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## European Romantic Prose: A Book Review Article of Comparative History of Literatures in European Languages

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**Arno GIMBER**

**European Romantic Prose:  
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The International Comparative Literature Association / Association Internationale de Littérature Comparée launched the series *Comparative History of Literatures in European Languages / Histoire comparée des littératures de langues européennes (CHLEL/HCLLE)* in 1967, an ambitious and unprecedented project that over the years has earned respect and recognition among scholars world wide (for volumes published see the Works Cited). The five volumes on Romanticism, like other groups of volumes in the series, contribute a dense and extensive web of connections and parallels, unusually multidimensional. Editors Gerald Gillespie, Manfred Engel, and Bernard Dieterle avoid defining Romanticism itself and treat it, instead, as a phenomenon whose meaning continues to resonate in a transnational perspective, crossing "linguistic, cultural, and geopolitical boundaries" ("Introduction" xx). They show how Romanticism developed and spread in its principal European homelands and the New World, revealing also the ways in which the contribution of the Romantic period lead to a redefinition of Modernism. Volumes on the Romantic period in CHLEL/HCLLE began in 1988 with *Romantic Irony*, edited by Frederick Garber.

*Romantic Prose Fiction*, edited by Gillespie, Engel, and Dieterle, is the last part of the sub-series, which involves a total of five volumes: *Romantic Irony* (Garber), *Romantic Drama* (Gillespie), *Romantic Poetry* (Esterhammer), *Non-fictional Romantic Prose: Expanding Borders* (Sondrup and Nemoianu), and *Romantic Prose Fiction*. In the review at hand I focus on *Romantic Prose Fiction* in particular, a volume that addresses basic Romantic themes and story types — the romance, novel, novella, short story, etc. — and considers the Romantic impact not just in Europe, but across the Atlantic and in the light of its influence on later generations. While it is possible to write a history of literature in national categories without a single non-German reference — as Rüdiger Safranski did in 2007 in *Romantik. Eine deutsche Affäre* — the Romantic period marks a wide network of connections and supranational influences which extend towards the beginning of European modernity and that have been neglected for too long. Without this premise, the Romantic era cannot be understood within the context of single national literatures. Contributors to *Romantic Prose Fiction* discuss the impact of Romanticism not just in literary history and theory, but also across disciplines including philosophy, cultural studies, gender studies, the other arts, the social sciences, etc.

Since the twentieth century, one of the most important issues in Western literary scholarship has been the question of the heterogeneity of the Romantic movement that occurred more or less at the same time in various ways across Europe and not just in specific national literatures. In "The Concept of Romanticism in Literary history" René Wellek approached this issue and concluded that Romanticism could be contemplated as an artistic period, since it appeared with identical or at least similar characteristics throughout Europe and across the Atlantic. Romanticism is commonly seen as the beginning of modernity, and it is, of course, obvious its importance in Great Britain, France, and Germany with regards to the avant-garde position of these cultures in Western Art. In this sense, *Romantic Prose Fiction* does not go beyond Wellek's approach and remains within Eurocentrism. It does, however, focus on Romanticism in a comprehensive manner including new readings from cross-cultural and interdisciplinary perspectives all of which add value. The view beyond national borders is the other strong point of the CHLEL/HCLLE Romanticism volumes, although it might also imply some dangers. For example, if we accept that Romantic literature might stretch from 1760 to 1890 — i.e., from the publication in 1760 of *The Castle of Otranto* by Horace Walpole, to Herman Melville's *Billy Budd Sailor*, almost a 130 years later — and thus the time-span is so wide that is no longer operative. One could ask, for instance, why not include Luis Cernuda among the Romantic poets or why not set the beginning of the Romantic period in Spain with the figure of Cernuda, as Philip Silver suggested recently, arguing that anti-mimetic writing

began Cernuda's influence in Spanish literature? Or how to evaluate Hugo Ball's judgment that Hermann Hesse — who died in 1962 — had been the last Romantic writer? Of course this wide view opens new literary connections never undertaken in the usual interpretations of the Romantic period, often limited to just one language, one culture, or one nation.

