ALEXANDER REGIER
FRACTURE AND FRAGMENTATION IN BRITISH ROMANTICISM
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Reviewed by Andrew J. Bennett

“Fragmentation is central to us,” Alexander Regier comments, and “fragmentation is central to Romanticism” (3). In this wide-ranging and critically astute study Regier proposes (in a slightly more nuanced formulation) that focusing on fragmentation in Romantic writing allows us to understand “some unique qualities” in Romanticism that have in turn “help[ed] to shape our current way of thinking, especially about aesthetics” (2). As Regier concedes, he wants to assert both that “we are still within Romanticism” and that “there are far worse places to be” (9). For Regier, therefore, fragmentation not only resists (self-evidently, one might say) totalization but also, and perhaps more troublingly for literary critics, “invades the form of inquiry” to which it is subject (5). There is a certain intensity and something of melancholy (Regier’s own term) in the self-reflexivity of this position, which always risks and sometimes skirts around or even touches upon an almost solipsistic involution of critical thinking: “there is no historical progress,” Regier declares, that would allow us a critical and analytical detachment from the object of our study, from Romanticism – which means that our own investigation into that cultural phenomenon is itself fractured, limited, bound for and bound up in failure (17). Recognition of this predicament does not necessarily entail abandoning the enquiry, Regier argues, but it does require critics to acknowledge the inescapable limitations of their own work. At the same time, Regier’s study is highly ambitious, using the categories of “fracture” and “fragmentation” to include far more than is denoted by their better known relatives, the fragment and fragment poem. Carefully distinguishing between his two key terms, which denote what he calls the “broken origins” of Romanticism (13), Regier argues that while fracture is structural, “a break that acts as an unbridgeable division between two spheres,” fragmentation is temporal, a process that involves “the unfolding of a break that happens either once or over and over again” (7).

This book is a comparative study in a number of ways. In the first place, it seeks to explore the “overlap” between literary and philosophical discourses, suggesting that rather than being opposed they may be said to “illuminate one another” in certain branches of “philology” (8-9). But the book is also comparative in national and linguistic terms: while highlighting British Romanticism (on Wordsworth, Keats and De Quincey in particular) it
also treats the influence of continental (particularly German-language) developments in literary and philosophical thinking, and juxtaposes writing from the Romantic period with twentieth-century literary theory and philosophy. Both methodologically rigorous and critically self-conscious, Regier joins what he calls a recent “return” amongst critics to “the question of what Romanticism might be” while resisting what he terms the “stifling” opposition of formalism to historicism (21). In making his argument, Regier knows full well that his new study also joins a long list of influential books on the genre of the fragment by Thomas McFarland, Marjorie Levinson, Anne Janowitz, Sophie Thomas and others in the Anglo-American tradition and by theorists such as Jean-Luc Nancy, Philippe Lacoue-Labarthe and Maurice Blanchot on the continent. While recognizing the work of these scholars, he carefully discriminates his approach from theirs. In a series of case studies – on language, on anthropomorphism, on the 1755 Lisbon earthquake and the sublime, on parenthesis in Wordsworth, on Keats’s letters, on citationality in De Quincey, and on the Romantic philology of Paul de Man – Regier repeatedly returns to his major insight, the idea that Romantic writers more or less explicitly articulate “fantasies of wholeness that turn out to be broken in their origin or hide a fracture at their centre” (25).

Chapters One and Two define the relationship between the human and the non-human as fundamentally “fractured” particularly with respect to, or as a result of, language and rhetoric. Chapter One looks at poetic tropes that invoke the idea of nature speaking (or not speaking) in Wordsworth’s The Ruined Cottage, Book Five of The Prelude, and—from the Lyrical Ballads of 1800— “’Tis said, that some have died for love.” Regier examines these specimens through the lens of Walter Benjamin’s distinctly idiosyncratic “quasi-theological” essay “On Language as Such and on the Language of Man” from 1916 (30). Applying the idea of Babel as Benjamin elucidates it, Regier tries to theorize language, and Romanticism’s engagement with the question of language. For Regier, Wordsworth’s Ruined Cottage “mirrors” Benjamin’s essay because both find poetic language exhibiting “a linguistic predicament, namely its fragmentariness” and because this in itself “defines how the human subject situates itself in the world” (30-31). The overall purpose of the chapter is to show that Wordsworth’s poetry radiates a sense of a literal fall, from actual, viable communion or communication with a literally speaking nature to a condition of division or fracture, a post-Babelian state in which humanity and nature can no longer communicate. By reading Wordsworth through early Benjamin, Regier argues, we can properly respond to the “fractured” reciprocity of the human, nature, and language in Wordsworth’s poetry.
At times, however, Regier’s reading of Wordsworth seems uncharacteristically forced. When the Pedlar seems to say at one point (lines 73-79) that nature is called to mourn by the poets, Regier contends that “Nature in its entirety is said to mourn with the poet” (33-4). Regier also construes “‘Tis said, that some have died for love” as a poem about a man who is “about to commit suicide” (50-51), rather than about one who mourns the loss of a lover but gives no indication of an intention to kill himself. Readings such as these suggest that there may be a greater distance or fracture between Wordsworth’s poetry and Benjamin’s philosophical musings than Regier is prepared to allow.

