NINETEENTH-CENTURY MAJOR LIVES AND LETTERS

ROMANTICISM AND THE CITY

EDITED BY LARRY H. PEER

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Nineteenth-Century Major Lives and Letters

Series Editor: Marilyn Gaull

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For dedicated members of the International Conference on Romanticism and its annual meeting coordinators, particularly Joshua Wilner, and for Janet Priday Peer, at one in the quest.

Acknowledgments

This book, although about an important topic in Romanticism studies, is also about the finer aspects of scholarly support, respect, and cooperation. Colleagues from around the world, with remarkable insight, have participated in seen and unseen ways in bringing this work to light. I am grateful for the sustaining power of their goodwill.

Without the expertise of Brooke Downs, Jana Porter, and the editorial staff at Palgrave Macmillan, with each person crucial at various stages of this project's development and completion, this book would not have come to print.

I offer particular thanks to The Wordsworth Circle for permission to use earlier versions of the essays by Jeffrey Cass, William Galperin, Diane Long Hoeveler, and Thomas H. Schmid, all appearing in volume XLI, number 3 (2010).

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Contents

Part III London

Introduction

The Infernal and Celestial City of Romanticism

Larry H. Peer

Western world literature "is and has always been at war with given reality. The world, as given, is disliked: it is disliked in large part just because it is given."[1] What is "given" today is a suburbanized culture based on the dominance of industrialization and the advance of technology, a situation decried in post-Romantic decades as a process that obliterates the natural environment by a valorization of the urban.[2] The role of late eighteenth- and early nineteenth-century Romanticism in this contemporary "given" is important for the understanding of modernism and postmodernism and crucial to an understanding of Romanticism per se.

Romanticism is a complex and reticulated system of norms undergirding a panoptic vision of both physical and metaphysical reality. It has been clearly and often demonstrated that one of the chief, if not *the* chief characteristic of this system is its almost obsessive engagement with the natural world.[3] Conceptual structures, images, and settings taken from the natural landscape and its weather are present everywhere in European Romantic art. The poems of Hölderlin, Petöfi, Leopardi, and Goethe, for example, reflect this characteristic, as do the novels of the Brontes, of Manzoni and Chateaubriand, and of *Sturm und Drang* drama. The philosophical systems of Fichte and Schelling stem from it. The paintings of Turner, Constable, and Friedrich would be blank without it.

Romanticism clearly represents a desire for identification with the elemental natural world. Nature is alive and, for the artist to be

intensely alive, he or she must fuse with that world and attain a highly individualized mystical experience that digs down into the core of reality. Wordsworth's excursion takes him there, as does Beethoven's pastoral symphony, Turner's steamship in a snowstorm, and Emily Bronte's wild and wind swept heights. The discourse of Romantic identification with and merging into dynamic, dangerous, and mysterious nature contrasts with that of pre-Romantic Western culture and constitutes a shift of profound proportions in philosophical attitude.[4] At the beginning of this shift lie Vico's *La scienza nuova prima* (1725) and Rousseau's *L'origine et les fondements de l'inégalité parmi les hommes* (1754), in which is found the beginning of Romantic preoccupation with the interaction of the poet with nature, and on the reverie in nature so crucial to the act of contemplation, both of which lead to a mature critique of civilized society in the 1820s and beyond.

It is, however, easy to see this preoccupation of Romantic poets simple mindedly. Another concern of Romantic thinking is the mutual interdependence of the individual with society, a relationship not always at its most profound in raw nature. For example, Schiller, in his powerfully influential essay *Über naive und sentimentalische Dichtung* (1795–96), argues that the realization of the deepest individual development requires the emergence of a moral society, a kind of ethically mature "city." Fundamental questions of social power and social order are at stake and, ultimately, human beings need to live together in such a way that self-interest and public interest mesh. Although there inevitably is tension between these interests, they are always brought into harmony by "aesthetic education," a kind of cultivation, possible in urban spaces as well as in nature, that brings about a free, although ideal and not yet achieved, society. In other words, art is the solution to the problem of the individual's alienation from and in urban space. The power of aesthetic artifacts to bring people together in creative and harmonious ways is a subtle valorization of the city as Romantic space.

