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Introduction

Romantic Redirections: New Arenas in Romantic Studies in Italy

Diego Saglia, Michael Gamer

The importance of Romanticism is that it is the largest recent movement to transform the lives and the thought of the Western world [...] There is the Industrial Revolution, there is the great French political revolution under classical auspices, and there is the Romantic revolution.

(Berlin 1999: 1, 7)

Opening his 1965 Mellon Lectures, Isaiah Berlin's remarks celebrate the pivotal role of Romanticism in the recent cultural and historical development of the Western world. The tone is definitive: there is no room for doubt. That Romanticism is a recent fact is stated with similar decisiveness, as if to reassure and motivate those who study the history and legacy of this crucial movement.

At the same time, the pronouncement also carries a sense of burden. Among Romanticism's legacies, Berlin lists some of the most nefarious aspects of twentieth-century history, including ideas foundational to fascism. Fully acknowledging Romanticism's revolutionary power in shaping modernity, he suggests, brings with it added responsibilities for scholars – at the very least, of describing dispassionately both the traditions we value and those we regret.

Berlin's lectures, of course, address their own intricate set of contexts. Delivered in 1965 at the National Gallery in Washington DC, they engaged a public discourse riven by a host of contending critical urges. These ranged from the Modernist resistance to Romanticism (still widespread in the 1960s), to

longstanding debates over the nature of Romanticism (embodied in, yet extending far beyond, the exchanges of René Wellek and A.O. Lovejoy), to the newly canonizing, formalist arguments of M. H. Abrams (which presented Romanticism as an aesthetically and philosophically coherent movement at once responding to, and transcending, the Enlightenment). Attempting to confirm its centrality by laying to rest the question of its importance, Berlin links Romanticism to a host of constitutive revolutions – economic, political and aesthetic – impossible to encompass through a single principle, event, interpretive lens, or tradition. Amidst his claims for Romanticism as a movement, we discover not coherence but rather ideas in transformation, beset by clashing and even partisan notions crossing intellectual fields and national boundaries. And this innate interdisciplinarity is what Romanticists since Berlin – with increasing creativity and intensity – have sought to address at an international level. Starting with the term Romanticism itself, we have explored alternatives to naming an entire period by way of an aesthetic, and a not clearly delineated or circumscribed one at that. Behind its veneer of coherence, we have found a heterogeneous and turbulent period rife with diverging phenomena: global war, opportunistic nationalisms, changing climates, and exploding rates of literacy feeding what the Multigraph Collective has called the Age of Print Saturation (Multigraph 2018).

This issue of *Textus* originates from a desire to assess the current state of British Romantic studies in Italy – a tradition that has long been at the forefront of innovative scholarly and theoretical developments within literary criticism. Italian Romanticists have helped not just to shape the newest historicisms and formalisms, but also to bring adjacent arenas of study – text and media, body and affect, ecology and anthropology, identity and geography – into dialogue with literary studies and with one another. Their arguments, moreover, have been sustained by a frequently comparatist, insistently internationalist, vision. For more than a century, the questions raised by what Berlin calls the ‘importance of Romanticism’ have proven especially pertinent to the Italian scholarly context, both its current twenty-first-century condition and its early twentieth-century roots.

It is a truism, yet one worth rehearsing for the purposes of this issue, that two of the foundational figures of English studies in Italy

– Emilio Cecchi and Mario Praz – dedicated significant attention to Romantic writing. Cecchi’s translation of Percy Bysshe Shelley’s *Defence of Poetry* in 1903 paved the way for his *Storia della letteratura inglese del XIX secolo* (1915). (His study was later republished, in an enlarged and revised version, as *I grandi romantici inglesi* [1961].) Cecchi’s sustained engagement with English Romantic poetry fundamentally shaped his later work as a critic and intellectual. His activities as a translator and commentator reinforced his cultivation of what has been called his *lato abissale* – a commitment to exploring the shadowy margins of aesthetic and philosophical questions and concerns, which contributed to the delineation of his cultural and writerly identity (Cecchi 1981: II, n.p.). Praz – perhaps even more famously – also plumbed aesthetic and psychological depths in *La carne, la morte e il diavolo nella letteratura romantica* (1930). Known in English as *The Romantic Agony* via the Angus Davidson translation of 1933, the study casts the Romantic period as a fundamental turning point in the histories of eroticism, sado-masochism, diabolism and fatal beauty. Firmly intercultural and comparative, its critical outlook is reflected in Praz’s methodology, which painstakingly maps key thematic clusters across two centuries of European writing. That it remains foundational to Italian Romantic studies today is testified by the opening essay of this issue, Paolo Bugliani’s “Romanticism Approximated: Mario Praz’s Idea and Practice of Romantic Studies.”