From a perspective that includes various national literatures, the period of Romanticism has other time constraints, as it is the case with German literary history, for instance, dating from the mid-1790s and reaching, with a few exceptions, until about 1830. From a European perspective, there is evidence that *Sturm und Drang* was never considered Romantic in German-language scholarship, a period that also included Jean Jacques Rousseau's works or Edmund Burke's essays. For all these reasons, early writings by Herder, Schiller, and Goethe are included by contributions to *Romantic Prose Fiction*, inclusions that provide, at least in the form of an outline, a sense of how certain powerful cultural moments — here Romanticism — inspire new discourses and serve as motivation for new imaginative writings in all directions of the Western world. It is, however, easy to name the core texts of Romantic literature within fictional prose. For instance, one needs to mention Rousseau's *Julie ou la nouvelle Héloïse* and Goethe's *Werther*, Novalis's *Heinrich von Ofterdingen*, E.T.A. Hoffmann's complete oeuvre and *Der Sandmann* in particular, Walter Scott's historical novels, Victor Hugo's *Notre-Dame de Paris*, Mary Wollstonecraft Shelley's *Frankenstein*, Thomas De Quincey's *Confessions of an English Opium-Eater*, Nikolai Gogol's *The Nose*, and Edgar Allan Poe's short stories. The fact that the five volume collection begins with *Romantic Irony* (Garber) also makes sense, since the self-consciousness and subjectivity present in authors such as Schelling, Schlegel, Hoffmann, Novalis, Hölderlin, Chateaubriand, Schiller, Coleridge, or Goethe, to name but a few, is germane to modernist self-reflection and ironic stance that extends even into the so called postmodern era.

With regard to the 2008 volume of *Romantic Prose Fiction* (Gillespie, Engel, Dieterle) I need to say that the 733 pages of the volume are such an impressive achievement, difficult to evaluate and impossible to summarize by exploring all its contributions individually in the limited space of this review article. Thus I concentrate on a few articles which for personal reasons caught my attention. The volume is divided in three parts with a total of thirty six articles, including the introduction and the conclusion. In the first part which concentrates on the "Characteristic themes" authors deal with topics such as the French Revolution, Wertherism, the figure of *Wanderer*, the analysis of the Romantic notion of music (Mihály Szegedy-Maszák; Claudia Albert), nature and landscape representations (Wilhelm Graeber; Paola Giacconi; André Lorant), the dark side of life, madness, and dream (Monika Schmitz-Emans), *Doppelgänger*-s or other kind of duplicities (Ernst Grabovszki; Sabine Roszbach), and less-known aspects such as images of childhood (Bettina Kümmerling-Meibauer), and gender and sexuality (Thomas Klinkert and Weertje Willms). For instance, Claudia Albert dedicates her article on Romantic music and narrative questions to aspects of poetics and self-reflection in the medium of music, although we wonder why she does not include the *Lied*, perhaps the most emotional expression of the Romantic spirit. Albert shows clearly the character of a specifically German perception of music as absolute art, something that has consequences on later discussions about the crises of language at the *fin de siècle*. Outside Germany, and particularly in France, music did not receive much attention: writers were more interested in musical practice as a social phenomenon, particularly with regards to opera. Indeed, French and English artists did not use music to express unspeakable feelings. On the contrary, authors such as Balzac, Stendhal, and Flaubert saw in musical language the same lack of expression as in other communication systems based on arbitrary signs. Paola Giacconi arrives at a similar conclusion about the particularities of the German case in what concerns the representation of nature and landscape in narrative. Again, it would seem that German-language literature found its own way of profundness.

Authors in the second part is dedicated to "Paradigms of Romantic fiction" and further sub-divided into "Generic Types and Representative Texts" explore genres such as the Gothic novel (Hendrik van Gorp), *Bildungsroman*, historical novel, and romance (Mark Bernauer; Virgil Nemoianu), fairy tales and the fantastic (Jörn Steigerwald), and various other types such narrative sequence, the fragment as structuring force, processes of mirroring, abymization, potentiation, the

dialectics of homophony and polyphony, the distinction between novel and romance, the role of myth (Dorothy Figueira), and an article on Spanish American Romantic fiction and its social dimensions (Annette Paatz; Jüri Talvet). This last topic is certainly one of the most unknown subjects and interesting chapters. It is also commendable that the importance of Jean Paul, Fichte's advocate and tutor to E.T.A. Hoffmann, is highlighted in many articles. Apart from scholars in France and German-speaking countries, Hoffmann's work has attracted little attention. Further, the demarcation of the *Biedermeier* era creates difficulties where the literary idyll is allocated to Romanticism. The genre does not even belong to the same filiation as the sublime and his negative extreme, the uncanny. Within the "Modes of Discourse and Narrative structures" Monica Spiridon presents the influence of Romanticism across time as she moves from polyphonic literary discourse in Novalis's *Heinrich von Ofterdingen* to Gogol's prose and to the crucial rule of Bakhtinian voices in postmodernism. This is also demonstrated in Spiridon's article about the fragment, the Romantic genre *par excellence*. More than the *Bildungsroman* and the historical novel, the fragment references the crisis of the self, originating at the time of the French Revolution. Remo Ceserani and Paolo Zanotti trace the philosophical and literary-theoretical framework, postulating *Tristram Shandy* as the base of the genre and examine apparently related works across decades in order to show how complex and multifaceted the prose fragment is and how much it owes to other genres such as poetry and the essay. Other entries are less dense, as they are aimed at a wide encyclopedic view. This is regrettable only in a few cases, when an article is restricted to a list of author's names and works.

