



Romanticism and the Forms of Discontent / Last Things: Disastrous Form from Kant to Hajar

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Crimmins's broader philosophical point in the chapter is an important one that many contemporary historicist scholars could stand to come to terms with—namely, that “the problem of futurity,” as he characterizes it, “need not sever its connection to causality” in order to remain “open to radical change” (26).

An openness to radical change that does not depend on disentanglement from the present then becomes the subject of Crimmins's sixth and final chapter, which critiques the Lacanian commitments of much contemporary queer theory as neglecting to recognize the revolutionary qualities of love as Percy Shelley conceives it in *Prometheus Unbound*. A queer theory that demands a radical break from the present—not to mention a perpetual commitment to breaking from every future present—commits itself to a transcendental goal. It thus fails to grasp the intermixture of past, present, and future in the now and, in turn, the radicalism of the Shelleyan idea of love as a condition of entanglement, one in which care amounts not to subjugation but an embrace of possibility and difference.

The Romantic Historicism to Come challenged me, and will surely challenge others, to think outside of the received narrative wherein Romantic historicism amounts to a mode of thought not only born out of a sense of historical rupture (especially the French Revolution) but also committed to regarding history as an explanatory and representational mode of compensating for rupture—of trying to collapse the gap separating present from past, and past from other pasts. It is also hard not to be pulled in by Crimmins's ambitious promise in the introduction that the remainder of the book will help scholars “move beyond the historicist's dilemma—caught between the fullness of lost time and its corollary empty freedom—that has stymied the Romantic historicism of the past” (20). Yet, as the extended chapter summaries above likely reflect, I felt the exposition inadequate to this promise at many points along the way in the book, not just within individual chapters but also across the book's sequential architecture. The openness of the book's gesture toward the future is such that it lacks a concluding chapter or epilogue, a lack that for this reader amounts to a want.

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Romanticism and the Forms of Discontent, edited by Christoph Bode, Trier, Wissenschaftlicher Verlag Trier, 2017, 214 pp.

Last Things: Disastrous Form from Kant to Hajar, by Jacques Khalip, New York, Fordham UP, 2018, xiii + 139 pp., 9 illustrations.

Christoph Bode's essay collection, *Romanticism and the Forms of Discontent*, and Jacques Khalip's second monograph, *Last Things: Disastrous Form from Kant to Hajar*, beg an essential question: What is the state of Romanticism and Romantic studies? If “state” means “emotional, psychological, or existential condition,” for Bode and his contributors that means “unease,” while for Khalip it's “lastness,” which raises the critical stakes considerably. Both books thus beg a different but related question: What is the state of Romanticism and Romantic studies *these days*? As well as can be expected, some would respond, given the facts and depending upon where one works. Romanticism continues to recede amidst a proliferation of other

fields and designations, translating into declining attendance at conferences and often interne-cine turf wars. Beleaguered academic presses are loath to accept work counter to critical fashion, which limits the forum for dissenting or unthought approaches, especially from emerging scholars facing a precarious future. Romanticism's plasticity, its liberatory inclusiveness of singularities predicated on difference as much as identity, renders it less a period than a periodic and thus undecided temporal and critical phenomenon without borders. An epoch of neither expansion nor concentration, fearlessly charting the frontiers of its own knowledge, Romanticism refuses instrumentalization. And so its heterogeneous modes of thought signify a dangerously heterogenous response to a neoliberal professoriate anxious to make up our minds about progress and, failing that (and failure itself), eager to write off Romanticism altogether. Add to this pressure to justify the Humanities, its fidelity to critique out of step in a world that turns cultural relativity against itself, and one ends up with a field on life support and a profession struggling to adapt to what De Quincey prophesied as a society addicted to the speed of change for change's sake.

