

Book Reviews

Alexander Regier. *Fracture and Fragmentation in British Romanticism*. (Cambridge Studies in Romanticism.) Cambridge University Press, 2010.

Alexander Regier's *Fracture and Fragmentation in British Romanticism* is not the first and will not be the last commentary on fragmentariness and rupture, topics that were rediscovered by the Romantics who infused them with philosophical, aesthetic, philological, and ideological value. What impresses from the very introduction of Regier's study, however, is his meta-critical stamina in asserting his title terms as decisive traits of Romanticism and our post-Romantic episteme:

“. . . fragmentation, as I have already indicated, helps us to define what is special about Romanticism. . . . It illustrates how we depend on that period for the formulation of our self-understanding, including the questions we deem to be critical.” (4)

But who is the “we” that the Romantic scholar refers to throughout the introduction? Though he champions Romanticism as the genealogy of *all* recent (meta)criticism, including twenty-first-century one, it soon becomes clear that the author is considering only New Historicism and Deconstruction. With the former critical paradigm, Regier professes a shared focus on the historical situatedness and the ideological charge of literary and metacritical discourse, with the latter, the frequent recourse to philosophy in his literary criticism, a recognition of the contingency of interpretation, and a “teas[ing] out contradictions through very close readings, and reveal[ing] a counter-logic in some texts” (19). Yet he is also careful to separate himself from the neo-historical accusations that Romanticism is ideologically inadequate and metacritically limp, as well as from Deconstruction's over-the-top subtleties such as *differance*, logocentrism, and *arche*-writing. With this prudently choreographed methodological ballet, Regier hopes to find a place for himself midway between the formalist and historicist maintracks of Romantic studies that cross the latter part of twentieth century and run into the twenty first.

However, negotiating this neutral position might lose Regier most of the critical company he invokes and render his use of the first person plural purely rhetorical. Especially when he claims that “we are still situated in a Romantic framework” (4) he is running against the grain of most Whiggish progressive and radical Marxist historicism. Who, then, is left by Regier's side in this courageous move? Postmodernist critics. Surely, his sympathetic description of the Romantic episteme as residing in irony and humility, in meta-critical reflection, and in “a constitutive scepticism regarding its own procedure that does not blunt its critical edge” (8) is a perfect match for postmodernist ironic and self-parodying reflexiveness, theoretical skepticism, and lack of epistemological confidence—the usual descriptors employed by such chroniclers of this contorted episteme as Ihab Hassan (1987), Roy Boyne and Ali Rattansi (1990), Zygmunt Bauman (1992) or Wayne Gabardi (2001).¹

The introductory chapter (“Broken Origins”) attempts several things of which it definitely accomplishes a few. It traces the genealogy of both Romanticism and Regier's own research, it establishes its polemic and particular position in the critical landscape of the past few decades of Romantic studies, and it asserts the importance of fracture and fragmentation for Romantic theory and practice. What it fails to do is convince us with a solid argument that the “kaleidoscopic structure” of Regier's volume is, indeed, the result of a “peculiarity” of the fragment, which, “because of its contradictory nature, invades the form of inquiry that it is subject to” (5), and of “the impossibility of the broken piece to be reabsorbed into an original totality” (25). The theoretical metaphor of the broken whole which calls for its necessary, yet impossible reconstitution from the resulting fragments (an echo of Benjamin's “The Task of the Translator” which is enlarged upon in the last chapter) may work when addressing the givens of language(s), our unavoidably situated perspective, or the relationship between originals and translations—all of which pre-date the subject and rest beyond its control. In the case of an academic study, however, the structure of the argument lies well within the

¹ Regier, who is otherwise committed to genealogy, never once mentions this infamous lineage throughout the book—the only “post” in the Index is “posterity” and the two times the word “post-modern” appears in the book are fleeting mentions of “prefigurations” that Regier does not care to pursue. One wonders if the author is not, in fact, embarrassed by being associated with posmodernism and thus becoming vulnerable to charges of “reactionary” ideology (10).

