



Romanticism on the Net

Afterword. Romantic Futurities: Onwards!

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Biographical Note

Emily W. Rohrbach is an Assistant Professor in English Literature 1660-1832 in the Department of English Studies at Durham University. She teaches and writes about British and comparative Romanticisms, narrative theory, literature and historiography, aesthetics and politics, the poetics of time, and the materiality and literary imagination of the codex book. Her essays on these topics have appeared as journal articles in *European Romantic Review*; *The Keats-Shelley Journal*; *Romanticism*; *SEL: Studies in English Literature, 1500-1900*; *Studies in Romanticism*; and *Textual Practice*. Her first book, *Modernity's Mist: British Romanticism and the Poetics of Anticipation*, was published in the Lit Z series of Fordham University Press in 2016. She's currently working on a new monograph, provisionally entitled *Codex Poetics: Romantic Books and the Politics of Reading*, that explores the relations between Romantic poetics and material formats.

1. Opting for “Romantic Futurities” as the theme of the BARS 2020 conference, the forward-thinking organizers—Colette Davies, Amanda Blake Davis, and Paul Stephens—invited postgraduates and early career Romanticists to consider at least two questions: How did Romantic writers envision the future, and to what extent is our own sense of futurity—or could it be—shaped by theirs? The essays in this volume address the former question most of all. Rayna Rosenova’s essay does so by revisiting poetry’s engagement with history, complicating ideas of moral progress at the intersection of grand historical narratives and “little” narratives on the scale of the individual. Amanda Blake Davis’s essay turns to the past in the form of Plato’s writings and Percy Shelley’s translations of them to shed light on Shelley’s contemplation of a future state in its shifting between skepticism and idealism,

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while Simon Clewes brings in the biology of blood ties to show how William Godwin Jr.'s novel *Transfusion* presents an incipient version of Judith Butler's theory of transness. Similarly concerned with Romantic biological science, Tara Lee sees Blake's "descriptions" of fibres and globules as paving the way for modern cell theory and theories of the organism: "What is now prov'd was once only imagined," as Blake himself put it in *The Marriage of Heaven and Hell*. In another take on Romantic-period material, Colette Davies's sparkling essay illuminates how the novelist Eliza Parsons draws on a cultural discourse about jewelry to show the value of imitation in the writing of novels, challenging a literary cultural opposition between imitation and originality that denigrates the former. Finally, Michael Gamer's essay explores exciting intersections between military, scientific, and theatre history, modeling new ways forward in unexplored interdisciplinary approaches to the Romantic period. Theatrical productions depicting the South Seas on the London stage frequently represented new military and scientific discoveries, and Gamer's essay itself demonstrates how asking the big questions, while attending to historical and visual detail, not only can continue to expand our understanding of a conventional archive of Romanticism but also might extend what one considers to constitute—or be relevant to—"Romanticism."

2. Perhaps because it can seem so malleable—at moments infinitely expansive and abundant, at others fleeting—time has been an enduring preoccupation of Romantic studies since its inception, whether those concerns have been formulated as the concepts of memory, history, or prophecy; an elusive or inescapable present; or a dystopian, utopian, or unforeseeable future. The choice of "Romantic futurities" as the theme for the BARS 2020

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conference was timely, given a striking tilt toward the future in some of the most notable work of late in Romantic studies. Recent book-length studies have approached the matter of futurity in new ways, and this work represents some of the most exciting and innovative approaches to the field. I am thinking, for example, of books by David Sigler, Christopher Bundock, Jonathan Sachs, Jacques Khalip, Anahid Nersessian, Sophie Laniel-Musitelli, and Kevis Goodman, to name only a few.¹

