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Review of The Romantic Performative: Language and Action in British and German Romanticism

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Angela Esterhammer, *The Romantic Performative: Language and Action in British and German Romanticism*. Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2001.
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As its title portends, Angela Esterhammer's *The Romantic Performative* represents yet another attempt to dislodge romanticism, or more precisely romantic discourse, from a phenomenological or largely privative solipsism by emphasizing the dialogic, interactive, or again performative, aspects of romantic utterance in poetry, fiction and theory of the period. In some sense, then, the study may be seen as an archaeology of the well-known philosophical debate between J. L. Austin and John Searle over the validity of distinguishing between constative speech acts, whose function is referential and subject only to judgments regarding their veracity, and performative acts, whose purpose is to achieve some end or effect in which only the result—or the “felicity”—of such acts ultimately matters. Austin, of course, famously concluded that there was no way to distinguish finally between constative and performative speech acts, prompting Searle to a rather dogged insistence on the validity of such distinctions by demarcating what we mean by intentionality. But it is Austen's bogey, with its implicit view that all acts of language are primarily interactive and a matter of pragmatics in always exposing the relation of signs to their users or interpreters that grounds both Esterhammer's recovery and its implications for romantic writing generally.

The question that immediately comes to mind is why is this necessary? While it is easy certainly to admire both the rigor and reach of Esterhammer's historiography, which takes us with admirable lucidity and command from Paine to Kant to Herder, Fichte, Bernhardt, Schelling and finally to Humboldt in whom the “romantic performative” finds its most concerted exponent, almost no one today would necessarily disagree with the overarching thesis that Esterhammer seems to feel needs buttressing: namely, that the Romantics are concerned with speech acts not only as phenomenological interactions but also as socio-political interactions between individuals and institutions. Indeed, it is not until the very end, in her absolutely superlative reading of Godwin, whose worries over performativity are insufficient to prevent its reenactment in his own writing, that the archaeology of the speech-act theory controversy in our time finds its true precedent, shedding new light on one of the more enigmatic thinkers and writers of the period. This may also be the case with the treatments here of Kleist and Holderlin—writers with whom I'm insufficiently familiar to be able to comment on with any authority. To Esterhammer, Holderlin's language “persistently reaches out to at least one dialogic partner—until the very reiteration of his address to the Other underscores the fact that there is *only* address” (239)—whereas Kleist shows “that the utterances even of supremely authoritative speakers are subject to the context in which they occur, and hence subject to people and events that exert control over context” (287). What is also clear, then, is that the “romantic performative,” far from being something that assaults or contests our received sense of romanticism, is more a dimension of romantic discourse that even the most subjective or idealistic paradigms do not necessarily rule out of bounds. It is the case in fact that the romantic performative, like romantic theatricality, is more properly a repressed *within* romantic writing: a predicament (so to speak) sufficiently perennial and inevitable that the performative (and the linguistic pragmatics to which it answers) is arguably the base on which the superstructure of romantic subjectivity is erected, no matter

how precariously. It this precariousness, along with its origins, that Esterhammer manages to bring into full view.

Beginning in Britain with writers and theorists such as Thomas Reid (a philosopher in the Scottish “common sense” school), Jeremy Bentham and Thomas Paine, Esterhammer shows that for these writers the performative was seen primarily in sociopolitical terms or as what Bentham, to emphasize what he saw as the largely representational work of language, called “fictions.” “Convinced that pleasure and pain are the only realities” available to constative expression, Bentham lists among his so-called “fictions” a range of performatives that are plainly social in nature: “obligation . . . , right, liberty, power, property, command, duty, prohibition, exemption, privilege, license, and judgment” (47). In a similar vein, Esterhammer distinguishes between Paine and Burke in their respective views of a nation’s constitution. “The language of Burke’s constitution,” she writes, “is descriptive or constative, referring to a state of affairs in the world, while the language of Paine’s constitution is performative, since it does not refer, but instead brings a new state of affairs into existence” (52). Where for Burke the contract between man and God on which society is based is collective and stable, binding humans to each other and to the cosmos in a compact that is fundamentally hierarchical, such a contract in Paine is between God and the individual, where “each man” is granted “equality with others” (66) that a constitution must as such honor or adapt to.

