



The Romantic Performative: Language and Action in British and German Romanticism by Angela Esterhammer. Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2000. Pp. xv + 357. \$55.00 cloth.

Over the past few years, Romanticists have had to confront (or, perhaps, accept as a fact) the apparent decline of their field, particularly its waning potential for opening new and compelling perspectives on literary and cultural studies overall. No doubt, some of the reasons for this widely deplored trend are institutional and economic—mere epiphenomena of the pervasive trend of “downsizing” the humanities in favor of grant-getting and revenue-generating work in the sciences and, on a smaller scale, the social sciences. The embattled condition of Romanticists thus ought to be understood as but one symptom of the pervasive transformation of the university over the past twenty years or so, away from the intellectual and (admittedly Western-Europe dominated) *universitas* envisioned by Humboldt, Hegel, Coleridge and their late-Romantic contemporaries and toward a (still Anglo-European-dominated) model of the university as one more corporate subject within a transnational and for-profit-only global business culture. On that count, it would seem that things, notwithstanding the standard line of university administrators about a rapidly changing world, do indeed stay the same. For just as the liberal-secular institutions of higher learning delivered the cultural justifications and technological means required for the twin projects of nineteenth-century Nationalism and Imperialism, so the early twenty-first century worship of “interdisciplinarity,” new media, and “excellence” (the “Test Act” for any successful career in university administration today) essentially replicates the globalist credo in perpetual technological innovation and the tearing down of obstacles to free trade whereby transnational corporations and their umbrella organizations evangelize capital as intrinsically benevolent and profit-motives as the very fuel for social progress.

In his new book, *The Law of Cool*, Alan Liu offers a poignant commentary on the uncertain “future of literature and literary study when all culture is increasingly the culture of information and when even literary scholars subordinate literature to an apparent clone of information: cultural context?” Liu’s view of literature’s vaunted autonomy as but a short-lived epoch within the far more enduring and inventive quest of “the literary” to find new idioms and roles in changing times is, if only implicitly, seconded by the architecture of Angela Esterhammer’s study of the Romantic performative. Arguably the most remarkable feature in a book of many strengths, it is the insistence of *The Romantic Performative* on taking us beyond Romanticism as endlessly ruminating and eulogizing the death of Literature or, inversely, writing yet another critical

and righteous exposé of its figural contradictions or ideological complicity. Instead, Esterhammer reads Romanticism as a watershed moment in the understanding of language *tout court*, with Literature advancing this broader project in important, though certainly no longer exclusive ways. By approaching Romanticism's "linguistic and poetic texts . . . [as] both analyses of language as action and instances of language as action" (3), she credits the period with a kind of reflexivity and fluidity that so often seems missing in eagerly political or materialistic accounts of Romantic writing. Indeed, Esterhammer goes further by contending that Romanticism's "speaking subject tends to be a much more fluid entity . . . than it is in twentieth-century speech-act theory—neither a function of the power that linguistic rules and societal conventions assign to certain utterances, nor an independent agent exerting control over the external world, but a mind negotiating its position with respect to language, nature, and society" (13).

The book's seven main chapters take us from the debate over promises, contracts and constitutions in Britain (Burke, Paine, Bentham) through a discussion of German Idealism (Kant and Fichte), German philosophy of language (Bernhardi, Humboldt) to readings of individual authors (Coleridge, Hölderlin, Kleist, and Godwin). Throughout the book, Esterhammer's command of her primary materials, as well as the range of her scholarship (both philological and theoretical) proves truly remarkable and ensures that her study, however wide-ranging and ambitious, remains at all times on firm ground. In its scholarly and critical demeanor, *The Romantic Performative* makes an eloquent plea not only for reintegrating the study of literature with the larger theoretical and political effects of writing at a time when "literature" had barely begun to claim formal-aesthetic autonomy for itself, but also for the seemingly defunct field of comparative literature and its lately ignored capacity for productively integrating literature with theory.