One problem with *Romantic Prose Fiction* is that the notion of Romanticism becomes more imprecise as more national literatures are included. The inclusion of Spain and Latin America shows, for instance, that the category of the Romantic novel cannot be applied to the works of the movement known as *costumbrismo*. At the same time, in this feature also resides one of the positive aspects of the volume, namely the possibility of speaking about the legacy of Romantic prose in later periods. For example, it is the third section that opens up to new themes and makes the volume to an original contribution to recent scholarship. The section, entitled "Contributions of Romanticism to 19th and 20th-century Writing and Thought," deals with reactions to the impact of Romanticism on cultural life to the present both in Europe and elsewhere including a wealth of international developments in Russia, Scandinavia, Hungary, Italy, Spain, Japan, Latin and North America. Contributions touch upon occultism and the fantastic in Spain and Latin America, Romantic prose fiction in modern Japan, ludic prose from Sterne to Fuentes, and screen adaptations presenting Romanticism as a dynamic cross-cultural process. Reception studies also offer revealing information. For example, Jane Smoot demonstrates how Rousseau's belief in the goodness of the *noble savage* passes on and operates in the Anglophone American discourse about the natural human and how this discourse is desecrated during the Indian Wars, especially in Mark Twain's *Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* and *The Adventures of Tom Sawyer*. On the other side, José Ricardo Chaves describes how the modernism of Rubén Darío was "the late Latin American literary version of Romanticism" (622) and how he influenced at the same time neighbors on the continent. Romantic traces are investigated in Realism or Naturalism (Jeanne J. Smoot), in the *realismo mágico* (José Ricardo Chaves), in Japanese literature (Takayuki Yokata-Murakami) and in film production (Elaine Martin) involving adaptations of works themselves (*Notre Dame de Paris*, *Carmen*, *Frankenstein*, or *Wuthering Heights*) or of motifs (e.g., the *Doppelgänger*). For instance, Elaine Martin connects David Lynch's *Blue Velvet* to Hoffmann's tales and the theme of the uncanny. At this point, a more extensive reading that would have included *Twin Peaks* and *Lost Highway* would be desirable, since these films are also interpenetrated by Romantic motifs from texts by Hoffmann.

The advantage of *Romantic Prose Fiction* lies in the differences and similarities between national Romantic literatures and on their interdependent influences, for example the approach on the comparative level, as well as at networks and transfers which show how contemporary art remains committed to the aesthetics of Romanticism and how this liberation of artistic potentiality survives in our time and is still not fulfilled. It seems to me that the Romantic movement in Germany is perhaps emphasized a little too much in the contributions so that it ends up being

understood too certainly as the starting point of the Romantic development. This conveys, of course, a particular image of the Romantic period where philosophical and psychological considerations play a more important role than political contexts. The exception is Gerhart Hoffmeister's article on the French Revolution. Such a wide and vast project requires content summaries to guide the unfamiliar reader, a practice that sometimes obstructs a penetration into the writings. It is also understandable that certain details are overlooked: the origin of German *Novella* is not Goethe's *Unterhaltungen deutscher Ausgewanderter* (365): it can already be found in the literature of sixteenth century. How is it possible to write about the Romantic *Wanderer* (and in such a capital manner) without mentioning the most important *Wanderer* in Romantic literature: the first person in Wilhelm Müller's *Winterreise*? Of course, we are able to find some remarks about the figure in the *Romantic Poetry* volume (Esterhammer). However, while the painter Caspar David Friedrich is named three times, Heinrich von Kleist's programmatic text about one of his paintings is not and neither is his letter from a writer to a painter, another key-text for the comprehension of the Romantic era. And when it comes to myths in Romanticism, a reference to *Hegel* is lacking because an understanding of the socio-political context would have proved important to the concept of new mythology. I also miss more detailed discussions about the Romantic theory of novel — evolving from Friedrich Schlegel's and Novalis's works — because this is important for the development of the genre in the last two centuries and I posit that they cannot be limited to a few pages about the Romantic novel and verse romance. Further, in the chapter devoted to gender studies Dorothea Schlegel or Karoline von Günderode are not mentioned while Bettina von Arnim née Brentano appears once only because she continued her husband Achim von Arnim's novel *Die Kronenwächter*.

Finally, not withstanding the above-mentioned absences — inevitable in such a vast project — *Romantic Prose Fiction* provides an outstanding introduction to Romantic literature including its forms of thought and representation. All major topics, themes, and aspects of Romanticism are covered from the highest aesthetic treatises to the most popular fairy tales and it is in every case an experience and a pleasure to read the articles and even the specialist discovers new facets and aspects of Romanticism, cross-references, similarity, and differences in this exciting era when the modern aesthetic was invented. For this reason I recommend *Romantic Prose Fiction* particularly to scholars and the general readers who are interested either in national culture or supranational approaches.

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