Chapter Two focuses, rather more successfully, I think, on what Regier calls the “problem of anthropomorphism” – “one of the most ancient” problems in philosophy (58), he contends, and one that leads to what he calls “a complex of questions” around “a fracture between the human and the natural” (57). Ranging over eighteenth-century debates between Herder and Hamann, Hugh Blair, James Beattie, Lord Kames, and James Harris, Regier argues that eighteenth-century discourse locates anthropomorphism at “the very origin of human language” (64) and that the “fracturing power” of the figure “forever marks the rift between man and nature” (72). According to Regier, debates in eighteenth-century linguistic and rhetorical theory present the figure of anthropomorphism as originary, thus exposing the distance between the human and non-human precisely on account of the rhetoricity of the figure (as opposed to its literalness or propositionality or referentiality). The linguistically and rhetorically fundamental or grounding act of ascribing human characteristics to the non-human introduces fracture (the fracturing of the human and the non-human worlds) at and as the origin of language itself. In a compelling and often enlightening analysis of “the longing rhetorics of anthropomorphism” that characterize late eighteenth-century debates (74), Regier presents a cogent case for considering the impact on Romantic poetry and poetics of the paradox that the figure of anthropomorphism appears to allow for an overcoming of the divide between the human and nature while at the same time insisting, just in its grounding rhetoricity, on its impossibility.

Chapter Three presents another inventive and resourceful analysis, this time of the far-reaching influence on rhetoric and aesthetics (or on the rhetoric of aesthetics) of the “European catastrophe” (78) of the Lisbon earthquake of 1755. For Regier, the earthquake acts both as inspiration and as a kind of objective correlative for the developing discourse of the sublime, which, he suggests, is thereby founded in the rhetoric of fracturing and fragmentation. Beginning with contemporary reports of the earthquake, Regier examines ways in which such rhetoric infuses accounts of the sublime in Burke and Kant: ultimately
relying on “the destructive power of fragmentation” epitomised in the destruction of Lisbon, these presentations of the sublime in turn threaten to “shatter” the “progressive” rational and secular project in which the two thinkers are engaged (77). For Regier, Burke’s *Philosophical Enquiry* can be read as a “rationalisation of the disaster” of the Lisbon earthquake within a “psychology of aesthetic pleasure.” In Burke’s analysis, fragmentation becomes “the *sine qua non* for the aesthetic pleasure achieved through the domesticating effect of the sublime” (86) – a “domesticating effect” achieved through the distancing mechanism by which the sublime is framed as an aspect of the aesthetic. In Kant’s third *Critique*, in turn, Regier argues, the “rationalised sublime” is dependent on a more radical “shattering” that “does not allow representation”; the Kantian “secular sublime” is ultimately, and paradoxically, founded on “a disruptive and breaking quality” that is nevertheless rhetorically and conceptually indebted to the 1755 catastrophe (94).

Chapter Four turns back to Wordsworth in order to examine the effects of parenthesis (specifically round brackets or lunulae) in *The Prelude*. For Regier, the parenthesis is both a grammatical mark and a rhetorical figure, one that “produces a hiatus and a fracture in thought and language” (95), because it may be said to “break the thought and flow” of language “in instructive ways” (96). Parenthesis is a promising topic in Wordsworth, and Regier produces some perceptive and provocative readings of a number of passages from *The Prelude*. The difficulty in talking about parenthesis, however, is that it is often unclear whether the rhetorical effects and conceptual breaks on which Regier focuses can be said to spring from the figure of parenthesis itself. When Regier remarks on a parenthesis in the “infant Babe” passage from Book Two – “(for with my best conjecture I would trace / The progress of our being)” – that this produces a “rupture” in an otherwise apparently “harmonising” memory, the identification of the lunulae themselves as the cause of the rupture seems to overstate the case since, as Regier himself correctly notes, the remark is itself *thematising* a fracturing of memory. In a not dissimilar way, when Regier asserts that the inclusion of parentheses in autobiographical narratives indicates that such stories “must be fractured linguistically” (100), he overlooks the fact that *The Prelude* is characterised by temporal and narrative “ruptures” that are by no means necessarily or exclusively a function of the grammatical parentheses that are said to “haunt” the poem (118).

