

Evan Gottlieb, *Romantic Realities: Speculative Realism and British Romanticism*. Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2016. Pp. 238. £19.99 (pb). ISBN 9780748691418.

Over the past decade, speculative realism [SR] has been of increasing interest to scholars in a range of disciplines. It would probably be misleading to describe it as a ‘movement’; rather, it is a congeries of often contradictory ideas and arguments brought together by a concern with the significance of things beyond their significance for human beings. That is to say, speculative realists critique post-Kantian correlationism: ‘the belief [...] that we can only ever talk or think about reality in relation to our human subjectivity’ (2). Evan Gottlieb’s excellent new book relies on the broadest possible definition of SR, including thinkers generally associated with the field (e.g. Graham Harman, Raymond Brassier, and Quentin Meillassoux), those who have influenced it (e.g. Bruno Latour and Alain Badiou), and those ‘new materialists’ who share its anti-anthropocentrism even if they differ in other respects (e.g. Jane Bennett and Manuel DeLanda). Although this is not an ecocritical study, Gottlieb rightly points out that the success of SR is related to a sense that linguistic critique struggles in the face of the environmental problems that beset us (4). With this in mind, it is notable that Romanticism – so prominent in the first wave of ecocriticism – has been considerably less so in more recent work in the environmental humanities and material ecocriticism. SR and the new materialism have the potential to give Romantic ecocriticism a much-needed impetus.

A major strength of *Romantic Realities* is its lucid and even-handed explication of complex philosophical ideas. Its concise summaries manage to condense and simplify without misleading: as Gottlieb was invariably accurate about the thinkers with whom I am familiar, I was willing to trust him on those whose ideas I know less well. The book’s aim is ‘to locate and explore a series of conceptual continuities and mutual illuminations between SR and British Romantic poetry’ (2). The broadest of these continuities is probably the attempt to move beyond the limitations of the individual mind and to reach some kind of absolute. That is not to say, of course, that contemporary philosophy and British Romanticism fit together in any straightforward way; Gottlieb is alive to the dangers of presentism and to those moments when his texts do not chime in with the ideas of SR. He focuses on five of the canonical male Romantic poets: Wordsworth, Coleridge, Byron, Keats, and Shelley. The absence of any female poets may well raise eyebrows, although Gottlieb gives a rationale for this focus (10); among other things, this book is very much conceived as a starting point for further research. Each chapter is focused around a single poet and the ideas of two thinkers. Wordsworth is paired with Harman and Timothy Morton; Coleridge with DeLanda and Iain Hamilton Grant; Byron with Latour and Badiou; Shelley with Brassier and Meillassoux; and Keats with Bennett and Levi Bryant. This approach is productive in all cases and works particularly well for Percy Bysshe Shelley because the concerns of his poetry (and perhaps even of his metaphysics) are clearly akin to those of Meillassoux and Brassier, as has also been recognised in recent work by me, Greg Ellermann, and Chris Washington.

Occasionally, Gottlieb seems a little disappointed that some of the poetry he addresses is not more closely aligned with SR. One gets the impression that he sees Wordsworth’s tendency to ‘fall back’ into correlationism and anthropocentrism (46) as a kind of failure, although generally his analysis of the poet in relation to the object-oriented philosophy of Harman and Morton takes a more interesting approach. I also felt at one or two points that SR was being ‘applied’ in a slightly clunky way to the texts. For example, it is not clear what Latour’s recent work brings to the study of different ‘modes of existence’ in *Don Juan* that could not be brought by longer-standing methodologies focusing on discourse or

ideology. However, given the novelty of Gottlieb's approach, a certain schematism is probably inevitable. *Romantic Realities* will play a major role in allowing SR to feature more organically in Romantic studies, alongside more familiar weapons in the critical armoury. Above all, it strikes me as a generous book: scrupulously fair to its sources and opening up the field to researchers (like me) who may not have Gottlieb's impressive grasp of the philosophical context. Whether or not the reader agrees with every interpretation or connection is not important. S/he will certainly have learnt a great deal about SR and canonical male Romantic poetry, and one could hardly ask for more from a single volume.

David Higgins
University of Leeds