

Realism / romance, Romantic / Victorian

Ian Duncan, University of California, Berkeley

Realism / romance, Romantic / Victorian: the dyads don't quite line up. It is easier to parse the difference between romance and realism as an opposition, sometimes dialectical, sometimes not; but the difference between Romantic and Victorian is scandalous, and not just because it renders a historical relation as a rhetorical relation, an antithesis. As titles of successive periods they are incoherent, incommensurate. One designates an aesthetic ideology (intrinsic to the literary work), the other a monarch's reign (external and adventitious). Their sets of associations predict approaches and methodologies as well as what gets included and how it is valued. "Victorian," at least, is so clearly contingent and arbitrary that it can work as a synecdoche for "history," making historicism a default setting for Victorian studies; while Romanticism has traditionally named a resistance to history – history as "normal change" (in Jerome Christensen's formulation, after Immanuel Wallerstein [11-13]), silting up the revolutionary opening of the 1790s, paving it over with that quintessentially Victorian technology, realism.¹ Romanticism, rhetoricity, lyric, versus history, realism and (to use Clifford Siskin's term) "novelism": these oppositions return with an impressive tenacity to inflect our thinking across the nineteenth century.

In my own career I have found "Romanticism" especially constraining, at least until quite recently (for a long time you weren't allowed to be a Romanticist if you worked on Scott, or for that matter on the novel, always excepting *Frankenstein*): but also—therefore—stimulating, intellectually productive, a point of resistance. So yes, let us by all means be "one people," if that brings a salutary alienation from these categories, whether we work within a particular period or

¹ Exemplary here is William Galperin's recuperation of Jane Austen for Romanticism from nineteenth-century realism and historicism.

across both of them. Having said which, I feel bound to admit my own perverse attachment to the categories (even Romanticism), and not just because they have generated extraordinary scholarship. Ostensibly neutral terms like the “Long Nineteenth Century” tend to be more insidious than blatantly factitious ones; they do their naturalizing, normalizing work more blandly, digesting “history,” for example, into an even, inexorable chronological flow (into “normal change”). The arbitrariness, the absurdity, of “Romantic” and “Victorian” can keep us thinking about the relations between form and history – the forms through which history is mediated, as well as the forms that history shapes – so long as we don’t forget their arbitrariness and absurdity.

Here I think “romance,” notoriously intractable to critical taxonomies, can help. For of course the romance-realism opposition is incoherent too. Realism foregrounds its mimetic function, while romance foregrounds its fictionality or rhetoricity; we can grasp realism as a repertoire of techniques (descriptive metonymy, free indirect discourse, and so on), while romance eludes that sort of technical or topical accounting. (Attempts thus to define it, e.g. as structured around a quest, leave out more instances than they include.) Romance has a different categorical consistency, one that inheres in the relation between work and reader (as the prototypical exploration of the romance-realism dialectic, *Don Quixote*, predicts).

In her forthcoming book *At Home in English* Deidre Lynch clarifies the late eighteenth-century “romance revival” – the modern inauguration of romance as a critical and aesthetic category – in these terms. Thomas Warton and others cast “romantic poetry” (Warton’s phrase) as an affective relation between work and reader, a newly charged possessive intimacy, which generates the modern aura of “the literary.” Lynch offers a *sentimental* genesis of the aesthetic complex that Jean-Luc Nancy and Philippe Lacoue-Labarthe have called “the literary absolute.” Writing with reference to German Romantic theory, Lacoue-Labarthe and Nancy analyse the

literary absolute as a structural rather than an affective relation (“literature producing itself as it produces its own theory” [12]), emphasizing its ironical, reflexive modality. Lynch’s focus on romance shows us how the literary absolute is produced as a relation between work and reader, rather than as a property intrinsic to the work itself. This relation includes but is not limited to reading; indeed, it was sometimes taken to preclude reading for more perverse modes of interaction, such as the acquisition of old black-letter books that were, strictly speaking, unreadable. Alongside the romantic aura of the literary, then, this affective complex precipitates the book itself as an object of value, in the early nineteenth-century collecting craze nicknamed “the Bibliomania.”² Romance, to paraphrase and condense drastically, thus plays its indispensable role as realism’s excess, at once the transcendental surplus (“the literary absolute”) and material residue (books, the machinery of production, mediation and possession) of the mimetic act.

“It is from the great book of Nature, the same through a thousand editions, whether of black letter or wire-wove or hot-pressed, that I have venturously essayed to read a chapter to the public” (3), Walter Scott announces in the first chapter of *Waverley* – recasting authorship as an act not of writing (or invention) but of reading: an act that mediates, equivocally, between contingent historical objects (editions, printed paper) and a universal code (human nature). Famously, *Waverley* reconceives romance for the nineteenth century by making it – set in a dialectical relation with “real history” – the instrument of an enhanced realism. Scott’s novel supplies what is still, today, the most fertile thinking-through of the terms, for Romanticists and Victorianists alike.

² See Jack Lynch’s “Wedded to Books: Bibliomania and the Romantic Essayists”, and Ina Ferris’ “Bibliographic Romance: Bibliophilia and the Book-Object”.

Biographical notice

Ian Duncan is Florence Green Bixby Professor of English at the University of California, Berkeley. His books include *Scott's Shadow: The Novel in Romantic Edinburgh* (Princeton, 2007), *Modern Romance and Transformations of the Novel: The Gothic, Scott, Dickens* (Cambridge, 1992), and *Scotland and the Borders of Romanticism* (co-editor: Cambridge, 2004). He is currently writing a book about the novel and the 'science of man,' from Buffon to Darwin.

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