constructive powers of its author, unless it is a collection of individual smaller critical endeavors, like articles prepared for academic journals or conferences, which approximate the general theme of the book, but were not originally conceived as steps along a unified line of reasoning. The individual analyses in the seven chapters are admirable exercises in themselves, but they do not always seem to concentrate on illuminating the central theme of the book or on demonstrating Regier's ambitious inaugural claims about the centrality of fragmentation in Romanticism and in "our" contemporary metacritical condition. In the opening commentary on the Babel myth ("A Brotherhood is Broken") it is not always clear how the implications of the Babelian catastrophe connect with the mourning muteness of nature in Wordsworth's *The Ruined Cottage*. The second chapter on the trope and philosophical-theological theme of anthropomorphism in the theory of the origins of language(s) loses in substance what it gains in historical breath. The names invoked seem somehow resistant to form a sufficient and convincing genealogy of Romanticism; in fact, they show that if anthropomorphism in accounts of language origins do, indeed, involve fragmentariness, then this is hardly something special to Romanticism, as it preoccupies writers from antiquity to the Enlightenment and neo-classical Warburton, Blackwell, Harris, Burnet (Monboddo), and Blair. The central argument, seductively formulated as a paradox at the end of the chapter—"man is *by nature* fundamentally divided from nature" (74)—rests on hasty syllogisms: "If metaphor lies at the very origin of language, it is impossible to escape the conclusion that knowledge achieved through and about language will also be figurative in character" (56). Perhaps such a conclusion would not sit as well within a different reasoning sequence, such as, for instance, that if all theories are derived from original intuitions, then all theories are must be intuitive in character. The third chapter is an original and stimulating account of the aesthetic and philosophical implications of the Lisbon earthquake of 1755, although Regier might have benefited in asserting a personal contribution to the topic by resorting to previous work by Rita Goldberg (1989) or Helena Carvalhão Buescu (2006). The comments on the importance of bracketing, breaching, and framing Wordsworth's poetic discourse make the next chapter one of the most compelling fragments of the book. The chapter on Keats' letters is one of the more firmly conducted demonstrations in the book (though, perhaps, the starting contention that Keats took letters for literature because at one point he did not wish to sound like a literary character is rather inscrutable). The analysis manages, especially with the help of Mauss, Hamann and Hörisch, to convince that letters reinscribe the distance and division between the interlocutors and that language has an inbuilt economic function of reciprocation pointing to "a fundamental gap between language and subject [which] is the precondition for the dynamic of exchange, suggesting how language, in the process of attempting to bridge it, cannot but repeat and reinforce the divide" (129). The sixth chapter is an intertextual analysis of De Quincey's citations as forms of the fragmentary that operate on the principle that "a citation breaks the text it is in, and the one it is taken from" (141). Not only does Regier expands the citational corpus beyond the *Confessions* to De Quincey's critical and autobiographical texts, but, more importantly, he broadens the notional sphere and theoretical scope of citation for which he employs the insights of a host of preceding critics like Bakhtin, Blanchot, Derrida, Ian Balfour, J. Ehrmann, N. Leask, G. Lindop, A. Compagnon, and the returning Walter Benjamin of the first chapter on Babel. One particularly enticing subject broached by this chapter argues that Wordsworth's rejection of the classical description of language as the dress of thought and his counter-proposal that words are the "incarnation of thought" is crucial in De Quincey's critical understanding of language. One would have hoped that this topos were pursued as crucial in this article on citation, since, in turn, Wordsworth is obviously citing Cicero, one of his classical models,² with his monist twist on the issue of the *res/verba* duality of language, since the ancient debate with its empirically-minded avatar emerging in early modernity (Bacon, Hobbes etc.)³ raises interesting issues about plagiarism and about the possibility of changing meaning through citation, and, also, since Wordsworth's classical citations and his interest in the more classical field of rhetoric have problematized his centrality to

² Cf. several genealogical studies of Wordsworth's Stoic or Roman ideas from the classic Wordsworth's Reading of Roman Prose by Jane Worthington Smyser (Yale University Press, 1946) to the fresher doctoral thesis 'Radical *Difference*': *Wordsworth's Classical Imagination and Roman Ethos* by John J. Cole (University of Auckland, 2008, <https://researchspace.auckland.ac.nz/bitstream/handle/2292/5677/02whole.pdf?sequence=4>).

³ Cf. Diana B. Altegoer's *Reckoning Words: Baconian Science and the Construction of Truth in English Renaissance Culture* (Associated University Presses, 2000).

Romanticism. In the last chapter on Paul de Man's Romantic rhetoric, Regier more consistently illustrates his association with deconstruction and postmodernism. His focus is de Man's theory of the "inhuman" (i.e., independent of human control and intention) linguistic mechanisms, structures, tensions, and events and the Yale deconstructionist's glossing on Benjamin's *The Task of the Translator*. The chapter reacquaints us with de Man's startling notion that although language is central to the human experience of the world, humans are entirely marginal in the world of language by translating this into the "inescapable gap between language and the [human] subject" (170). The subject is entirely germane to the book's general theme since Benjamin's account of language resides in its fragmentariness: all languages are pieces of a broken vessel (the pure, pre-Babelian language), hence the original and its translations are themselves equally fragmentary and complementary efforts at the necessary but impossible task of recapturing that primordial wholeness. Necessary because unavoidable, impossible because that original [originary, really] pre-catastrophic language is forever beyond our reach and, therefore, for all deconstructive purposes that broken origin or irradiating center does not exist. The paradoxical deconstructionist rhetoric does not prevent de Man from talking about correct translations versus errors or mistranslations and from ridiculing Benjamin's translators Zohn and Gandillac. Regier is right in challenging de Man's hasty and entirely un-deconstructionist evaluations. He could have added a further meta-critical move of showing how de Man grossly mistranslates himself from Benjamin's German original while making a show of lecturing Zohn on his cross-linguistic transgressions.⁴ Discursive and hermeneutic fragmentariness is the professed "melancholy" avenue taken by de Man's interpretation of Romanticism.

Alexander Regier is refreshingly direct in stating his beliefs as axiomatic, simple truths: "Romanticism is central to us, and fragmentation is central to Romanticism" (3). The rare virtue of an unpretentious academic book that deals with philosophical and meta-critical issues of Romanticism is complemented by the rigorous and carefully documented manner of his analyses which are generally devoted to appealing topics. Not least of all, it is refreshing to listen once more to the interpretive air of our post-Romantic condition, although, perhaps this heavily assailed thesis would have benefited from novel arguments that could dispel the well-rehearsed objections. Broader and more consistent arguments are also needed to prove that, indeed, fracture and fragmentation are pervasive core features of Romanticism (rather than an occasional and idiosyncratic themes in Wordsworth, Keats, and the belated De Quincey)⁵ and that they are the same as the incompleteness and disjointedness of *some* contemporary meta-critical discourse.

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⁴ See, for instance, Valentine Cunningham's "Sticky Transfers" in *REAL* 10 (1994): 325-355.

⁵ Pity that on the few occasions that he happens to mention Coleridge, the "obvious choice" (more than the three featured in the Index, though not by far), Regier only does it in passing and for the sake of marginal notations on plagiarism and the use of lunulae (round brackets). One is left wondering about the soundness of the author's excuse—"One of the aims of this book is to present material that has not previously been thought of or discussed in relation to the fragmentary. This explains, amongst other things, the omission of the 'obvious choice', Samuel Taylor Coleridge." (25-26)