




The Cambridge History of European Romantic Literature

Edited by Patrick Vincent. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press. 655 pp. ISBN: 978-1-108-49706-0. Hardback. 2023

Encountered by Luiza Tavares da Motta 

Queen Mary University of London, London, UK

Email: ltavaresdamotta@qmul.ac.uk

doi:10.1017/S174455232400017X

Historicising Romantic literature within a context that is temporal and geographical, Patrick Vincent's comprehensive volume, comprising nineteen chapters, calls attention to the intertwining, collaborative and cross-border characteristics of Romanticism as a literary movement. It is in this flow from England to Continental Europe, across Continental Europe, and vice-versa, that Romantic Europe is constituted (Vincent, 2023).

Two main themes inform this collection's efforts at historicising European Romantic Literature: (1) space and (2) time. These permeate and join together all the chapters of the volume. I will turn to each theme in this article. I will then move to one more particular aspect: (3) emotion, in which I will consider further the sublime and the grotesque, and the border-transcendent and time-challenging aspects of Gothic literature.

1 Space: Romantic literature and the making of Europe

The Cambridge History of European Romantic Literature, as mentioned above, takes seriously the role of Romanticism in the creation of Europe. In taking this role seriously, the volume brings forth several instances of this invention of Europe in Romanticism: this means investigating the formation of national identities within Europe as well the broader formation of a shared identity as 'Europe' in the context of an anticipation of globalisation (Gottlieb, pp. 487–515).

As Evan Gottlieb writes, the modern idea of 'globalisation' in transnational and supra-national relations and organisations could not happen without the formation of nation states and national identities. The time-space compression that Zygmunt Bauman refers to in globalisation, as Gottlieb cites (p. 490), is characteristic of a post-'electronic communication and mass transport' (p. 491) modernity. It is important to note that Gottlieb recognises that this phenomenon of modern globalisation that exists in this 'time-space compression' cannot be thought to have been distributed equally around the globe – in other words, that the experience of globalisation 'is not singular' (p. 490). The exchange, translation and trade in literature were also inserted into this time-space compression. In this way, Romantic literature thus participated in this process of communication that created networks and the 'infrastructure for the mobilisation of global thinking' (p. 491).

In its invention of a Romantic Europe, the volume places the invention of European Romanticism in its contexts of overseas exploration, of nationalism and of an idea of Europe that is much constituted by the construction of the Other within an imperialist and colonialist project (Said 1978). But, as Gottlieb points out, there are several 'Romantic globalisms' (p. 492) rather than a unified or one-way movement of imperialism. The empire, in this sense, is a part of long-duration globalisation, rather than a globalisation that is one result or one element of

imperialism (p. 493), thereby also re-inserting colonised peoples as active agents in the history of globalisation.

Gottlieb's analysis of global Romanticisms is particularly important here because it identifies a Europe that is both traversed by globalism – constituted in part, but not only, in its opposition to the 'Orient' as conceptualised by Edward Said (1978) – and made of national particularisms that travel, through translation and literary exchange, as exemplified by '[Walter] Scott's manoeuvre of evoking regional particularities via their seemingly untimely relation to modernity' (p. 513). Gottlieb thus complicates the idea of a creation of the East that comes alongside the creation of the West by recognising an influence that spreads and returns in various directions rather than being a one-way path.

In studying 'Romantic Nationalisms,' Joep Leersen also points to 'how deeply entangled the political ideology of nationalism was with the aesthetic and intellectual programme of Romanticism' (p. 352). Leersen identifies the essential link between Romanticism and Nationalism, to both the Napoleonic wars and technological innovations: Romanticism and nationalism could arise only in a context of political insecurity and, once again, a literary market that could at the same time be state-controlled and transcend national borders. Nationalism and Romanticism, Leersen points out, emerge together. In analysing this common origin, Leersen identifies 'the linguistic revolution, the spread of idealism, and the rise of historicist dialectics' (p. 355) as points of encounter and, thus, of special importance to the rise of Nationalism and Romanticism.

With the interest in Eastern tales after the creation of the Indo-European model of language, national identities also became intrinsically related to language: 'Scottish Highlanders and Irish peasants were now reclassified as Celts(. . .) Latvians and Lithuanians saw their cultural capital raised by the archaic Indo-European features of their regional languages, while Slovenians' maintenance of the ancient Slavic *dualis* plural bolstered their national standing' (Leersen, p. 356). This linguistic revolution, which revived nationalisms and identified peoples with their languages, created broader families of languages and peoples such as pan-Slavism and was also important to efforts at reviving the past. In this sense, Leersen recognises that 'nationalism has a short history but a long memory' (p. 355), a claim to tradition that 'while "invented" in certain cases, most often were genuine reflections on a real, documented, often rediscovered and idealised past' (p. 355). Friedrich Savigny, the founder of the historical school of jurisprudence, is inserted in this context as a believer in law and, in Leersen's words, 'as a historical accumulation rather than as a mere set of rules and guidelines' (p. 365): historicism becomes a search for the past and an anchor in the face of the instability of the present. National identity is constituted, Leersen observes, through linguistic, historical, and idealistic identification.