Esterhammer's first chapter focuses on the French Revolution and its stunning impact on public print-culture in Britain. If time then seemed ripe to acknowledge the instability and consequent malleability of political realities as *de facto* linguistic fictions, Esterhammer shows how premonitions of this shift can be found in Hume's and Thomas Reid's particularly intriguing exploration of promises and other, non-propositional types of linguistic expression. The *differentia specifica* in most discussions of the performative—the question of intentionality—already emerges with great clarity in Reid's distinction between "the will to engage" and the "will to perform what we have engaged" (39). Here "a revealing contrast between the British and German traditions emerges. For the Germans (including Herder, Humboldt, and Bernhardi), language is essentially dialogic because cognition is essentially dialogic. For Reid, language is essentially dialogic—but precisely this distinguishes it from cognition and renders it essential to the existence of human beings as social creatures." It is here that Esterhammer locates the emergent distinction between

performativity as “a phenomenological” or “sociopolitical” act (40), a distinction that was to ignite such heated debate between Searle and Derrida about whether performative utterances are by their very nature undecidable and (as a further consequence of Derrida’s argument, and one particularly unsettling to Searle) impossible to distinguish from any other forms of utterance. Ever vigilant of human beings’ proclivity to confuse linguistic and material realities, Bentham here appears as a direct precursor to Derrida (and also Paul de Man) when he asserts that “the various declarations issued by the French National Assembly . . . [inasmuch as] they bring into being exactly the reality they describe” produce “absurdity or self-contradiction” (51). What Derrida was to label the “fabulous retroactivity” of constitutionalist practice is here already subjected to a critique that, interestingly, confounds the usual dichotomy between a politically conservative but rhetorically adventurous Burkean model and the politically principled and hence conservative linguistic theories of the Paines. This is outstanding, superbly informed expository writing on intricate and often ignored theoretical questions, and Esterhammer pushes her analyses to the point that “metaphysical questions about the power of language” (66) also begin to open up. Among these figures centrally the tension between Paine’s idea of an “original, transcendent contract” and his generation’s desire to define that contract anew, in spite of the apparent and seemingly overwhelming power of historical time.

The next chapter explores a significant “structural parallel” (75) between the Kantian transcendental apperception (the “I think” that must accompany all representation) and Fichte’s foundational act (*Tathandlung*) of the self positing itself on the one hand, and the basic structure of performative utterances on the other. Where Kant’s prose often proves reticent when it comes to acknowledging its linguistic underpinnings, Esterhammer sensibly averts to Herder’s largely unread *Metakritik* of Kant’s *Critique of Pure Reason* (78–83) as arguably the first attempt to “link Kant’s First Critique with universal grammar—the study of parts of speech in terms of universal logical categories, rather than in relation to specific natural languages, that formed the prevailing mode of linguistic scholarship during the eighteenth century” (81). Quite possibly, no theorist would seem more pertinent to a study of Romantic performativity than Fichte. In her reading of his *Wissenschaftslehre* (Science of Knowledge), Esterhammer persuasively traces the degree to which Fichte’s epigenetic account of the self (as *Setzen*) relates to the positional power of language (*Satz*), and how Fichte ultimately “fails [“avoids” might not have been too strong a word] to work out the larger linguistic implications of his own idealist philosophy” (88). In yet another of her numerous valuable recoveries of overlooked and theoretically pioneering texts from the Romantic era, Esterhammer juxtaposes Fichte’s hesitant, even defensive relationship to the linguistic foundations of his formalist logic with August Ferdinand Bernhardt

(1769–1820) Bernhardt's *Sprachlehre* (1801–1803), and even more so, Humboldt's numerous and more widely known writings on universal grammar and its relationship to cognition, lead Esterhammer to these momentous conclusions:

It is illustrative . . . that speech-act philosophers tend to *observe* the asymmetry of first-person forms and modify their analysis accordingly, without investigating the role of the I itself. The Romantic performative, on the other hand, grows out of a theorization of the I in its relation to being, objective reality, and other human subjects. It therefore focuses on utterances that not only (like the modern performative) alter the circumstances in which they are spoken, but also react back on the speaker, altering the I itself and its relation to the hearer and context.