Chapter Five examines the self-consciously literary qualities of Keats’s letters. In an instructive reading, Regier argues that Keats’s letter-writing involves “a fragmentary principle around which his posthumous corpus is constructed” (119). The dialogical nature of letter-writing, Regier suggests, opens an “unbridgeable gap” between writer and addressee
just as (or indeed just because) it attempts rhetorically to close or elide the distance that it presupposes (125). Responding to and developing recent critical discussions of the textual-corporeal afterlife of John Keats, Regier notes the startling fact that Keats asked for an unread letter from Fanny Brawne and an unopened one from his sister to be buried with him in the grave. The subsequent construction of an almost mythical Keatsian corpus and the persistence of that myth to the present day ultimately depend, writes Regier, on a sense of the “linguistic fragments” that may be said to constitute his correspondence (136). It is the “brokenness and failure” of Keats’s letters as well as the poems themselves, Regier concludes, that “ensure” the survival of his work (140).

Chapter 6 examines De Quincey’s trouble with influence, citation, and plagiarism in his various memoirs, focusing in particular on writings about, and borrowings from, his erstwhile hero, William Wordsworth. According to Regier, De Quincey produces and articulates a singular version of Romanticism, but one which coincides with others in its reliance on “broken structures” (142). Like the figure of anthropomorphism, the use of parenthesis, letter-writing, and other figures, tropes and generic forms, citation involves fragmentation (since a citation is, by definition, a piece broken off from a “whole”): it produces what Regier calls, in a characteristically incisive locution, “splintered truths” (156). Regier figures De Quincey as an early and particularly anxious “archivist” of Romanticism, one for whom the activity of archiving involves a paradoxical fracturing of the whole on which it draws and which it in part thereby preserves.

The final chapter of Regier’s book addresses the work of Paul de Man as an instance of Romantic discourse in its engagement with or articulation of “the broken relationship between human subject and language forms” (169). The chapter focuses in particular on de Man’s reading of Benjamin’s “The Task of the Translator” in The Resistance to Theory. Regier’s main point, and the reason for the chapter, is that de Man’s recognition of the originary “fracture” between the human and language is bound up in any definition of Romanticism, and is therefore integral to our own relation to that movement (185-6). De Man’s work, in other words, allows us to acknowledge the ways in which our own readings of Romanticism engage not only the fractured nature of that discourse but also the fractured nature of our own relation to it. This, for Regier, “involves recognising the contemporary nature of Romanticism, and the Romantic nature of the present”, even if, as he comments in a characteristically sharp turn in thought, our acknowledgement that we are “immersed in Romanticism” does not mean that “we know what that exactly means” (186).
This is a valuable study with much to offer on the problem of language in Romantic discourse, on the question of Romanticism more generally, and on our relationship to it. The book presents an incisive and resourceful intervention in current critical debates around Romantic culture, and Regier’s consistently sophisticated and often illuminating readings repay careful attention as well as detailed critical engagement. There are local moments of interpretative fracturing or fragmentation, and even arguably at times a kind of failure of reading that is not quite what is envisaged, I think, in Regier’s own ruminations on the limitations of contemporary Romantic studies. But the book constitutes a consistently engaging study which helpfully enlarges our sense of the fragment in Romantic culture, and of what Romanticism might be, how it might work, and how it encompasses and still directs our thinking about nature, language and the human.

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The question we might ask upon encountering Alexander Regier’s Fracture and Fragmentation in British Romanticism is, do we need another book on fragments and Romanticism? Regier points out that thinkers throughout western Europe have been captivated by the earthquake: writers including Goethe, William Blake, Mary Wollstonecraft, Heinrich von Kleist, Thomas Mann, Adorno, Benjamin, and Bertrand Russell have used it to illustrate both a world characterized by “inexplicable suffering” and one simply subject to “natural causes” (76). In this book, Alexander Regier explains how fracture and fragmentation form a lens through which some central concerns of Romanticism can be analysed in a particularly effective way. These categories also supply a critical framework for a discussion of fundamental issues concerning language and thought in the period. Over the course of the volume, Regier discusses fracture and fragmentation thematically and structurally, offering new readings of Wordsworth, Kant, Burke, Keats, and De Quincey, as well as analysing central intellectual presuppositions of the period. He also highlights Romanticis...