Europe is thus created through communicative processes that are national and supra-national. National identities are formed as communities find identification in one language and one tradition in their idealistic search for the essence of a nation. Language families, common historical origins and the shared experiences of reading, writing and translating Romantic literature constitute a Europe that is, at the same time, being constituted by imperialism, in contrast with the East.

The discussion on the forming and crossing of borders in Europe, the idea of a nation and its legal consequences to national and international law in the creation of national identities (Varouxakis 2006) and the idea of the West as opposed to the East (Varouxakis 2020) are made even more interesting with the inclusion, in this volume, of Russian and Nordic Romantic literature, where most scholarship on Romanticism tends to focus on England, France, and Germany. Escaping the traditional view of Russian Romanticism as an 'essentially language-centred national project or even one fundamentally derivative or secondary to other European Romanticisms' (p. 575), Luba Golburt instead focuses on a story of communicative Russian Romanticism, entangled with not only the Russian Empire context but also the broader European Romanticism. The idea of a Europe which now comes entwined with the idea of 'the West'

(Varouxakis 2020) is both extended and challenged when Russian, Ukrainian and Polish Romanticisms are brought to the literary as well as to the legal discussion.

2 Time and the making of Romantic literature

In addition to space, time is the other key theme in the construction of national and supra-national Romantic ideals. *The Cambridge History of European Romantic Literature's* chronological organisation points to the contextualising effort of the pluralistic analysis presented in all of the chapters that compose the volume, but they also point to a circular motion. In its search for Romantic genealogies, the first part of this volume points to the Romantic relations with the past but is not restricted to an 'archaeological effort' to define the origins of Romanticism. Rather, it brings to light the role of the past within Romantic literature along with the role of the past in the making of Romantic literature. By reaching deep into the eighteenth century, this volume seeks not simply to find the initial point of Romanticism but also to understand the meaning of this past within Romantic literature.

The first part of the book thus traces Romanticism in its relation to modernity and the 'many modern concepts that emerged in reaction to this acceleration', such as 'deep time, nature versus culture, organicism, industrial capitalism, historicism, nationalism, cultural pluralism, democratic citizenship, natural rights, class subjectivism, and individualism' (Vincent, p. 6). It is a reminder that the Romantic movement did not exist in a vacuum; that fiction, much like law, are manifestations of and reactions to a culture, a time and a space.

Revolutions are another strong constitutive element of the Romantic period. The second and third parts of the book deal with Revolution to Restoration and Restoration to Revolution: the breaks and returns, continuities and discontinuities of history are here represented and convey a history that is more comprehensive, while also challenging linearity. The back-and-forth of the political scene among Monarchy, the constitution of European and of national identities travels through time and geographical space across the very borders it constitutes.

The retrieval of the past as a place of mythical origin and as a place of stability (Herringman, pp. 41–72), the awe and admiration of a nature untouched by men and the fast-paced technological advances of the nineteenth century (Rigby, pp. 73–104) and the rediscovery and re-translation of the classics (Saglia, pp. 401–432) come together with the chase for the future, the desire for revolution and the strength of the new to re-shape what was static. In addition, *The Cambridge History of European Romantic Literature* reaches back to the mid-eighteenth century in search of the genealogies of Romanticism.

Vincent's organisation of *The Cambridge History of European Romantic Literature* brings forth a temporality that is in constant movement and a movement that goes back-and-forth, that is spiral and that brings past and present into future by pulling the future into the present while looking to the past. In 'Transcendental Revolutions,' Nicholas Halimi synthesises a temporalised view of revolution that was especially important in nineteenth-century historicism, as also pointed out by Jonathan Swift. Revolution, due to 'the concept's semantic development in the eighteenth century,' was, in the nineteenth century '[a]ssimilated to a new, temporalized understanding of historical time as a succession of unique events and aligned with the concept of crisis as a moment or process of epochal transition' (p. 225). A story of the new and of disruption comes to take the place of a perceived historical continuity that Romanticism mourns.