Thus, it is the *tension* between city and country, and the possibility of an *ideal* urban space that powers much of the metaphorical positioning of Romantic art. Vico would say that in Schiller's ideal city the people are speaking with *sapienza poetica*, the robust and "true" language at an individual's core, lost not only by separation from nature, but also by a tendency of human beings to separate the art they produce from the society that makes such production possible. That is, a return to nature without a parallel return to relevant urban space produces mere sentimentality, not the Romanticism toward which Vico moves and in which Schiller thinks. It is necessary to remember that Romantic art always seeks the *transcendental,* looks for that which is beyond the world of appearances, revealing the infinite and unfathomable, or

Geist, in Hegel's terms. The radically individualized and transcendental orientation of Romantic art actualizes the tension between and possible harmony of city and country.

In this book Romantic views and metaphorical uses of urban space are explored. The first part of the book opens a series of chapters on the theory of the city, Michelle Faubert's "Nerve Theory, Sensibility, and Romantic Metrosexuals" offers a view of the relationship between Romanticism and the psychology of urban sensibility. Her groundbreaking argument about the emotion engendered by urban space leads to a consideration of how such feeling is used as a trope and setting in the works of the movement. William Galperin ("Wordsworth's Double-Take") explores Wordsworth's poetry as a Romantic example of moving back and forth between conceptions of art as imagination on the one hand and, on the other, of the creative process as stemming from simple ordinary experience. A poet teetering on the edge of the ordinary before he becomes a visionary is central to the creative process of Romanticism and finds a trenchant example in the encounter with the blind beggar in Book 7 of *The Prelude*, which recounts Wordsworth's residence in London with its urban ordinary extraordinariness. Jeffrey Cass ("John Galt, Happy Colonialist: The Case of 'The Apostate; Or, Atlantis Destroyed'") studies the complex use of the mythical city of Galt's work, making a case for *The Apostate* as iconic example of how Romanticism mythologizes the city in ways new to Western culture. Diane Long Hoeveler's "The Gothic Chapbook and the Urban Reader" points out that in 1800 a three-volume gothic novel could cost as much as two weeks' wages for a laborer, so the cheaper chapbooks, as redactions of longer Gothic novels and dramas, were affordable and became the chief reading material of the vast population longing to be "in fashion." And it is precisely in the city that readers lived at the boundary between the more sophisticated reading and the essentially illiterate nonreading publics, making the city the site of "pop Romanticism." Finally, Marilyn Gaull ("Romantic Science and the City") concisely summarizes the chief issues in the development of the hard sciences in Romanticism, seeing in that development the rise of urban life as key to an understanding of the history of science.

The second part of the book deals with Romanticism and Continental cities. Nancy Yousef ("Phenomenal Beauty: Rousseau in Venice") explores the problem of Rousseau's recollection of his sojourn in Venice, in *Les Confessions,* where, as an urban space, Venice itself is virtually invisible. Arguing that in Romanticism beauty insinuates itself as an unstable mediator between sensually determined perception of the other and an ethically determined appreciation and respect for the other, Yousef shows that, for Rousseau, Venice represents the

philosophical problem of the city as possible site for transcendental beauty. Another ambiguous use of the city is studied by Alexander Schlutz in "E. T. A. Hoffmann's Marketplace Vision of Berlin." In addition to the fact that Hoffmann provides the first sustained description of Berlin as a cityscape, he demonstrates an acute awareness of the narrative quality of acts of perception through which we construct reality: Schlutz sees Hoffmann's description of the city as a kind of "test case" for Romantic narratology. Ernesto Livorni ("Renzo in Milan") analyzes the view of the city in Manzoni's *I promessi sposi,* an ambivalent look at urbanity as intellectual, social, and artistic labyrinth in which one inevitably will lose oneself but only sometimes will find oneself again. The city as a hellish place, contrasted with the idyllic countryside, is in Manzoni's novel raised to a new metaphorical level, a level at which individual freedom and its relationship to providence and history is explored. Tatiana V. Barnett, in "Rome Above Rome: Nikolai Gogol's Romantic Vision of the Eternal City," shows how Rome was a place of cultural refuge for Gogol in contrast to Paris, a place of emotional emptiness. This contrast figures forth Romantic interpretations of urban space, of ancient versus contemporary, of North versus South, and of Romanticism as the dislocation of the antique world.