Bugliani argues for the importance of not just *The Romantic Agony* but also the *Storia della letteratura inglese*, not to mention Praz’s abundant output of related essays and translations (all of which Bugliani usefully lists in an Appendix). It is in the *Storia* that Praz first envisaged Romanticism “as a properly defined and productive area of study”. His lasting contributions to Romantic studies, Bugliani suggests, were crucially related to contemporary debates about the nature and discrimination of Romanticisms, which, like the Romanticism Praz championed, possessed a life far beyond their 1930s milieu. Elements of Praz’s vision and opposition to the Modernists’ anti-Romanticism resonate particularly, in the late 1950s and 1960s, in what Bugliani calls the “Romantic resistance promoted by exponents such as Frank Kermode, Northrop Frye, M. H. Abrams, Walter Jackson Bate, Harold Bloom, and George Hartman, among others”.

As this list of Anglophone scholars and critics intimates, English studies in post-war Italy developed in ways that mirrored theoretical and methodological developments abroad. Studies in Romantic writing mostly focused on the major male poets; principles such as those expounded by Abrams in *The Mirror and the Lamp* (1953) became increasingly influential; genres such as the novel, the essay and drama remained peripheral; and structuralist approaches slowly began to gain traction. As in other national scholarly contexts, the 1970s and 1980s saw the emergence of poststructuralist trends, and especially of materialist and neo-materialist critical theories foregrounding historical context and identity. On such premises, the theoretical impulses of the 1990s and 2000s opened up new avenues of research, which – thanks to a prevailing and crucial shift from ‘Romanticism’ to ‘the Romantic period’ – aimed at recovering marginalized experiences and lost voices.

The new developments from the late 1980s onwards created the conditions for a scholarly field now characterized by productivity, liveliness, and diversity. In 1993 the Dipartimento di Lingue e Letterature Straniere Moderne at the University of Bologna created a Centro per lo Studio del Romanticismo, under the guidance of Lilla Maria Crisafulli, with a marked interdisciplinary and transnational vocation including British, European, and World literatures. (In 2010, it became the Centro Interuniversitario per lo Studio del Romanticismo [CISR])¹. Since its inception, scholars associated with the Centre have re-explored a host of questions fundamental to the period. Their abiding concerns have included neglected media such as theatre and performance; modes of identity and otherness including race, class, gender, and sexuality; the long history of ideas of human and non-human, and of nation, planet, and cosmos; the centrality of print phenomena and popular publishing, particularly Gothic; and periodical writing as central to the Romantic period’s public sphere.

In the area of English-language Romantic-era literature, the Centre has organized conferences (on some occasions in conjunction with AIA and international associations such as BARS and NASSR), promoted publications, and developed a number of national and

¹ See <https://site.unibo.it/cisr/en> (last accessed: November 21, 2022).

international research projects. Launched in 1995, the journal *La Questione Romantica*, currently directed by Lilla Maria Crisafulli and Annalisa Goldoni, showcases the work of scholars of Romanticism from the national and global research communities; in parallel, the catalogue of its publisher, Liguori, features a series entitled “Romanticismo e dintorni”. Another important Romantic-related centre to have emerged within Italian academia is the University of Verona’s CRIER – Centro di Ricerca Interdipartimentale sull’Europa Romantica –, dedicated to comparative approaches also through numerous connections with centres abroad, especially in France². The networks of scholars fostered by such university-based research centres have arisen alongside thriving literary societies like the Jane Austen Society of Italy (JASIT, founded in 2013) and institutions such as the Keats-Shelley House in Rome (formally inaugurated in 1909) and the Museo Byron at Palazzo Guiccioli in Ravenna (scheduled to open in the autumn of 2023, at the time of writing).

This quick roundup reveals Romantic-period studies in Italy as an inexhaustibly fertile nexus of local, national, and international interest. The field is home to a lively conversation covering the full range of scholarly and popular perspectives³. Of equal interest

² See <http://crier.univr.it/> (last accessed: September 10, 2022).

