EUROPEAN ROMANTICISM: A READER



Ed. Stephen Prickett
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Reviewed by Christoph Bode on 2011-02-25.

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This is an awe-inspiring volume. Not only because it is a real wrist-breaker of an anthology, but also because the concept behind it is truly ambitious. Presenting the first anthology of primary and contemporary secondary sources that reflects the literature of Romanticism as an irreducibly *European* phenomenon, Stephen Prickett, his sub-editor Simon Haines (who, in addition to co-editing the whole volume and writing the introduction to the English section, did all the necessary footwork, like gaining permissions and raising financial support for the project), and no fewer than 15 experts, or sectional editors, have compiled a collection of texts that is unique in scope and original in design: all non-English texts are given in their original language with an English translation on the opposite page. Where possible, the accompanying English translation is from the period; even where not, the discerning reader is offered some gems, like Vladimir Nabokov's translations of Fyodor Tyuchev's "Silentium!" or of Lermontov's *A Hero of Our Time* (an excerpt, of course).

This rich material is thematically arranged in sections called Art and Aesthetics; The Self; History and Politics; Language and Interpretation; Myth, Religion and the Supernatural; Nature; The Exotic; and Science. While I do not want to quibble with this arrangement, I do not know why it should form "a logical progression" (20). With Aesthetics preceding the Self, and Nature following History and Politics, this arrangement suggests a more radical constructivism than the anthology actually endorses.

Each of the above eight sections contains texts from the different European literatures (British, French, German, Hungarian, Italian, Norwegian, Polish, Portuguese, Romanian, Russian, Spanish, and Swedish), although not all literatures are represented in all sections (e.g. Danish or Norwegian), and from Czech literature we find only one example, Karel Hynek Mácha's 40-page poem "May".

As with any project of such magnitude, the main questions that have to be addressed by a reviewer are: How representative are the selected texts? If length required shortening, how intelligently have the excerpts been chosen? How good are the translations? And finally, how carefully have the texts been edited?

Generally speaking, the selections are magnificent. In the French sub-sections, for example, you meet with all the usual suspects from Chateaubriand to Gautier, from Mme de Staël to Victor Hugo, from Baudelaire to Alfred de Musset and Lamartine. But the same is also true, it seems to me, for Spanish and Italian literature and for the selections from Polish in particular. It is wonderful to have the words of José Zorrilla y Moral, Francisco Martinez de la Rosa, José de Espronceda, Gabriel García Tassara, Gertrudis Gómez de Avellaneda, Ramón de Campoamor, Carolina Coronado, and Gustavo Adolfo Bécquer (to name but a few) along with the manifesto of Italian Romanticism--Giovanni Berchet's essay (from 1816) on Bürger's *Lenore*. We also find Giocomo Leopardi and Alessandro Manzoni rubbing shoulders with the lesser-known Silvio Pellico and Ermes Viscomi. The choice of Adam Mieckiewicz and Julius Slowacki is, of course, predictable, but the individual passages chosen from, say, *Konrad Wallenrod* or *Kordian* bespeak a fine, discriminating literary intelligence. Nor did I find any instances of unfortunate abridgements. This alone is a remarkable feat.

Having said that, I find a number of conspicuous absences. Under the heading of Art and Aesthetics (German), why are there no excerpts from Kant's *Critique of Judgement*? Either the passage on "interesseloses Wohlgefallen" or Kant's revolutionary re-definition of the sublime would have made an excellent choice. The breathtaking *Oldest System Programme of German Idealism* (supposedly co-written by Hegel, Schelling, and possibly Hölderlin) is mentioned in the historical introduction to German Romanticism (38), but even though it's only about a page long, it doesn't make the anthology. And why, for that matter, is there no excerpt from Schelling's "Über das Verhältnis der bildenden Künste zu der Natur" (1807), which Coleridge later passed off as his own "On Poesy or Art"? It would have shown what strange ways the reception of foreign ideas sometimes goes.