The third group of chapters focuses on Romanticism and London. We are accustomed to thinking of Wordsworth as the poet of nature, but he is also the poet of the city, as Eugene Stelzig argues in "Wordsworth's Invigorating Hell: London in Book 7 of *The Prelude* (1805)." The poet's extended presentation of London in Book 7 of "The Prelude" not only shares in a negative perception of the urban as a kind of necropolis, but also sees its role as highly stimulating to the imagination. This ultimately ambivalent view of the city is more common in Romanticism than has heretofore been recognized. Mark Lussier ("Blake's Golgonooza: London and/as the Eternal City of Art") examines Blake's appropriation of discrete sections of London as the foundation for his imaginary city of art, pointing out that through Blake we have a visionary cartography of how the gates of this city open onto the work of other authors and other post-Romantic historical moments. In "London's Immortal Druggists: Pharmaceutical Science and Business in Romanticism," Thomas H. Schmid points out that the early nineteenth century marked the beginning of London's, and Great Britain's, modern drug industry, with its complex interplay of research, manufacturing, and marketing, the more negative implications of which led to greater legislative regulation and oversight later in the century. The drug business was a permanent feature of London's cityscape in Romanticism and, properly understood, cast new light on works such as De Quincey's *Confessions of an English Opium Eater.*

Peter J. Manning ("Wordsworth's 'Illustrated Books and Newspapers' and Media of the City") explores the dual engagement with the quality of urban life and the media it fosters, as exemplified by Wordsworth's experience with the complicated contexts of London, and Tim Fulford ("Babylon and Jerusalem on the Old Kent Road") shows how London was seen by many Romantic artists as the modern Babylon on the verge of being turned into the New Jerusalem. Arguing that in Romanticism a permanent split between the rural and the urban occurred, he suggests that Romanticism either necessitates a concentrated poetic synthesis of the two or else requires an acknowledgment of a deep night of bifurcated human experience.

This book is a further articulation of complexities coterminous with the rise of Romanticism in the arts. It is instructive to think back to 1752, when Bambini and his musicians first brought the music of Scarlatti and Pergolesi to Paris, engendering a battle over this new kind of music reflected in the writings of Rousseau, D'Alembert, and Grimm: or, to remember Thomas Girtin's search for "structured luminosity" (a catchword for Romantic visual representation) that led him in 1800 to an ambitious scheme to paint a panorama of London. In both cases, the city functions as both the site and symbol of an inclusionary power fostered by Romantic art, of the insistence that to be Romantic meant not just to be a dreamer, but to be one who faces the developing and powerful realities of the time, especially the reality of an increasingly urban landscape in Western culture.

NOTES

1. George Kateb, "Technology and Philosophy," *Social Research* 64:3 (1997): 1241.
2. See, for example, F. R. Leavis and Denys Thompson, *Culture and Environment: The Training of Critical Awareness*, London: Chatto, 1933; Jonathan Bate, *The Song of the Earth*, Cambridge, MA: Harvard UP, 2000; Michel Serres, *Le contrat naturel*, Paris: Bourin, 1990; and Michael E. Ziimmerman, *Contesting Earth's Future: Radical Ecology and Postmodernity*, Berkeley: U of California P, 1994.
3. Numerous scholarly studies of this point have been made during the last five decades, including these exceptional examples: James C. McKusick, *Green Writing: Romanticism and Ecology*, New York: St. Martin's, 2000; Irving Babbitt, *Rousseau and Romanticism*, New York: Houghton, 1919; and Simon Schama, *Landscape and Memory*, New York: Knopf, 1995.
4. See Chapter 17 of H. G. Schenk's *The Mind of the European Romantics*, New York: Doubleday, 1969, for a succinct explanation of this difference.