³ The sustained critical and editorial investment by scholars has bolstered, and been bolstered by, popular cultural phenomena like global Austenmania and Regencymania, fuelled by successful adaptations not just of Austen’s fiction but also of novels by Susanna Clarke, Seth Grahame-Smith, P.D. James, and Julia Quinn, to name but a few. Recent years have also seen Romantic bicentenary celebrations in Italy, such as those commemorating Keats’s death in Rome in 1821 and Shelley’s off the Northern coast of Tuscany in 1822. The latter event has proven especially generative, sparking academic, poetic, musical and other events across the country, including: “Imagining Poetry Today: Responses to P.B. Shelley’s Defence of Poetry (1821)” (May 2022, sponsored by the University of Rome Sapienza and the Keats-Shelley House); the city of Lericci’s festival of contemporary poetry in Italian and English and performances of musical pieces inspired by Shelley (June 2022); Viareggio’s hosting of two talks dedicated to Shelley on the significant dates of 6 and 8 July as part of the city’s commemorative celebrations; “Transnational Shelley(s): Metamorphoses and Reconfiguration” (October 2022, held at Frascati and co-organized by the University of Rome Tor Vergata and the University of Pisa); and “Shelley’s Contemporaneities” (October 2022, co-organized by the University of Bologna, the Centro Interuniversitario per lo Studio del Romanticismo (CISR) and the Museo Byron in Ravenna). This thick cluster of events testifies to the degree to which the interests of scholars, the general public, heritage, and local

is its abiding interdisciplinarity, one harking back to Berlin's need to associate Romanticism and the Romantic period not just with literary innovation but also with a range of socio-economic, political, and aesthetic sea changes. Seeing literature and culture as inseparable from context and cross-disciplinary contamination, scholars have explored the mediating, even problem-solving, power of form and genre, tracking how aesthetic innovations can mirror or even shape broader cultural shifts. And within Romantic period writing, they have sought to find earlier versions of debates raging today concerning the boundaries of human and non-human, and body and self; the nature of historicity and temporality, ecosystem and environment; the long histories of movement and displacement, exchange, and imperialism; and the intersections between the material, the numinous, and the transcendental.

The essays gathered in this issue of *Textus* extend and expand on this tradition of local and global critical interests, as well as the attendant modes of cross-disciplinary inquiry. Their different approaches to textual, cultural, and historical manifestations bear out the forms of critical eclecticism instigated by the multifaceted make-up of Romantic-period Britain. They also confirm more generally that 'theory' can be understood both as a reflective and a creative pursuit: at once an examination of fundamental terms within one's discipline, and an act of looking beyond its traditional boundaries to gain fresh perspectives on basic tenets and ways of seeing. Romantic writers (and by extension Romantic studies) have traditionally embraced this speculative and experimental turn, thriving in the face of new perspectival challenges, whether they be the ideological earthquakes of the French revolution or the transformational ways of seeing the world posited by figures such as Humphry Davy, Caroline and William Herschel, James Hutton, David Ricardo, or Mary Wollstonecraft.

Following the essay of Paolo Bugliani, Carlotta Farese's contribution discovers in Jane Austen's writings and biography an acute ambivalence over disability and illness. This tension, she

communities tend to coalesce around Romanticism. The celebrations also show a markedly international bent, connecting themselves with global organizations like the International Association of Byron Societies and the Keats-Shelley Memorial Association.

shows, reaches its climax in Austen's final works just as her own fatal illness began to take hold. In *Persuasion* (1818) and *Sanditon* (1925) especially, Farese finds Austen's characteristic satire and irony taking on a new edge, seeming "to function as [...] an extreme attempt to ridicule her fatal disease and affirm her agency against it". Addressing questions of medical knowledge and practice as well as their relation to ethical principles, her essay provides new interpretive lenses for understanding both Austen and her characters. Looking outside literary studies, she provides a more stratified view of Austen's attitude towards illness and disability, and in the process sets into relief some specific manifestations of the Regency body.

Anna Anselmo also mines a cross-disciplinary cluster, in this case one including literary and cultural studies and political discourse and emphasizing methodological and linguistic issues. Entitled "The Discourse of Lawfulness in Representations of the Peterloo Massacre", her essay takes up the tools of discourse analysis to analyse journalistic commentary on the August 1819 Peterloo Massacre. Seeking to describe the range of ideological responses to that event through the examination of keywords, Anselmo surveys accounts published in *The Times*, *The Morning Chronicle*, *The Courier*, *Sherwin's Political Register*, and *The Examiner* soon after the event. What emerges is a common preoccupation with lawfulness but wielded in radically divergent ways to aid representations of Peterloo as either a government conspiracy or a legitimate act of self-defence. By turns arresting and illuminating, her study testifies to the productive opportunities offered by a methodological fusion of linguistics and cultural-literary studies.