The encounter with a historicised account of Romanticism is the encounter with a shared history of Romanticism, one that is receptive to the intertwining of constitutions of identity, whether it be individual or collective, with the constitution of a temporal and geographical space that is at the same time political and fictional. In this historical account of Romanticism, one finds that it is the discovery of the past within the present, as Noah Herringman stresses (p. 41), and of a nature that is other (Rigby, p. 73). Here the legal scholar may find the increasing role of precedent

in the legitimation of common law, or the Modern Constitution that Bruno Latour denounces as fictional (1993), and to which, Kate Rigby indicates, Romanticism responded with ‘an alternative ethos, modelling contemplative, compassionate, and convivial modes of multispecies coexistence and warning of the potentially dire impacts of the despoliation of the living earth’ (p. 77–78).

The legal scholar, in reading *The Cambridge History of European Romantic Literature*, may thus confront questions on the expansion of empathy through the epistolary novel and its role in the invention of human rights (Hunt 2007) or on the duty of the poet as a creator and enforcer of morality (Lettre de Victor Hugo 1872). The legal scholar may even profit from the Romantic emphasis and value of a sensibility that resided in the feminine realm, as per Enit Karafili Steiner (p. 135), and question the legal emphasis on rationality that drove women out of the public sphere and into the private sphere in the French Revolution (Hunt 2009).

3 Emotion in European Romantic literature

Emotion is an especially important theme in Romantic literature, and it is equally important for this collection. Here, I propose to focus on two chapters that speak to this theme: Cian Duffy’s ‘The Romantic Sublime’ and Angela Wright’s ‘Gothic Circulations’.

Recognising the frequent association between the romantic and the sublime, Duffy proposes to study the ‘much more complicated cultural history of the place of the aesthetic in late eighteenth- and early nineteenth-century Europe’ (p. 106). Duffy points to the role of aesthetic discourse as a mediator between art history and art theory: ‘while art history examined what kind of art had been produced, and art theory considered what kind of art might or should be produced, aesthetics, as a discourse, sought to explain how art functions to produce an effect in the mind’ (p. 107). However, as Duffy underlines, several understandings of the sublime that are now taken for granted were not necessarily wholly accepted in the nineteenth century. The discussion mainly revolved around where one could place the sublime – whether the artist had full control over the effect of the sublime on the audience; whether the sublime was found in nature or was a product of human creation, as Longinus suggested; and whether the sublime was irresistible or entirely subjective.

Duffy highlights the debate around the definitions of the sublime and the grotesque. The expressions of the sublime and the grotesque appear in Romantic literature: in Gothic literature, for example, these categories can be identified in the association of beauty with virtue and of terror with the common motifs of decay of humankind, the loss of faith, and injustice. The Gothic thus both produces and manifests a form of aesthetic discourse.

If the sublime and the grotesque are the irresistible forces of awe and terror in the face of an impressive work of art and if the rhetorical sublime is the irresistible force of awe and terror in the face of an impressive work of literature, can fiction and reality in legal practice also provoke such forces in the experience of the law?

Duffy’s analysis of ‘The Romantic Sublime’ invites us to question whether the sublime and the grotesque have a place in the courtroom as they had in the French Revolution. If so, in which form? As Burke’s inescapable force of the experience, or as Kant’s purely rational reaction? More importantly, what can these categories teach us about the experience of law?

The role of the ancient texts, including those from Greek antiquity but also ancient Nordic texts such as the *Edda*, as sources of the sublime – as, perhaps, better sources of the sublime – from which Romanticism was to learn also raises questions and opens possibilities of investigation on the role of temporality in the construction of narrative that is not only literary but may also be legal: is the custom from time immemorial a glimpse to the sublime? Does custom from time immemorial, like the Ossian texts, carry a claim to antiquity and therefore legitimacy even though this antiquity is of contested origin?

It is with emphasis on the collective dimension of law that I turn now to Wright’s ‘Gothic Circulations’.

Gothic fiction, one of the most popular forms of fiction during the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries (Punter 2013), was also, according to Wright, a mobile, communal construction that existed within and beyond Romanticism, as it existed within and beyond borders ‘by promoting closer conversations, emulation, and collaborative publications across Europe’ (p. 162). This was a genre constructed through and by translations and conversations across nations, time, and forms of high and low culture.

It is important to note, once again, the temporal and spatial relations that emerge from this volume. Gothic literature both exists within and transcends borders; it combines the local and the universal, the old and the new. It does that through categories such as the sublime and the grotesque, through rhetorical and narrative tools that engage emotion. This points to questions of universality and generality, and of the role of emotion in shared communicative and communicable experiences of time, space and, perhaps, law.