(99–100)

Humboldt, above all, appears to have understood the extraordinary autonomy of the linguistic medium vis-à-vis the intentions that the speaking subject appears to project onto it. For Humboldt, the study of language essentially places the enigmatic nature of Kant's "synthesis" (nowhere more apparent than in the chapter on the "Schematism" from the First Critique) on firm empirical footing.

It is beyond the scope of this review to detail the wealth and acuity of Esterhammer's subsequent readings of Coleridge, Hölderin, Kleist, and Godwin. Of these, Kleist may well prove the one most congenial and supportive of Esterhammer's overall reading of Romanticism as a variously explicit or implicit meditation on the performative and world-constituting power of linguistic fictions. Esterhammer's wholly lucid account of Kleist's most ambitious novella, *Michael Koohlhaas*, ends with what Coleridge would surely have called "genial coincidence." A quote from Jeremy Bentham's 1791 critique of the French National Assembly's Declaration of Rights exemplifies his skepticism with the very image of horses left to a stranger's care and received back in nearly worthless condition that was to become the thematic premise for Kleist's story. To exist in the world is, for Bentham and Kleist, no less than for us, to take things on faith (or on promise) with no collateral to back us up: "[Bentham's] evocative image suggests that not only Kohlhaas's declarations, but the fate of the horses that represent the catalyst for his whole adventure, may be read as an illustration of how the meaning and effect of words shift beyond the control of those who use them and those whose lives they alter" (279). Koohlhaas's fantasy, which in the end may also be that of more "conservative" twentieth-century theoreticians of the performative, appears to be that language—particularly the black-on-white solidity of print culture—ought to

be as permanent as the “blacks” (his horses) whom he expects in their “original” condition. In one way or another, the oeuvre of each author focused on by Esterhammer’s study revolves around this fantasy of “a language that . . . neither deforms reality nor is deformed by it” (279).

One regret about this otherwise excellent study has to do with its overly streamlined account of performativity. Given the complexity of twentieth-century debate on this manner, it would have been useful to explore how the “greater fluidity and creativity” of the Romantic performative might compel a reevaluation of its twentieth-century successors. Yet these figures (Austin, Searle, Derrida, K. O. Apel and Habermas) are disposed of in less than ten pages, and their function appears to be mostly to attest to the topical relevance, not the conceptual tensions, of performative theories of language today. Thus Esterhammer’s argument concerning Romanticism as precursor to late-twentieth-century speech-act theories remains largely invariant throughout the book, and all figures ultimately converge in the same notion of language as bearing the imprint of a deep-structural, pragmatic motivation—the instantiation of so many realities *qua* symbolic action. By and large, this formal schema dominates over the consideration of the social and political effects produced by the very fact that the Romantics thought of themselves as inhabiting language both as the domain of political and cultural practice and as the catalyst for theoretical awareness of that very condition. As her readings of Godwin, Kleist, and Hölderlin clearly imply—though Esterhammer does not always follow up on that implication—to dwell within language as the domain of (virtual) practices *and* to grasp it theoretically as the *Reflexionsmedium* (Benjamin’s word) for performative self-constitution entails an attenuated, even skeptical perspective on political action. While the careers of the four primary “literary” figures in Esterhammer’s study (Coleridge, Godwin, Hölderlin, and Kleist) would certainly support that contention, *The Romantic Performative* curiously foregoes any consideration of the social and political effects wrought by the acceptance of its very thesis. That the book at times foregoes drawing out the implications of its central thesis seems particularly regrettable given that, as Esterhammer herself shows so well, the Romantics appeared more willing to countenance the implications and imponderables of performativity than many of the theoreticians writing on the same subject in the second half of the twentieth century.

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British Romanticism and the Science of Mind by Alan Richardson. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000. Pp. xx + 243. \$55.00 cloth.