3. My own work on this topic in my first book focused on how Romantic writers envisioned futurity as unpredictable and epistemologically uncertain, situating those imaginings in relation to the intellectual history and historiography of the eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries in Britain and Europe. It was not lost on me, therefore, that the experience of time that Romantic writers had wrestled with was one that the past year has brought home to all of us. More specifically, that the Covid-19 pandemic arrived between the initial planning of the BARS 2020 conference and the conference event itself enacted a significant change in historical situation that no one, so it seems, could have foreseen. Its extent and effects have been like nothing experienced in our lifetimes, though references to previous pandemics have helped make some sense of our evolving pandemic present.
4. I want to acknowledge the devastating public health crisis of the two years while putting the unbearable suffering and loss of life that it has caused, for the present purposes, to the side. Within academic life, the pandemic has meant, among other things, a shifting of our interactions with others, which would normally take place in the classroom or the conference space, to online platforms. I echo Michael Gamer's praise for the astonishingly

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agile organizers of BARS 2020, who seamlessly translated what had been originally conceived as an in-person conference in London to an online event with both live and recorded elements. This was the first conference that I knew of to take place online because of the pandemic, and it made that shift imaginable and appealing for so many to follow. With the other side of the pandemic still somewhat uncertain, but starting to appear perhaps on a hazy horizon, one now starts to wonder what a “post-pandemic” academic world will look like. Will the online platforms that have become so invaluable in the absence of the alternatives remain essential, or will they disappear once the threat of Covid-19 is truly behind us? At least in my experience as an academic in the UK, it has been strange, and at times more than a little disconcerting, to see administrative perspectives regarding online education change in the course of the last year and a half. Whereas prior to the pandemic, many administrators saw a financial incentive to moving education online (saving on the cost of the classroom space, for example), the pandemic taught them that the financial cost of online education is, in fact, much more than they had ever imagined. What’s more, many students realized (or maybe they knew all along) how irreplaceable they find all the aspects of learning afforded by the in-person experience—whether it is the chance to ask the professor a question informally after class; the conversations with other students as they walk out; or the ability to convey more effectively and in real time that they are, or are not, following the lecturer’s or another student’s point. At the same time, it has to be acknowledged that others appreciate what they experience as the welcome flexibility of a Zoom meeting or class, which one can attend from almost anywhere with a good WiFi connection. My own university has invested in a terrifying “owl” technology that allows one to teach some students in a purpose-built classroom while others attend virtually; its

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eyes follow and, for the remote students, projects the image of whoever in the classroom is speaking, as long as their voice is low enough for the owl to pick up. I say “terrifying” as someone who is good at monotasking and who has experienced the pitfalls, frustrations, and disturbances of being required to use this technology. What does all this historical, social, and technological shift mean for the future of academic life, and what does Romanticism have to offer to the conversation of how and where we learn?

5. Answering that question is certainly beyond the scope of what I could accomplish with or without the space to do so. Personally, while I love my laptop, I am deeply partial to the in-person learning experience and, furthermore, to the experience of holding and reading and marking up bound books rather than accessing literature online. I prefer bound books for the way they focus the mind, and I like to have them with me in the classroom when and where I am teaching. Every element of that experience feels important. Along these lines, Christina Lupton has recently proposed: “[Caroline] Spurgeon’s 1914 emphasis on the necessity of approaching the text as if it were ‘the only thing that matters’ is a timely reminder that texts on screen rarely solicit our undivided attention. One thing that 2020 has taught us is how inefficient a screen is at securing the kind of investment that is supported by putting a body in a particular setting for a particular purpose” (n. pag.). The reading technologies available to us today still include all those available to Romantic-period writers (we have not left behind the book or the magazine), but the formats in which we can read—our choices—have multiplied over time. My own current work in Romantic studies focuses on the poetics and materiality of the bound book in the context of the Romantic media environment, which I revisit as a place where the bound book figured as

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a technology of freedom. What draws me to this research no doubt is my own experience of bound books as affording a distinctive kind of emancipation from certain kinds of impoverishing distractions (the desires of others, for instance). Reading paperbacks and hardbacks centers me, and it makes the bound book very much worth holding onto in a world of proliferating reading technologies. Perhaps the future of the field can be drawn from our taking note, with the subtlety of a snail horn perception, both of how the pandemic has reoriented us in relation to our experiences as readers, as teachers, and as bodies in the world and of how Romanticism has helped us to make sense of those experiences. Perhaps, too, it can be a resource for posing other urgent questions about our post-pandemic futures.

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¹ Forthcoming work from John Havard will further enliven this critical conversation.