Franca Dellarosa's "Between Stereotype and Sediton: Romantic-Era Geo-Histories of the Italian South on the London Stage" takes up a different sort of fusion – in this case, early nineteenth-century efforts to reimagine Italy's position and identity in post-Waterloo Europe. Dellarosa's primary interpretive lenses are theatre history and reception studies, which she harnesses to explore stage representations of southern Italy as a discrete cultural space that can help us map shifting ideas of European identity. In particular, she concentrates her attention on Felicia Hemans's *The Vespers of Palermo* and a cluster of plays on Masaniello. These dramatic productions, she argues, "provide a picture of the Italian South [...

as a] backward ‘barbarian’ and orientalised ‘debatable land’ [... and] as the repository of subversive imagery that lends itself to [...] a variety of political investments”. Imagined as at once part of Europe and resistant to cultural assimilation, the Italian South becomes for British dramatists of the 1820s and 1830s a site of revolutionary potential and possible violence, encapsulated in the presence of the volcanoes Vesuvius and Etna. In introducing theatre history and reception studies to longstanding conversations about the history of Italian identity, her essay stands at once as a contribution to studies of British Romantic constructions of Italy and an expansion of their scope.

Aligned with current developments in the Environmental Humanities, the last three essays in this special issue – by Elisabetta Marino, Serena Baiesi, and Gioia Angeletti – discover environmental concerns within Romantic-period discourses of travel, disease, and displacement. Each presents a sustained engagement with early nineteenth-century texts that imagine the environment as comprised of human and non-human elements. Marino’s essay on Selina Martin’s *Narrative of a Three Years’ Residence in Italy*, for example, focuses on Martin’s attempt to correct celebratory representations of Italy’s countryside, culture, and inhabitants. Especially fascinating is her analysis of Martin’s use of popular genre, that is, her willingness to deploy the stereotypes of Gothic fiction and drama as textual vehicles for lived experience. Seeking to reverse the positive reputation of its countryside, culture, and inhabitants, Martin presents Italy as a toxic and debilitating environment, painstakingly describing to her “fellow nationals [...] the numerous dangers they would be exposed to”, both in body and in soul. In this traveller’s critical account, environmental questions emerge through a focus on Italian geography, weather, and landscape, a nexus that is presented as a constitutive force and an expression of Italian decadence.

In her contribution, Serena Baiesi finds in the travel writing of Leigh Hunt some of Romanticism’s most suggestive environmental engagements. Hunt’s fondness for writing about place is well known; Baiesi’s critical innovation arises from her shrewd juxtaposition of country and city through Hunt’s accounts of life in Tuscany and in London. Examining his explorations of the interconnections between urban and rural spaces, she traces his interweaving of direct perception of the environment with its literary inscriptions.

Both approaches contribute to directing his ‘green footsteps’, a resonant phrase Baiesi borrows from Hunt himself. As she follows the variations and transformations of the author’s experience between England and Italy, and his expanding conception of the interrelation between the human and non-human, Baiesi outlines how Hunt opened up “new insights into processes of personal and collective growth”.

Concentrating on Lady Morgan’s travel-book *Italy* (1821), Angeletti’s essay closes this issue by also engaging disciplines outside literary studies to consider the history of ideas of the human and the non-human. But here the picture is even more multifaceted, reminiscent of Morgan’s own synthesizing and cosmopolitan intellect. In *Italy* Morgan presents the Italian landscape and its inhabitants as mutually constitutive; in each dimension she consistently finds the shaping forces of the other. “Italian geography is everywhere enmeshed with its multi-layered cultural and political context”, Angeletti notes – so much so that considerations of environment and place become essential “vehicles for [Morgan’s] socio-political critique, which distinguishes Italy from other Romantic-period women’s travel books on the Bel Paese”. Angeletti delves into this complexity to set into relief how Morgan depicts Italy as made up of inextricably entwined human and other-than-human components. Combining ecocritical and geo-critical methodologies, her analysis suggests that Romantic-period representations of Italy – in their combinations of *topos*, geography, and environment – offer important arenas for pursuing a “green Romanticism”.

Even if this issue cannot include all the lines of investigation currently active in Italian Romantic studies, our hope is that this selection of essays will provide a sense of its richness and possible futures – of work recently published and studies still to be conceived. The interdisciplinary bent of the essays suggests possible directions for further work. They do so, moreover, not just through their choice of subject, but also through their desire to organize knowledge in ways not always reflected in the structures of university departments and programmes. There is also, we believe, some of the Romantic period’s own spirit of synthesis, experimentation, and play: its willingness to combine lyric and other poetic modes, the narrative and the performative, nature and philosophy, politics and language, human and geological time, and so on. Considering

Berlin's question of the importance of Romanticism here, we find the period's relevance most urgently in its irrepressible fecundity: in the sheer diversity of its writings, in the constant critical rethinking, translation, adaptation, and remediation of these writings, and in the enduring popular appeal of its figures, myths, and legacies.

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