Proceeding from here to Germany and to figures such as Kant, Herder, Fichte, Bernhardt, Schelling and finally to Humboldt, the theoretical center of this investigation, Esterhammer reveals that despite the idealistic or phenomenological drift of German romanticism, the emphasis on *Darstellung* (or representation) makes language a necessary bridge between cognition and communication, leading in Bernhardt, for example, to a recognition of the interdependence of *Darstellung* and *Vorstellung* (idea). For Bernhardt the “apprehension of the object as it is appears in a performative moment” (92)—so that by effectively representing the object to itself, the subject is engaged simultaneously in what amounts to an authentication of being in general. In Humboldt, correspondingly, mental activity takes place in and as language, making a language or the production of the word a jointure, in effect, of subjectivity and the world’s materiality. Thus, as Esterhammer observes somewhat later in her demonstration, the “romantic tendency,” culminating in Humboldt, “to conflate the cognitive and the communicative dimensions of language” (136) makes the romantic performative, with its “simultaneously objective and subjective I” (133), the bedrock of a romanticism that is necessarily continuous with pragmatic linguistics.

The remainder of Esterhammer’s study is given over to four case-studies in romantic performativity: Holderlin, Kleist, Coleridge and Godwin. As I indicated earlier, I will be addressing only the treatments of the writers in English, both of which are quite illuminating. Focusing on the social or interactive aspects Coleridge’s notion of “outness,” Esterhammer explains that “language brings about an outness,” in Coleridge’s conception, without which we could not participate in one another’s worlds” (163). This interactive dimension bears on intersubjectivity but also on what amounts to an intrasubjectivity. Although Coleridge recognizes that words have an autonomy of their own that frequently overrides or complicates a given speaker’s intention, it is the case too (as it is for Humboldt) that “words, once uttered, react back on the speaker’s mind and enter a dialogic relationship with it” (164). With this mind,

Esterhammer is able to show how Coleridge's "Hymn before Sun-rise, in the Vale of Chamouni," regarded by De Quincey and others as a virtual plagiarism of Frederike Brun's earlier "*Camounix beyrn Sonnenaufrauge*," differs from its precedent in a particularly significant way. Where in Brun's poem the "landscape respond[s] to the human subject of its own accord," it remains, in Coleridge's text, a mere "echo of what the poet's 'busier mind' and 'active will' bestows" (172). A similar dynamic obtains in Coleridge's famous "conversation" poem "Frost at Midnight." Here, Esterhammer shows, the humanistic appropriation of divine afflatus, where "I am" and "It is" are ultimately synonymous, is given an extended demonstration in the fluttering shape that the speaker fashions from the sooty film emanating from the fireplace in his cottage: "By becoming both subject and object—becoming a "*stranger*"—the fluttering ash allows the poet to engage in reflective thought, to find an "echo or mirror" of his own spirit" (181).

Finally, in the treatment here of William Godwin—a notorious opponent of linguistic performativity and an advocate concomitantly of "a language dedicated to truth, sincerity, and correspondence with experienced reality" (291)—Esterhammer brilliantly traces Godwin's reluctant, if necessary, subscription to linguistic pragmatics. In a splendid reading of *Caleb Williams*, in the company of a number of Godwin's other fictions, she demonstrates that despite its advertisement as a constative text devoted to the depiction of "things as they are," "Godwin's fiction undermines his philosophical dedication to constative language by portraying the performative as inescapable" (297). By the end of the novel, by which point Caleb has entered fully into the print culture given over to various fictions (and their intended aims) regarding his guilt or innocence, "socio-political performatives have actually grafted themselves onto anything that could be called truth or sincerity" (306). Indeed, sociopolitical performatives become so "interwoven with identity and moral behavior" (307), that Godwin—despite his commitment to sincere communication uninflected by motives or intentions—effectively concedes a "public, even performative dimension to knowledge itself" (308).

While much of *The Romantic Performative* will be of interest to students of romantic-period theory and philosophy, most especially in Germany, the archaeology of the speech-act controversy that Esterhammer undertakes seems at least as much an advertisement for Esterhammer herself in showing the knowledge she has amassed and assimilated so as to ground her interpretive maneuvers. All of this is impressively done, of course, but it is sometimes repetitive and occasionally makes for slow going. By contrast, the interpretations here, including those of the writers with whom I'm only somewhat familiar, are fresh and exciting. None of this, however, can possibly prepare for the treatment here of Godwin, which ranks among the very best—if not the best—assessment of his achievement, particularly in *Caleb Williams*, that I have encountered. For this reason alone *The Romantic Performative* should be on every Romanticist's and on every late-eighteenth-century scholar's reading list.