

Christoph Bode (Ed.)

Romanticism and the Forms of Discontent

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

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Contents

<i>Christoph Bode</i>	
Preface	7
<i>Christoph Bode</i>	
Romanticism as a Form of Discontent	13
<i>Nicholas Halmi</i>	
Past and Future, Discontent and Unease	87
<i>Timothy Michael</i>	
Keats and Uneasiness	101
<i>Katharina Pink</i>	
Romantic Discontent and its Discontents	121
<i>Ralf Haekel</i>	
Discontent and Dialectics: Percy Bysshe Shelley's <i>Laon and Cythna</i> and <i>The Triumph of Life</i>	137
<i>Katharina Rennhak</i>	
Mary Shelley's Fictions of Cultural Discontent: Attachments of Cruel Optimism in <i>Frankenstein</i> , <i>Matilda</i> and <i>Lodore</i>	157
<i>Christoph Reinfandt</i>	
The Persistence of Romantic Discontent: From Wordsworth's <i>The Prelude</i> to Knausgaard's <i>My Struggle</i>	181
Contributors	211

Christoph Bode

Preface

Since 2005, the *Gesellschaft für englische Romantik* (GER) and its North American sister organization, the *North American Society for the Study of Romanticism* (NASSR), have enjoyed a special relationship: it was at the 2005 NASSR conference in Montreal that Frederick Burwick of the University of California, Los Angeles, proposed to the NASSR executive board that, with regard to their respective conferences, membership in one society should be regarded as equivalent to membership in the other as well. This motion was unanimously accepted by the board. Fred Burwick and other NASSR members had, of course, attended GER conferences before – in his case, involvement with GER went back more than twenty years before the Montreal moment –, but for a variety of reasons the same had not been true the other way round. Montreal opened the doors, not only in the sense that it was now easier for GER members to financially shoulder the cost of attending a conference in North America, it also set a model for similar agreements GER was able to close with the *British Association for Romantic Studies* (BARS), the French *Société d'Etudes Romantisme Anglais* (SERA), the *Japan Association of English Romanticism* (JAER), the *Nordic Association for Romantic Studies* (NARS), which covers all of Scandinavia, and the newly formed *Polish Society for the Study of European Romanticism* – which today makes GER not only the oldest scholarly association for the study of English Romanticism, but arguably also the best connected. In 2006, Fred Burwick was honoured in our book series with a *Festschrift*, edited by Walter Pape and an unnamed associate. In recognition of his services to GER, Fred Burwick was also elected the only honorary lifetime member of our society. It is a telling detail, by the way, that not few scholars have preferred to remain fully paid up members of both organizations, showing their support for the common cause.

But Montreal 2005 – and I am moving closer to the origin of this volume – was also decisive for another reason: Tilottama Rajan, of Western Ontario, the founder of NASSR, also proposed that GER should be allowed to organize their own panels at NASSR conferences – and this we have done, with a few interruptions only, ever since. These sessions – sometimes organized, as other special panels, too, by invitation only, sometimes by a call, sometimes by a mix of both – have invariably proved very popular. But the GER session at the 2016 NASSR conference in Berkeley (August 11-14, 2016) proved very special indeed: the conference topic was "Romanticism and Its Discontents", the GER panel was headed "The *Forms* of Discontent" – and it easily pulled the largest crowd of the conference outside the keynotes, competing as it did against five parallel sessions. The three original papers read at Berkeley – Katharina Pink's "Romantic Discontent and Its Discontent", Nicholas Halmi's "Historicism and the Forms of Unease", and Timothy Michael's "Demanding Satisfaction: The Romantic

Pleasure" – provoked such an intense and animated discussion that it spilt over way into the following lunchtime break. It had obviously been a very special moment, that August 13, 2016. It was because of this, because we wanted to give some kind of permanence to a very special one and a half hours – and because the three papers so miraculously cohered and spoke to each other (miraculously, because next to nothing had been scripted beforehand) – that the convener and the three presenters presently agreed to have extended versions of their papers, plus the convener's introduction, published in a volume that would also contain contributions by other well-known experts in the field: Ralf Haekel, the editor of a new (2017) *Handbook of British Romanticism*, Christoph Reinfandt, theorist, narratologist, Romanticist, but also a scholar who has always tried to fathom the deep continuities between Romanticism and the present day (e.g., *Romantische Kommunikation*; also ed., *Handbook of the English Novel of the Twentieth and Twenty-First Centuries*, 2017), and, last but not least, Katharina Rennhak, Director of the Wuppertal Center for Narrative Research, with her long-standing interest in the interactions of literature and culture around 1800, as well as in theories of identity and power, and gendered discourse (e.g., *Narratives Cross-Gendering und die Konstruktion männlicher Identitäten in Romanen von Frauen um 1800*).