The irony is not lost on those who see in Romanticism's self-questioning a soberingly promiscuous response to our current state of things, one of several shadows Romantic writers continue to cast on our future. This irony is not an explicit concern of Bode and his contributors, who champion a robust ambivalence promising transformation, signaled by the book's cover image of the frontispiece to Blake's 1793 *Visions of the Daughters of Albion*. For Khalip, who opens with a searing account of the present state of Romantic studies, the irony may very well do us in. Like the Triumph in Peter Hujar's photograph depicted on the cover of *Last Things* (from 1976, coincidentally the time of a sea-change in Romantic criticism), the field is at once opaquely within and absently beyond the photo's frame of reference, running on its own fumes. The implication is more than merely provocative, for *Last Things* sees in this endgame the death drive of Romanticism as a future we ignore at our peril. The result will leave some Romanticists in disbelief, despair, or indignation that we might be contemplating the end of our field. As Khalip powerfully suggests, however, like Kent or Edgar gazing upon Lear holding the dead Cordelia in his arms, whether or not this is the promised end, or image of that horror, what would it mean to dwell in its disastrous wake? To do otherwise would be like organizing a mindfulness workshop not just to weather but to prevail against a critical storm that shows no sign of letting up. Khalip doesn't hear a bang, because the whimper is far more deafening and challenging.

The tutelary spirit of *Romanticism and the Forms of Discontent* is Freud's *Das Unbehagen in der Kultur* (1930), published the same year in English as *Civilization and Its Discontents*, which the volume applies to the future of Romanticism both with and against the eviscerating grain of Freud's epochal text. Bode begins his long excursus to the volume with a mistranslation: "*Unbehagen* is not 'discontent.' *Unbehagen* is 'unease,' 'uneasiness,' 'feeling uncomfortable,' 'ill at ease'" (14). Or as Nicholas Halmi, whose essay follows Bode's, writes, "*discontents* . . . denotes a somewhat more conscious, active feeling, which . . . creates an impression of detachment and disapproval, as if one were standing apart from the history of human civilization and assessing its failures" (87). Both authors play with the tension between "discontent" as affect, or more powerfully the ontological or even metaphysical stain of existence, and "discontents" as the object designated or produced by such a force, not to mention its effect on those who live *with* its effects. Hence both authors assess how Romanticism constitutes, as Bode writes, "*a distinct phase in the history of unease*" (15). Past Freud, Bode first works from Herbert Marcuse and Norbert Elias to the Systems Theory of Niklaus Luhmann, which sees "identity not as a constant, still less as a given, but only as the variable of highly dynamic signification processes" (37). He then reads this history through Romantic writers for whom the aesthetic becomes crucial to meeting the demands of historical contingency: Blake, Wordsworth, Coleridge, Wollstonecraft, Byron, Hazlitt, Percy Shelley, Keats. For Halmi, following Odo

Marquard, this response waged itself as either critique marked by nostalgia for an “unrestorable” past or “anxiety about a future understood to be unpredictable” (89). Whereas the former aims for the reliability and control of facts, the latter introduces the rupture of “radical newness” as “crisis or revolution” (94, 93). The result, as Halmi states via Foucault’s *Les Mots et les choses*, was to leave man “never fully accessible to himself” (95).

The same might be said of Romanticism, for

historical temporality imposed on the self-consciously new, Romantic epoch the burden of trying to theorize humanity in a way that could be at once systematic and normative and also fully cognizant of historicity, including—not least—that of its own theorizing. (96)

This recognition asks what it means to historicize Romanticism as a “*distinct phase*,” an inability to stand outside history that informs the remaining essays. Timothy Michael reads between the Emponian ambiguities of Keats’s verse and its representation of intense affective states the aesthetic experience of and uncanny relation between pain and pleasure, joy and suffering, through which the poet both loses and finds himself. Reading more generally across a variety of Romantic writers, Katharina Pink sees uneasiness as the symptom of a broad-ranging disillusionment that then becomes the spur to ameliorative action, the harbinger of a satisfied resignation to the mundane world that Freud calls common unhappiness. Rather less happily, Ralf Haeckel then reads between Shelley’s *Laon and Cythna* and *The Triumph of Life* a shift in dialectical perspective that results from an inability to transform unease. Whereas the former text attempts a Hegelian synthesis of discordant social elements to produce the positive sublation of a greater revelation or unity, the latter produces what Adorno calls negative dialectics through which we awaken to the limits of knowledge. In Katharina Rennhak’s essay on the unfolding family romance of Mary Shelley’s fictions (*Frankenstein, Matilda, Lodore*), this confrontation signifies what Lauren Berlant calls cruel optimism. This melancholic libidinal attachment results from any idealism’s broken covenant with our desire, especially our cathexis with objects—like happiness—that threaten harm precisely because they promise a satisfaction whose advent is purely contingent. In the volume’s final essay, Christoph Reinfandt extends this contingency from Wordsworth’s *The Prelude* to Norwegian writer Karl Ove Knausgaard’s recent sprawling *Min Kamp (My Struggle)*, both epic explorations of personal unease, unintentionally chronic in Wordsworth’s case, ineluctably so in Knausgaard. However much an emergent modernity threatens the Romantic subject’s autonomy, in both works subjective experience recurs with a vengeance, suggesting that we are irrevocably dependent upon the world’s welter of information as the matrix of our both personal and collective experiences, making uneasy our attempt to gain any definitive purchase on history.