In the same section (but under the heading British), I was struck by the inclusion of John Keats's "Ode on a Grecian Urn." The aesthetic message of that poem is not uncontroversial, to say the least, and it would have been more fortunate, I think, to select passages from his letters -- say, on Negative Capability, or on The Vale of Soul-making, or on the Poet's (Non-)Identity -- to give the reader an idea of his aesthetics. But the latter passage is not even given under The Self, where instead we get Keats's "Ode to a Nightingale." And why do we not have some of Joanna Baillie, Mary Wollstonecraft, or Mary Shelley? Represented here with selections from Wordsworth, Hazlitt, Coleridge, Keats, Peacock, and P.B. Shelley, the field of Art and Aesthetics in Romantic-era Britain looks like an exclusively male domain. It wasn't.

In History and Politics (British), we miss William Godwin, John Thelwall, and Joseph Priestley -- at least one of whom could have been included, had Lord Byron and William Wordsworth been given less space; and in Language and Interpretation (British), Horne Tooke is as sadly missing as is Shelley's short essay "On Love," which could have handily demonstrated how much Romanticism pre-figures deconstruction. By comparison, the passage chosen from Jane Austen's *Persuasion* seems not quite so thrilling.

In the introduction to Myth, Religion and the Supernatural, the editors promise an extract from William Blake: an obvious and welcome choice, if it had only materialized, but it is nowhere to be found in this section. But then, with Robert Lowth, Thomas Paine, Bishop Richard Watson, Samuel Taylor Coleridge, and William Paley, the British contingent is already the largest in the section, with 23 pages; only the Russians (Gogol, Afansy Fet), with 21 pages, get nearly that much.

Science, I must say, struck me as the only topic not well represented in its section. Though Malthus, Charles Lyell, Novalis, and Goethe are rightly included, why is there nothing of Buffon and nothing contemporary on animal magnetism? Why does the section include both Balzac and Ibsen, whose claims to Romantic status seem equally doubtful, and why does it include Keats's sonnet "On First Looking into Chapman's Homer"? Does this poem qualify as scientific simply because it alludes to William Herschel's discovery of the "new planet" Uranus in 1781? Whether or not it does, why is there nothing by Johann Friedrich Blumenbach? Why not anything, for that matter, from the greatest polymath of the age, Alexander von Humboldt? And why, for all his importance, Captain Cook, who wrote badly, instead of a passage from Georg Forster's *A Voyage Round the World* (1777), which brilliantly reports on Cook's second voyage to the Pacific and also exemplifies the cosmopolitan nature of European Romanticism (and could easily have been accommodated under The Exotic as well)?

Other decisions seem equally doubtful. If Heinrich Heine is counted as a Romantic and included, why isn't E.T.A. Hoffmann? Can it really be that Kierkegaard counts as a Romantic philosopher -- but not Hegel?

To avoid any misunderstanding and to put my criticism into perspective, I must say that on the whole the selection of texts strikes me as superb. But for this very reason the few omissions and misplacements stand out all the more conspicuously, and sometimes even the introductory essays point to these absences.

Where I am able to judge I found the quality of the translations very good -- a consequence, no doubt, of the editors' relying on established and standard translations wherever possible and of their policy to solicit new translations from experts only.