What these seven essays have in common – and what distinguishes them from the articles in the special conference issue of *European Romantic Review*, compiled by my former Berkeley colleagues Anne-Lise François, Celeste Langan, and Alexander Walton – is this: all seven essays take their departure, more or less, from Sigmund Freud's *Das Unbehagen in der Kultur*, infelicitously translated into English as *Civilization and Its Discontents*. All of them proceed from the hypothesis that, if *Unbehagen* is generally concomitant with the process of civilization, it makes sense to historically *differentiate* Romantic discontent from other, later forms of discontent. Hence, the *forms* of discontent. What *forms* does discontent take in the literature of the Romantic age? That is the question asked and, we trust, at least partially answered in this volume.

In his introductory essay, **Christoph Bode** lays the theoretical groundwork by a discussion of Freud, Herbert Marcuse, and Norbert Elias (to mention only his main points of reference), before he zooms in on the Romantic period as one of special interest: it is in the second half of the eighteenth century that the societal pressures on individuals and groups within Western society increase to an unprecedented degree and create hitherto unseen levels of discontent and unease, while at the same time the new social subsystem of Literature, quasi-autonomous and equipped with an absolute poetics, allows to give vent to these growing sentiments of *Unbehagen* – Romanticism is identified as a distinct, early phase in the history of modern unease ('modern' in the sense of *neuzeitlich*), a period that sees growing discontent but also new ways of formulating a counter-discourse in the realm of the aesthetic. Consequently, Bode's readings of William Blake, William Wordsworth, Mary Wollstonecraft, Lord Byron, William Hazlitt, John Keats, and P.B. Shelley all aim at showing how in these canonical texts an articulation of unease is combined with visions (and be it negatively) of unre-

pressed social and gender relations, a kind of utopian *Vorschein*. The articulation of unease is presented as inevitably ambiguous.

In his closely argued "Past and Future, Discontent and Unease", **Nicholas Halmi** looks at critical rejections of the modern 'monomyth' of progress, at doubts that address a key problem of historicism: "Such doubts expressed themselves in two principal forms, nostalgia for a past understood to be unrestorable and anxiety about a future understood to be unpredictable. The first was critique, the second unease." At the core of his essay, which takes us from Thomas Warton's *History of English Poetry* (1784-91) to Immanuel Kant's *Streit der Fakultäten* (1798), Halmi identifies a systemic problem of historicization, viz. that, while it can easily subject the commensurable, it has no place to productively accommodate the incommensurable – both of which seems near to a tautology, but is fatal in an age that sees itself both as historically determined and unprecedented at the same time: nothing follows from this insight, as the shadow of the contingent and unforeseeable looms large on the horizon of the unpredictable.

Timothy Michael's essay "Keats and Uneasiness" takes a different trajectory. Focusing on John Keats's idea of pleasure-pain (a conception deeply tinged with temporality, see Bode, *Vom Innehalten*), Tim Michael sees this ambivalence in conjunction with a feeling of uneasiness that William Hazlitt, in turn, associates with the aesthetic experience. Walking his readers through "Ode to Melancholy", *Lamia*, *Hyperion: A Fragment*, *The Fall of Hyperion: A Dream*, and *The Eve of St. Agnes* – all written in Keats's *annus mirabilis*, 1818/19 – Michael points out how, time and again, Keats found himself amenable to depicting this sort of uneasiness, "predicated on the intermixture, co-dependence, and, at times, identity of pleasure and pain": "Throughout," writes Michael, "there is the sense that pure pleasure and pure pain are neither possible nor desirable and that the uneasiness that accompanies the aching sense of beauty is that which allows one to recreate and extend that sense."

Again taking her cue from Freud, **Katharina Pink** in her piece on "Romantic Discontent and Its Discontents" widens the horizon once more. Taking exception at the established cliché of the reclusive Romantic poet who withdraws into solitude, she can show that in a number of canonical Romantic texts this discontent with the world and the escapist response to it are depicted in a decidedly critical vein: Wordsworth's *The Excursion*, Shelley's *Alastor*, and Keats's *Endymion* all question, in their own way, whether to flee the world of pain and suffering can really be regarded as a viable coping strategy. Rather, to be able to see the ideal in the real and to return to the world and our fellow beings seems to be what the Romantics advise.

Ralf Haekel, in his contribution, may seem to narrow the focus again, concentrating, as Timothy Michael in his, on just one poet. But "Discontent and Dialectics: Percy Bysshe Shelley's *Laon and Cythna* and *The Triumph of Life*", by applying Hegelian dialectics as well as Adorno's and Horkheimer's *Dialectics of Enlightenment* to these two of Shelley's major works, pinpoints one of the crucial tensions in any Romantic attempt at articulating discontent in the realm of the aesthetic, viz. that between the psychological and the aesthetic dimension within the work of art. This tension can

be resolved in a variety of ways, as Haekel shows when he traces Shelley's development from the pursuit of closure (*Laon and Cythna*) to aesthetic negativity. That *forms* of discontent vary within the œuvre of one poet, should not surprise us – that they do to such a degree, however, might underline the fact that Romanticism is, more than anything else, a laboratory in which the full spectrum of possibilities of a response to the challenges of modernization is played out.

