

James Vigus, ed., *Informal Romanticism. Studien zur Englischen Romantik*. Trier: Wissenschaftlicher Verlag Trier, 2012. Pp. 214. Pb. €24. ISBN 9783868213911.

What is ‘informal’ Romanticism? In this collection, based on a 2011 conference at LMU München, James Vigus has brought together a thought-provoking set of essays, which respond to and develop many key themes in Romantic studies. However, he also proposes a new way of taking hold of them: as *Informal Romanticism*. Not all of the contributors engage with this term and some, such as Paul Hamilton, brilliantly reconfigure it – in his case, as ‘Romantic Occasionalism’. However, it succeeds as a way of approaching the range of material and critical perspectives on offer and, while it is of course paradoxical to try and define a term intended to challenge more rigid, hidebound or formal conceptions of Romanticism, some key features stand out.

Romantic informalism shows the continued and often transformative influence of Gillian Russell and Clara Tuite’s *Romantic Sociability* (2006). Of course, sociability is not always informal – and at the turn of the nineteenth century was often anxiously codified, as sources as divergent as Austen’s novels and Godwin’s diary suggest. But, as Vigus argues, the ‘notion of the ‘informal’ tends to imply sociability’ and, citing recent work by Jon Mee and Susan Wolfson, the collection continues to refine ‘the formerly dominant paradigm that distinguished between a monolithic public sphere on the one hand and the isolated artist on the other’ (2).

Many of the essays are also based on material which is ‘informal’ in the sense of being unpublished. This is an impressive and exciting feature of the volume, which includes essays on the recently discovered Steele Collection of West Country nonconformist women writers, Godwin and Henry Crabb Robinson’s diaries, marginalia and letters by Coleridge and Southey: all part of the rich Dissenting archive of intellectual exchange and self-examination, by both individuals and communities. There is also a strong comparative element, evident – to take two examples – in Christian Deuling’s discussion of Johann Christian Hüttner’s reports on literary London for Duke Carl August in Weimar and Franco D’Intinos chapter on Giacomo Leopardi’s manuscripts. Perhaps the most surprising aspect of Romantic studies today is the continued scope for new archival work in the field, and this collection performs a valuable role by presenting some of this research together.

Vigus describes a period of literature driven by formal experimentation, and yet one dominant form emerges: ‘the heterogeneous category of non-fictional prose’ (1). This ranges from marginalia, which Felicitas Meifert-Menhard’s opening essay identifies as an archetypal Romantic genre, coined and created by Coleridge, to the more recognisable form of the familiar essay. David Duff’s superb account of Lamb’s ‘Imperfect Sympathies’ argues that ‘its meaning pivots on a previously unrecognized allusion to Wordsworth’s “Ode: Intimations of Immortality from Recollections of Early Childhood”’: the ‘obstinate questionings’, ‘fallings’, ‘vanishings’ and ‘shadowy recollections’ of Wordsworth’s ninth stanza (146). These are picked up in Lamb’s defence of an ‘anti-Caledonian’ mode of thought, governed by ‘surmises, guesses, misgivings, half-intuitions, semi-consciousnesses, partial illuminations, dim instincts, embryo conceptions’, and embodied in the essay form.

Other chapters take a broader view of the cultural scene, paying particular attention to the often neglected 1820s. Angela Esterhammer ‘remediates’ Theodore Hook’s silver-fork fiction through ideas of speculation and spectatorship, while David O’Shaughnessy shows how William Godwin’s interest in the founding of the London University – or, to *John Bull*, the ‘Cockney College’ (167) – maintains a longstanding interest in education within the fraught educational politics of 1820s London. There are also two fine essays on Henry Crabb Robinson, by Philipp Hunnekuhl, tracing the development of HCR’s philosophy of

disinterestedness during his studies at Jena, and Frederick Burwick, reading his diary as a rich source of 'informal' theatre reviews, unfettered by commercial considerations.

James Vigus's own essay, 'Informal Religion: Lakers on Quakers', is lucidly presented and grounded in fascinating and little-known source material. Tracing Coleridge and Southey's shifting responses to Quakerism, he shows how both writers were initially drawn to a faith that appealed, in words of its founder, George Fox, 'To all that would know the way to the Kingdom: Whether they be in forms, without forms, or got above all forms' (97). However, these sympathies were short-lived and, 'in the context of the Napoleonic wars, both writers stigmatise the Quaker movement and its peace testimony for a failure of patriotism' (111). It is the end of these wars that are the key moment in Paul Hamilton's concluding chapter, which follows a trajectory from the Revolution Controversy of the 1790s, a time when 'to discuss the language of politics has become the way in which to discuss politics', to the re-imagining of Europe in the Congress of Vienna: 'the effect of this occasion was to suggest that politics could be literature or an imaginative activity' (208). The burden of Hamilton's argument is to defend 'political romanticism', *pace* Carl Schmitt, but the essay also implies the significance of 1815 as a point of disjuncture, between a culture of popular radicalism and the liberal tradition that Hamilton is concerned to vindicate.

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