Within Wright’s analysis of the construction of the Gothic in this nationalist and international character, through and across borders, genres and temporalities, I propose to focus on the very last section of the chapter: the power of the Gothic in reading communities. The communication of terror, of the grotesque the Gothic mobilises, ‘were particularly suited to communal reading and verbal transmission, where auditors could take their cue from the intonations of a reading, as well as from the astonishment of others’ (p. 184).

The Gothic in its ‘cosmopolitan, mobile nature’ (p. 185) may serve thus as an example of the power of the very categories of aesthetic in the construction, through rhetoric and performance, of a shared experience that is not universal, but that can be communicated across the national borders of a Europe in its constitutive moment of both proximity and delimitation. Moving to recent studies of the role of performance in the law, or *Law as Performance* (Peters 2022), the Gothic may serve as an interesting lens or connection to understanding the experience of law in its performative dimensions.

With due care not to broaden the concept of performance so that it encompasses everything to the point of losing its distinctiveness (Peters 2022), one of the dimensions of the investigation of law as performance may draw from the role of the grotesque, the horrible, as the Gothic did, to move audiences such as a jury. In other words, can the experience of oral pleading learn from what Wright pointed out as the ‘power of public reading’ (p. 184), especially in the horrors of the Gothic?

On yet another encounter with law as performance, and considering that law, insofar as it must ‘showcase justice, visibly represent its own force and dignity, induce deterrent awe in the populace, produce the docile legal subjects through example, deploy the passions of the crowd, provide a theatre for vengeance, promise catharsis as closure’ (Peters 2022, 8–9) and therefore necessitates performance, one could ask: what can categories of the Romantic encounter with the sublime and the grotesque do for the legal scholarship on punishment?

I have outlined several questions for the legal researcher that may be investigated through the different lenses that a historical account of Romanticism provides: for the formation of national identities in Europe, for the enactment of empathy and for the literary denouncement of social injustice. I have, however, chosen to focus on distinctive approaches to law and literature, to law and Romanticism that allow for further investigation of the emotional, temporal and embodied experience of the law and its relations to literature and literary theory.

This is not to say, however, that law is to be too closely related to – to the point of being identified with – literature or performance. As Stone Peters, in her investigation of the scope of *Law as Performance* (2020) notes, there is value to be found in disciplinary borders. Not that those borders are not to be bridged but that the bridging effort of interdisciplinary study does not need to – and maybe should not – become the complete blurring or effacement of those borders.

In other words, the case made here is not to completely identify law with literature or performance, but rather to recognise and mobilise studies in performance, literature and

imagination to form deeper understandings of different manifestations of narrative, rhetoric and fiction within the law. As Peters (2022) writes, ‘It would be liberating to acknowledge that different kinds of performance in different domains (the aesthetic, the legal, and the quotidian) are, in fact, really *different*, and do not need to be yoked together into a single narrative showing the coherence of the field’ (p. 213). It would also be liberating to acknowledge that law is composed of different dimensions that include their own forms of performance, narrative, fiction and aesthetic; that do not need to dominate law and strip from it its distinctive character; but that may offer new levels of investigation to legal practice and scholarship.

References

- Hunt L** (2007) *Inventing Human Rights: A History*. New York: W. W. Norton & Company.
- Hunt L** (2009) The unstable boundaries of the French Revolution. In Perrot M (ed), *A History of Private Life, vol IV, From the Fires of Revolution to the Great War*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press (1987).
- Lettre de Victor Hugo** à Léon Richer (1872) “Il est Difficile de Composer le Bonheur de l’homme avec la Souffrance de la femme” In *Oeuvres complètes de Victor Hugo: Actes et Paroles III*. J. Hetzel & Co. (1880–1926), Paris.
- Peters JS** (2020) Mapping law and performance: Reflections on the dilemmas of an interdisciplinary conjunction. In Stern S, Del Mar M and Meyler B (eds), *The Oxford Handbook of Law and Humanities*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Peters JS** (2022) *Law as Performance: Theatricality, Spectatorship, and the Making of Law in Ancient, Medieval, and Early Modern Europe*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Punter D** (2013) *The Literature of Terror: A History of Gothic Fictions from 1765 to the Present Day*. New York: Routledge.
- Said EW** (1978) *Orientalism*. New York: Pantheon Books.
- Varouxakis G** (2006) Introduction: Patriotism and nationhood in 19th-century European political thought. *European Journal of Political Theory* 5, 7–11.
- Varouxakis G** (2020) When did Britain join the Occident? On the origins of the idea of ‘the West’ in English. *History of European Ideas* 46, 563–581.