As I suggest above, *Romanticism and the Forms of Discontent*, despite its contributors’ varying degrees of uneasiness, evokes a collective desire to move the field productively forward. Bode’s preface notes the enduring partnership between the North American Society for the Study of Romanticism (NASSR) and the Gesellschaft für englische Romantik (GER), and the volume itself grew out of a GER/NASSR special session, “The Forms of Discontent,” at the 2016 NASSR conference, “Romanticism and Its Discontents.” Bode’s volume is inspired by the heartening spirit of institutional and academic community, which subtends the field’s survival, despite the fact that the volume’s topic carries with decline and demise. Whereas Bode’s volume never flirts with this irony, it inflames the both rearguard and full frontal critical advance of *Last Things: Disastrous Form from Kant to Hajar*, which picks up where Reinfandt leaves off. The sub-title touches upon Blanchot’s *The Writing of the Disaster*, quoted in one of Khalip’s notes:

Gift of the disaster, of that which can neither be asked for nor given. Gift of the gift, with neither giver nor receiver, which does not annul the gift but which causes nothing to

happen in this world of presence under the sky of absence where things happen, or even do not happen. (120n110)

To think of such a disastrous world is to tarry with (as Wilfrid Bion notes) thoughts that have no thinker, a world that “is already conceptually extinct” (9), which is where Khalip’s introduction, “Now No More,” borrowing its title from “Tintern Abbey,” begins by taking up Kant’s late essay, “The End of All Things,” French painter Hubert Roberts’s *The Accident*, and a recent installation by Japanese artist Tatsuo Miyajima, *Arrow of Time (Unfinished Life)*. Three succeeding chapters then “reflect on how modes of lastness become instances of unworlding, unliving, and unthinking that tarry with the formal expenditure of the given” (9). Partly as a riposte to the prevalence of historicism in Romantic studies, particularly its “attempt[] to reanimate romanticism’s relevance by interpreting its context as linchpins for returning it (or turning us back) to the world” (44), the book’s first chapter, “The Unfinished World,” asks: “What if we were to allow for thoughts to exist without a world, without a thinker, and without a life,” a “radical worldlessness”? (24). Khalip starts with Barthes’s rumination on Caspar David Friederich’s *The Polar Sea* and ends with Canadian painter Paterson Ewen’s *Close up of a Planet with Three Satellites*, in both cases accompanied by Wordsworth’s own ruminations on anonymity and the inhuman. This is to poise us on the verge of a world without subjects, what speculative realist Quentin Meillassoux, taking aim at the illusion of a correlation between world and the human condition, calls ancestrality: “any reality anterior to the emergence of the human species or even anterior to every recognized form of life on earth” (qtd. in Khalip 44). But Khalip suspects even this “great outdoors” (again, Meillassoux’s term), which “spells the strangely romantic autonomy of a space that is not a world but still promises some *thing*, albeit profoundly removed from our thinking” (45).

The second chapter, “Life is Gone,” draws its title from Hume’s comment on the inconsequential nature of life and thus takes aim at the “normative insistence on life,” recurrent in much of our field’s exploration of the topic, by addressing the “last of life” that produces “a kind of detachment from clarity or certitude directed at life” (53). Quoting Catherine Malabou, Khalip explores a “farewell that is not death, a farewell that occurs within life, just like the indifference of life to life by which survival sometimes manifests itself” (53)—a survival epitomized by Wordsworth’s sense that “we feel, we cannot chuse but feel” that any human effort “must perish” (*The Prelude* 5.20–21). Asking “What is the un-lived? What does it mean to never be syncopated with life? What happens when we no longer think that life needs to be imagined as a ground or context that we run alongside? Why is it that one just cannot let life *not* live itself?” (53), the chapter begins with readings of Clare, Wordsworth, and Godwin, moving on to photographs by Joanna Kane and John Dugdale of various Romantic poets’ death masks as examples of a Keatsian posthuman existence. The latter is a particularly moving portrait of Dugdale, who has gone blind from HIV-related causes, holding Keats’s death mask, an impression of which Maurice Sendak, a further spectral absence in the photograph, gifted to the artist. Each case glimpses “life itself as something that is not given to us but can be looked upon only if one continues, with careless refusal, to look with eyes wide shut—to look but not to see and not to possess” (73).