Katharina Rennhak takes this further in "Mary Shelley's Fictions of Cultural Discontent: Attachments of Cruel Optimism in *Frankenstein*, *Matilda*, and *Lodore*". Taking Freud but as a stepping-stone, she applies concepts and theorems of affect theory and, more particularly, Lauren Berlant's postmodernist reflections on 'cruel optimism', which crucially shift the emphasis from forces operating within the individual to relations between subjects and objects. Centrally concerned with notions of 'the good life', Rennhak can show in her series of fascinating close readings of Mary Shelley's narrative fictions that the good-life fantasies of the protagonists can only be realized at the prize of a lingering discontent, which finds its counterpart in a discontent on the part of the reader, as the wish fulfilment within the story world badly jars with assumptions of plausibility and verisimilitude, and, once again, contingency seems to be the prime agent of happiness. Rennhak's *tour de force* culminates in a discussion of the differences between Shelley's Romantic, Freud's Modernist, and Berlant's Postmodernist diagnoses of their respective society's discontent, under the aspect of their temporality.

It is fitting that **Christoph Reinfandt's** essay should form the closing statement of our collection. "The Persistence of Romantic Discontent: From Wordsworth's *The Prelude* to Knausgaard's *My Struggle*" connects the Romantic's 'unprecedented' attempt at discursively producing himself in an epic that questions in how far he is able to write the great philosophical poem of the age with Karl Ove Knausgaard's life-writing that seems to deny the usual fiction/non-fiction divide in that it insists on an authenticity that can always be only claimed, but whose correctness can, of course, never be checked. Reinfandt opposes, on parallel tracks, aspects such as 'Beginnings', 'Chronology', 'Literature', etc., and comes up with surprising similarities, while never forgetting the epochal differences between the two. Indeed, as one major stop on his way to the twenty-first century is B.S. Johnson, Reinfandt takes great pains to define the differences between the Romantic Wordsworth, the (late) modernist B.S. Johnson, and the postmodernist Knausgaard, but even as he crucially examines their respective media differences, Reinfandt insists that "the underlying problem remains distinctly Romantic." Acknowledging that "[w]hile all three writers [...] clearly respond to a sense of alienation from the world and modern society, their discontent takes different forms", Reinfandt at the same time maintains that what they are dealing with is essentially the self-identification of the writer in the forcefield of language, media, discourses and counter-discourses, with the usual parameters of narrative (as meaning-productive), authenticity, originality, negotiation of the public vs. private line, negotiation of genre boundaries, etc.

In other words: what we undeniably have, is a perceptible *discontinuity* with regard to the *forms* of discontent as they are manifested in literary works of the last 250 years or so; what we also have is an equally undeniable *continuity*, best exemplified by an uncanny resurgence and persistence of 'Romantic' discontent. This underlying continuity may perhaps be best explained by the fact (but this is Bode, no longer Reinhardt, though he would most probably concur) that "der Schoß ist fruchtbar noch, aus dem das kroch", meaning that the very conditions that made it first possible to articulate *Unbehagen* in the realm of the literary at the end of the eighteenth century still persist and guarantee, in that respect, the continuance of the Romantic paradigm, which we have identified as a first, distinct phase in the history of modern unease. However, in order to understand what is specific about the forms of unease in our own age, we need to be able to differentiate between *historically concrete and discrete forms* of discontent. Then, and only then, will we be able to identify *why* the forms of discontent in Romanticism, indeed, Romanticism *as* discontent, looks so uncanny when it returns under different circumstances: as in other manifestations of the uncanny, it is most probably the return of the all too familiar, the return of the repressed that refuses to vanish, as long as the reasons for its suppression are there.

This volume could not have been produced without the help of Doris Haseidl, Felicitas Meifert-Menhard, George Rainov, Lukas Schepp, and Sabrina Sontheimer. I thank all of you for your hard work, wise advice, and dependable service. Special thanks, however, go to Stefanie Fricke, who, with characteristic care, oversaw the final editing, and to Sonja Trurnit, who worked extra shifts and proved to be a true mainstay of the whole exercise. For all remaining errors, I take sole responsibility. Once more, a volume in this series would have been impossible without the generosity, flexibility, and enthusiasm of Dr. Erwin Otto of WVT. May the result of our joint endeavours leave its readers not discontent – although as we know, not from Sigmund Freud, but from Stephen Hawking, that such a state of mind, as everything else, can only be temporary.

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