

Buchbesprechungen

Brian Tucker (Wabash)

Paul Hamilton: *Metaromanticism. Aesthetics, Literature, Theory*.
Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2003. Pb., 328 S.,
\$ 25.00. ISBN 0-226-31480-4

In *Metaromanticism*, Paul Hamilton aims to set forth a new romanticism. He seeks to find within romanticism an alternative to the self-sufficient ideology of internalization and compensatory idealization for which it has often been criticized. Hamilton's romanticism is primarily British romanticism, but his work will be of interest readers of these pages because his approach to British romantic writers is firmly grounded in German romantic theory and German philosophy. He looks often to Kant, Schlegel, and Benjamin, and he draws much of his theoretical perspective from a Habermasian model of negotiation and dialogue. But his book will interest readers more generally for its rethinking of romanticism in the wake of the ideology critiques launched by deconstruction and new historicism. That is, if romantic ideology requires critique, from where must it come? From someplace outside romanticism, from an historical differential, or from a function within romanticism itself?

The first question to address is what Hamilton means by metaromanticism. The term, as Hamilton uses it, should not suggest a distance from romanticism, a language outside of romantic writing, nor a pretension to external objectivity. He means, rather – as the prefix might also suggest – a form of romantic writing that reflects on its underlying principles and ulterior questions. As he puts it, romantic writing „is often simultaneously a position paper on its own kind of significance" (1). In metaromantic moments, texts critique themselves and dramatize their dissatisfaction with the entrapment in which they find themselves. They resist the autonomy and self-sufficiency of their aesthetic.

The contours of this new romanticism emerge through contrasts, as Hamilton juxtaposes instances of bad romantic writing with metaromantic texts. He frames these alternatives in the first two chapters, which treat Schiller and Rousseau, respectively. It is perhaps not surprising that Schiller is given the dubious honor of embodying bad romanticism. Hamilton focuses on Schiller's aesthetics: ideas can be fully expressed in aesthetic experience before they can be practically realized in life. The aesthetic is supposed to be a way station on the road to a better life; it should give way to the life it inspires. The danger, however, is that the aesthetic becomes an end in itself, that it actually defers the better life for the sake of imagining it. According to this recuperative logic, every real-life failure becomes a victory for the aes-

thetic. Art's reflexivity and autonomy impede revolutionary ideas and remove them from any real chain of events.

This kind of romanticism is ideological because it creates a self-confirming system that precludes critique. Wordsworth and his use of symbolism provide a second example. Through a reading of *The Prelude*, Hamilton shows that the romantic discourse cannot fail because it can recuperate every loss as an eventual gain. He writes, „There are no epistemological defeats that cannot be translated into ironic successes; the collapse of representation becomes its effective supplement when it is reread as the *symbol* of what exceeds representation” (202). When the sublime overwhelms understanding, for example, such romanticism can reinterpret understanding's failure as the successful symbolic representation of something beyond the limits of understanding. Failure stops being failure; it becomes instead a new kind of success.

Hamilton argues at the same time that not all romanticism is satisfied with being confined to this defensive and totalizing ideological structure. Metaromanticism names an alternative to the ideology implied by Schiller's aesthetics and Wordsworth's symbols, and we find it in authors like Rousseau and Schlegel. Hamilton reads Rousseau as preoccupied with self-interpretation in that he tried to anticipate how posterity – his children – would receive and distort him. On this view, one finds in Rousseau a kind of writing that intentionally subverts itself, even damages itself, and surrenders its authority to later readers. It is sometimes difficult to pinpoint exactly how this self-subversion takes place. Hamilton moves quickly in the theoretical chapters and does not always work closely with his texts. The result is that some of the metaromantic operations he identifies – such as „dramatizing discontent” – are left ambiguous. But he clearly finds in Rousseau something akin to Friedrich Schlegel's notion of irony – a writing that undercuts its own position of privilege and authority, shifting it to another reader and another discourse.

In the book's middle section, Hamilton focuses his readings on a series of literary texts. He finds metaromanticism at work in various places, in Keats, for instance, whose poetry „critically undermines what its aesthetic ideology obliges it to say” (91), and in Shelley, whose *The Triumph of Life* demonstrates its discontent with ideological constraints. Hamilton's readings attempt to redefine immanent critique – not as the imprisonment of criticism within a particular discourse but rather as „the transfer of authority from one discourse to another” (195). Basically, he concedes that romanticism evinces a conservative ideological tendency – look at idealism, look at Schiller – and that this ideology has been „rightly attacked by a succession of thinkers, from Heine and Marx to contemporary new historicists” (214). Hamilton's point, though, is that there is also an alternative to this ideology *within* romanticism – metaromanticism, which sets critique in motion and creates a space for future reformulations.

