined codes or messages with which earlier poets typically populated their poems. Nicholas Halmi, too, addresses Wordsworth’s exercises in ambiguity, in this case first in the constrained scope of “Tintern Abbey” and then in the expanses of *The Excursion* and *The Prelude*, arguing that Wordsworth labored not to suggest (or to impose) stability and regularity upon the philosophical dimensions of those poems but instead to dissolve any such stability. To do this, Halmi writes, Wordsworth employs two largely complementary rhetorical strategies: (1) “positive statements that dissolve conventional epistemological and ontological distinctions (between perception and imagination, subject and object, self and other, man and nature)” and (2) “qualifications that reveal those statements to be wishful rather than definitive” (39). The latter category, the qualifications, Halmi tells us, arise from “the conflict between a linear conception of cognitive development as a progression from sensation to consciousness and the desire to recover an original, as it were pre-conscious, sense of oneness with nature” (39). That is a complicated formulation, worked out in the argot of contemporary theory, of the notion that nothing is entirely what it is perceived to be or what it actually and objectively “is.” Nothing ever really “stands still,” as it were, whether in texts or in the physical, phenomenal world. (Napoleon’s observation that victories would come more easily if the enemy would stand still while one maneuvers comes to mind as apt in this context.) By the end of his discussion, Halmi elects to present a Wordsworth poised uncomfortably and ambiguously

between an “old” world of revolutionary and nature-based republicanism which has failed to set fruit and a “new” world of largely self-centered and “redeeming” prophetic promise whose advent appears not at all certain (51).

Ralf Haekel takes up Wordsworth too, linking him with Milton via the conclusion of *Paradise Lost*, in which Haekel understands Milton to counterpose ethical issues of freedom of choice and will, on one hand, and semantic issues of the insufficiency of language to a writer’s needs, on the other. Haekel takes Kant’s *Critique of Pure Reason* as a touchstone, “a watershed in Western philosophy” that signals “a paradigm shift in the role and function of literature and literary language” and that elevates the significance of contingency, or “the notion that things might as well be different” (53–54). Contingency, in this sense, may produce an optimistic intuition of freedom, but it may also give rise to anxiety when the tenor of the times is not conducive to optimism. For Milton, we’re told, contingency was circumscribed by a firmly entrenched sense of necessity grounded in the doctrine of God’s providence. The “guard rails” were firmly in place, in other words, leaving the course that humans might run consequently both contained and constrained. By the time Wordsworth undertook (and continued) *The Prelude*, however, those rails had been largely removed and the world had left its erstwhile static state and entered into what appeared to be a state of immanence, of becoming, whose condition was necessarily one of ambiguity precisely *because* the rails were down and the future comparatively guideless except through individual human prerogative—including the prerogatives of artists, poets, and other unacknowledged legislators of the world (66).

Almost on cue, Jens Martin Gurr turns to Shelley’s post-Peterloo writing, where the presence of ambiguity is inseparable from that poet’s struggles to envision the future of Britain—and the world—where everything could only be expressed as a conditional, as in the figure of the “glorious phantom” that only “*may* illumine our tempestuous day” or in the question (“Can Spring be far behind?”) that Shelley substituted for the bold assertion (“Spring lags not far behind.”) with which his glorious “Ode to the West Wind” originally concluded. Gurr takes as his touchstone, though, Shelley’s fragmentary *Philosophical View of Reform*, left unpublished for fully a century after the poet’s death, in which Shelley repeatedly reveals his inability to resolve for himself “the questions of whether to counter oppression by means of passive resistance or by revolutionary violence” (83). Gurr proposes a tempting resolution to the apparent impasse evident not just in the *Philosophical View* but also in the political poems of 1819 and shortly thereafter: he suggests that “the ambiguities of poetic language allow for a—poetic rather than discursive—*resolution* of the contradictions” (91). But hypothetical solutions to literary (or linguistic) ambiguities and ambivalences are not so easily or conveniently transferrable to real-world political crises in which real people are beaten, sabered, or killed by real weapons wielded by real agents of totalitarian oppression. There is nothing, finally, ambiguous about death, and there is always a whiff of the proverbial ivory tower involved in toying with the shades and shadows of language and usage when there is blood on the corpses of the brutalized masses and on the hands of their killers.


Other particularly good essays in *Romantic Ambiguities* include Frederick Burwick’s predictably stellar examination of time in European Romantic drama; Michael O’Neill’s masterful reading of Shelley’s treatment in *The Cenci* of language as both a code and form of power and as a medium for empowering an emergent consciousness; Pascal Fischer’s resourceful reconsideration of Edmund Burke’s “Sublime” as a formative precursor of both high Romantic and high modernist ambiguity; and Sabrina Sontheimer’s bracing interdisciplinary reading of Coleridge’s “Rime of the Ancient Mariner” and the engrossing ambiguities that arise from various of its illustrations over two centuries. Finally, Christoph Reinfandt returns us to the ghostly presences in language and reference that fascinate Susan Wolfson. As Reinfandt

observes, there is “a crack” between “the world on one hand and the ways in which it is being made sense of by human beings in specific layerings of language, writing, and textuality,” a “crack” through which both understanding (cognition, knowledge) and ambiguity (instability, multireferentiality, and echoes) enter to do their contestatory work. Like Wolfson, Reinfandt reminds us that Romanticism’s determined turning to subjective experience anticipated that of Modernism in its “awareness of the language- and media-related complexities of authentic representation” (282). A century after the high-water mark of Modernism we are no more sure of ourselves, our words, and our successive decodings of literary language: ambiguity seems, more than ever, to be the nature of the postmodern present, that slippery, shadowy world of echoes and reshaping in which we pass our days among these fleeting ghostly presences.

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**The Poetics of Decline in British Romanticism**, by Jonathan Sachs, Cambridge, Cambridge UP, 2018, xiv + 226 pp., 6 figures.

**The Romantic Historicism to Come**, by Jonathan Crimmins, New York, Bloomsbury Academic, 2018, ix + 180 pp.

Jonathan Sachs’s *The Poetics of Decline in British Romanticism* and Jonathan Crimmins’s *The Romantic Historicism to Come* both begin by reading Romantic encounters with scenes of ruin, and, in turn, by discussing how the Romantics’ sense of history involved imagining a future for which the present will one day amount to a ruin. Both begin, too, by acknowledging Kevis Goodman’s *Georgic Modernity and British Romanticism* (2004) and its privileging of the georgic as a mode of accessing the lived experience of historical movement, or what Sachs characterizes as “the flux of historical process” (25) and Crimmins as “the minimally articulable evanescence of experience” (3). But while Sachs invokes *Georgic Modernity* sympathetically, regarding Romantic lyric poetry more generally as a privileged medial opening onto the experience of overlapping, heterogeneous temporalities—capturing, reckoning with, and theorizing the complexity of living at once through the glacial slowness of geological time, a sense of cultural acceleration, and a *longue durée* of historical ascendance or decline—Crimmins singles out Goodman’s study, along with Alan Liu’s *Wordsworth: The Sense of History* (1989), as examples of what he thinks of as a problematic mainline mode of thinking about history. Such historicisms, he contends, mire us in philosophical difficulties because they regard history too much as something whose “fullness . . . has ceased to be” (5) and whose medial traces amount to things that “come between the present and the past” (3). As one can imagine, the Romantic historicisms to come in the remaining chapters of Crimmins’s