However, and this is where it hurts, the problem lies not with the translations but with the originals as presented here and with their textual editing. Misprints include "weiche" (132) for "welche," a non-sensical "thr" (142) for "ihr," a glossolalic "Zurklallik" (174) for "Zur Klassik," "1ch" (342) for "Ich" and "Vornunft" (346) for "Vernunft." Evidently, these texts have been scanned very carelessly and have not been proofread by a native speaker. Umlaute get lost when we find "Samtliche" (174) instead of "Sämtliche," "verhalt" (342) instead of "verhält," "Gleichmassigkeit" (752) instead of "Gleichmässigkeit," and "fuhlte" (822) instead of "fühlte" (822). Names and titles are also misprinted. Theodor Körner, *Lied der Schwarzen Jäger*, is systematically shorn of its umlauts in Theodor Korner, *Lied der Schwarzen Jager* [xxi]); Søren Kierkegaard is re-christened Soren Kierkegaard (xxi); and some other Dane seems to have passed on his superscript º to the German publishing house of Kohlhammer (152), where it sits awkwardly on the o. One is just slightly perturbed by a wrong German plural form in "Athenaeums Fragmentes" (152) (instead of "Athenaeums Fragmente"), but shocked to see "semen" (978), which, however, turns out to be an innocent "seinen", misread by the editors. And "Freidrich Schiller. Siimtliche Werke" (124) is, of course, an absurd rendition of "Friedrich Schiller. Sämtliche Werke".

Such mistakes proliferate in the table of contents, where the name of the eminent Romanian contributor, Mihaela Anghelescu Irimia, is changed to Iremia; Scott's *Waverley* becomes *Waverly*; and it looks as if Pan Tadeusz were another Polish writer rather than the title of Poland's great national epic, written by Adam Mickiewicz. Even Stephen Prickett's excellent Introduction displays misprints: *Werther*, as a book title, is not italicized (18), whereas in a later section (31-32) proper names inconsistently are. The present reviewer, who is quoted approvingly, is misspelt Christophe (15), a fate he gladly shares with Hippolyte Taine, who comes out as Hyppolyte (13).

Certain editorial inconsistencies also mar the later sections: Why are the original publishers sometimes given, sometimes not? Why is it Munich and Cologne, but Zürich? Why is there a wonderfully helpful annotation to the excerpt from José de Espronceda's *El diablo mundo* (405, 407), a practice followed only in the headnote to Alexander Pushkin's *The Gypsies* (925, 927) and nowhere else?

To be sure, this anthology offers an excellent mapping of European Romanticism and is especially informative on the hitherto neglected margins, like Romanian, Hungarian, Portuguese, or Scandinavian literatures; beyond that, it also includes essays on American Romanticism and on the impact of European Romanticism on Japan. There is nothing comparable. Every library should have a copy, and every lover of Romanticism should have access to this anthology, though at a price of $350 or £195 it seems to aim at a somewhat restricted group of customers.

To the four guiding questions that I asked above, one could well add a fifth and final one: How does this volume redefine European Romanticism for us? Well, it all depends on who 'us' is, and on 'our' idea of European Romanticism. It has always seemed to me -- but this is only a personal hunch -- that in what was formerly called *Mitteleuropa*, there is still a fairly reliable knowledge of what constituted Romanticism in the neighboring countries and languages, and the names of writers and their works are not entirely lost. French Romanticism's strong links and ties to Iberian and Italian Romanticisms have been generally known, as are the debts of Russian Romanticism to Britain and Germany. Where this knowledge has become extinct, this anthology will prove an inestimable guide. And it is fitting that the common denominator of this volume should be the dominant European language of today, our *lingua franca*, English.

To come to my final verdict: the task has been Herculean, the spirit in which it was carried out Promethean. But as T.S. Eliot wrote in "The Hollow Men": "Between the idea /And the reality / Between the motion / And the act / Falls the shadow." It is a great pity that at the end of this monumental project, which took twelve years from its inception to its realization, there was evidently not enough time and care taken to minimize errors. Everybody involved in this gigantic project deserves our unreserved gratitude. But a more perfectly edited volume would have done greater honor to the laudable enthusiasm of this collective enterprise.

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Stephen Prickett responds (02-26-11):

I have to say this is a very fair -- even generous review.

The choice of texts in each section has to be made by the relevant sectional editor, and every reviewer will have their own ideal selection: it would be a minor miracle if they always agreed!

The problem of proof-reading is much more serious -- and indeed proved almost intractable. The process went on for nearly two months, with each editor receiving and returning up to three versions. Even so, far too many errors did creep in, and for this we can only apologize and promise improvements in the future.

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