When Hamilton takes up the possibility (or impossibility) of critiquing romantic ideology, when he refers to Heine, Marx, and contemporary new historicists, a clear reference point in the background is Jerome McGann, one

of the leading figures in shifting new historicist attention from renaissance studies to romanticism. McGann's *The Romantic Ideology* (1983) located a danger in romanticism. It saw romanticism as something to which contemporary criticism could fall prey – at least one could fall prey to the illusion that the romantic past established the boundaries of current critical practice. For this reason, romanticism requires an oppositional historicism. One of McGann's key models is Heine's reading of Uhland in *Die romantische Schule*, a reading attuned to the historical distance separating 1833 from 1813 (see McGann's chapter 5). For McGann, this 20-year gap and this outside agency are necessary preconditions to counteract the effects of Uhland's romantic ideology. But another position would be to argue that the subversion already occurs in the text itself. Schlegel would call it romantic irony, or to use Murray Krieger's words, it is the „verbal workings“ that undo the tendency toward totalization. Though Hamilton does not directly engage McGann's work on this particular topic, the reading of Heine and Uhland helps illustrate the possibility he sees in metaromanticism: he wants to fold the force of Heine's critical reading into romanticism itself; he wants to find an historicizing, self-distancing ideology critique within romantic discourse. From Hamilton's perspective, critique need not begin only from a later, outside position because even an immanent critique can express dissatisfaction with its immanence. Hamilton thus complicates McGann's understanding of romantic ideology and the agency of its critique. Even if romanticism looks like a totalizing discourse that leaves no place outside ideology from which it can be critiqued, the possibility always remains that it can undermine its own authority from within. The minimum threshold of that critique, for Hamilton, is that romantic texts express – or better, dramatize – a discontent with their imprisonment in immanence and thereby prepare a way for future critique.

In the final section, „Theory,“ Hamilton turns more explicitly to issues of contemporary criticism, to the „afterlife of romantic theory which we inhabit“ (193), and to the intersection of aesthetics and politics. Here Habermas comes to the fore through his notion of the „stand-in“ or *Platzhalter*. In *Moralbewußtsein und kommunikatives Handeln*, Habermas uses the term to suggest a more modest role for philosophy: it should serve as a *Platzhalter* rather than a *Platzanweiser*. It should act as a mediator or translator among the isolated cultures of science, morals, and art. For Hamilton, the „stand-in“ presents an alternative to Schiller's aesthetics of infinite deferral. In contrast, the „stand-in“ is a communicative function that is pragmatic and productive. Rather than prefigure a deferred future ideal, it serves the present needs of compromise and negotiation. Hamilton connects Habermas in this regard to Schlegel's notions of irony and permanent parabasis. Using Lyceums-Fragment Nr. 65, „Die Poesie ist eine republikanische Rede [...]“ (misattributed as an Athenäums-Fragment), Hamilton finds in Schlegel a model for progressive, emancipatory politics based on literary self-reflection and self-criticism.

It is an ambitious and interesting project to develop a political model through Habermas and to link it to a metaromantic practice for which Schlegel provides theoretical support. As many readers have noted, Schlegel

exemplifies a writing that cedes authority, refuses to close itself, and thinks itself, from the outset, as fragmentary and self-distancing. At the same time, however, bringing together „Schegelian republicanism” (265) and Habermas’s theory of communicative action requires one to overlook much of Schlegel’s skepticism about the efficacy of dialogue and communication. Schlegel sounds like less of a pragmatic optimist when he writes lines such as the oft-quoted, „Das Höchste kann man eben weil es unaussprechlich ist, nur allegorisch sagen” (KA 2, 324). In another example, Hamilton writes that „Schlegel has no time for Kant’s careful sequestration of the aesthetic in a realm of its own” (262). But perhaps Schlegel is not in such a hurry. In *Lyceums-Fragment* Nr. 117, which claims famously that „Poesie kann nur durch Poesie kritisiert werden”, he speaks directly of the „Reiche der Kunst” (KA 2, 162). Hamilton chooses fragments that support his take on Schlegel and omits others that suggest a more nuanced or even conflicted view – those, for instance, that highlight Schlegel’s fondness for obscurity and exclusivity. This criticism might be unfair, given that the book is not really about Schlegel and does not seek to give a comprehensive account of his thought. But the point is this: Schlegel becomes a necessary instrument in the argument when he connects metaromantic writing to a more generalizable political and communicative project. To fit Schlegel into this role, Hamilton smooths out some of the rough edges and inherent self-contradictions in Schlegel’s writings. I suspect that many specialists in early German romanticism would not recognize this Schlegel at first sight and would want to complicate the presentation of him offered in this book.

Metaromanticism received the International Conference on Romanticism’s 2003 Jean-Pierre Barricelli prize for the year’s outstanding book. It is indeed a remarkable work that deserves praise for its wide-ranging argument, comparatist approach, and insightful readings. It brings together romantic texts, politics, and metacritical issues in a productive and mutually illuminating dialogue. Anyone interested in the scholarship and theory of romanticism (especially British romantic literature) after deconstruction and new historicism will profit from reading it. Since the linkage of German theory and British texts tends to generate more penetrating insights on the British side, Germanists will probably turn to this book less for its readings of particular authors than for its broad claims about the relationship of romantic thought to current critical, ideological, and sociopolitical debates.