The dis- or non-possession of this blank stare at and through existence informs the moving last chapter, “As If That Look Must Be the Last,” an extended meditation on Shelley’s *The Triumph of Life*. For Khalip, the poem’s third to last line, from which the chapter takes its title, signals a range of approaches to asking what one sees when one sees something as if for the last time, not at the point of death (although death gives last looks a certain edge) but as a moment of survival within life: Mary Shelley gazing at her husband’s chaotic manuscript, Rousseau gazing upon the Car of Life, the sightless gaze of Hujar’s 1976 photograph of a Triumph parked at night on a street with no name, and, one hastens to add, Khalip himself

arrested by Shelley's last poem, unable, like most of us after de Man, to "see what it means." That is to say, in each case we are confronted with the impossibility of gaining a "definitive last word on what [the poem's speaker and Rousseau] see and do not see" (101). To encounter this "queer unlivability," Khalip writes in the book's penultimate sentence, is "to encounter, quite necessarily but impossibly, what is on the side of neither life nor mortality—what is unlivable *in life*" (102). Khalip's attention throughout the book is to last things as "singularities, hovering in the complex relationship between appearance and disappearance, life and nonlife, world and nonworld, materiality and immateriality. They are not residually melancholic or traumatic; indeed, there is nothing broadly psychological about them. They are unobtrusive, almost nothing" (13). To capture the last is to miss the point, for one only "dwells with it in its fleeting gestures, derealizing humanistic investments in futurity, endurance, life, and expressiveness" (13).

Which is why the visual field, particularly the photograph, is perhaps Khalip's and Romanticism's paradigmatic (if one can call it that) aesthetic and critical form, precisely for how the technological and metaphysical certitude of its ability to capture the real ends up as a missed encounter. Indeed, although Khalip's theoretical orientation is not psychoanalysis, this book reads as one of the most moving expressions I have encountered of what it means and feels like to encounter the real in our chasing of it (which even for Lacan is not, in the end, psychoanalysis itself). Although advocacy suggests a call to action that this book precisely disavows, just as disavowal names an agency this book does not wish to have, just as wishfulness claims a desire that always exists elsewhere, *Last Things* nonetheless fists our brain and heart. It is short, swift, brutal in its assault on our critical sensibilities. It can easily be read as nihilistic, which would be to miss its power to advocate (I'll risk the word) for a critical gesture that demands we attend to the inhuman dimension of the otherwise human worlds we have created, exploited, destroyed, cobbled together, and (barely) survived

Like other work by Anne-Lise François, Rei Terada, and especially John Ricco, three of Khalip's key inspirations, *Last Things* asks us to site/sight the punctum of the moment of gazing in order to see the very thing we miss *by seeing*. This is to make of our attention to ourselves, others, and the world something dangerously antithetical, to draw our attention to the inhuman unlivability of what we were and have become. To imagine the possession of knowledge otherwise is to name precisely the object of knowledge that purports to make a use of things, which usefulness has landed us where we are. In turn to imagine the *uselessness* of Romanticism and Romantic studies as a way of staring blankly into the life of things *without* hope of capture, then, is to risk a wildly unsafe mode of survival, academic or otherwise. But, this book challenges us to ask: What is there left to lose? Our world is burning—literally. Cruising promiscuously between temporalities and media, Khalip rallies a mobile army of critical metaphors and metonymies in the name of a resolute resistance to fetishizing any sense of the world, thought, life itself if we are to face the heat. In doing so, he offers a mode of queerly beautiful critical articulation that, like his first book, *Anonymous Life* (2008), reads to me as if I'd never quite understood Romanticism before. Like the Ancient Mariner, it stops me mid-cruise, as if to ask, "Do you know what you're here to do?" And *that*, to go against this book's grain, gives me great hope, even makes me glad to be alive.

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