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*Romantic Realities: Speculative Realism and British*

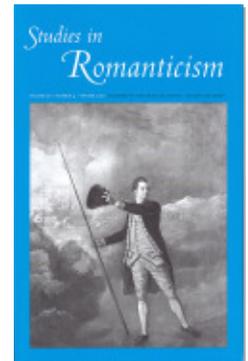
*Romanticism* by Evan Gottlieb (review)

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Evan Gottlieb. *Romantic Realities: Speculative Realism and British Romanticism*. Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2016. Pp. 235. \$130.

Evan Gottlieb's *Romantic Realities: Speculative Realism and British Romanticism* is a timely arrival for many reasons, not only because it intervenes in the critical conversation over what exactly "Speculative Realism" is but also because it makes a case for what can be done with it in literary scholarship. For those not currently familiar with Speculative Realism, or SR, it might be useful to establish its central idea, "correlationism," even as we should heed Gottlieb's reminder, per M. H. Abrams on Romanticism, that Speculative Realism is "no one thing" (8). Correlationism, Gottlieb writes, is "the belief—enshrined in Kant's *Critique of Pure Reason* . . . that we can only ever talk or think about reality in relation to our human subjectivity" (2). The result of correlationist thinking, so the argument goes, leaves humans stuck in an epistemological cul-de-sac, eternally wondering about our own thoughts and existences without being able to think ontologically about the larger world outside of those thoughts and existences. As Gottlieb points out, this is not philosophical ado about nothing, but rather a philosophy with sweeping implications for how we understand our relation to the world as well as how we think the humanities: "the problems we face today—especially the increasingly likely prospect of worldwide ecological catastrophe due to anthropogenic global warming—have material dimensions that simply exceed the purview of the linguistic, critical, and epistemologically oriented approaches that have directed the humanities for some time now" (4). By putting Speculative Realism into conversation with British Romanticism, Gottlieb throws these problems into relief while simultaneously roadmapping how humanistic study can think ontologically inside and outside of the correlationist circle. After all, Gottlieb reminds us, "striving to get our ontological accounts right can only help us improve our epistemological critiques" (234). One way to understand his book, then, is that it offers a kind of prolegomenon for how future literary study can profitably put Speculative Realism to work in service of the humanities in general.

Gottlieb's contextualization of his book illuminates its distinctiveness in this regard. He briefly sketches the history of Romantic criticism of the last fifty years, noting that it has been characterized by deconstructive theory before more recently being overtaken by New Historicist and ideological critiques. This critical turn, from the linguistic to the cultural, let's say, reflects larger trends in literary studies, and also, to an extent, in the humanities as a whole. In positioning his work as deviating from this trend, as well as from both deconstructive and cultural studies methodologies, Gottlieb explores a form of literary criticism that is only now beginning to

make waves in Romanticism. And yet, while the trajectory of Romantic studies certainly supplies a historical literary-critical snapshot useful as a stand-in for other literary periods, it is not clear why British Romantic literature is of especial merit in demonstrating “ontological description” over epistemological or cultural or historical understanding of the world. Would not this be the case for all periods of literature, all writers? Gottlieb argues that turning to British Romanticism supplies a special case-study for this kind of ontological description because “the Speculative Realists jointly seek to break thought out of its Kantian prison and free us to speculate once more on reality itself” and, “since they were writing at a moment when Kantianism was not yet hegemonic, the Romantic poets already enjoyed such freedom, albeit to varying degrees” (231). Perhaps so. But following such logic further suggests that other literary periods prior to Romanticism, and, hence, historically prior to Kantianism, would also be free from such correlationist constraints (as Gottlieb notes, Meillassoux identifies Berkeley, and not Kant, as the initial source of Kantian correlationism). Indeed, medieval scholars have been working with Speculative Realism for some time. But this is a larger humanities disciplinary problem that Gottlieb’s book alone cannot solve. What Gottlieb’s book does brilliantly, though, is suggest a new approach to thinking about Romanticism and other literary fields because it tackles—if not totally solves—the perplexing problem of how to uproot and then reorient the humanities from its own ideological moorings.

Gottlieb frames his chapters as both exploratory and cautiously probatory, an approach that pays off well since it allows him to survey leading Speculative Realism thinkers while rereading the canonical Romantic authors (Wordsworth, Coleridge, Byron, P. B. Shelley, and Keats)—who in turn aid him in reading the Speculative Realists. And this, after all, is the book’s direct ambition: to show how Speculative Realism helps us view Romanticism in a new way and how Romanticism helps understand Speculative Realism differently from how it has been understood in other contexts, such as academic philosophy. In each chapter Gottlieb offers assured, consistently provocative readings of major poems that include: Wordsworth’s “Lucy poems,” “Tintern Abbey,” and *The Prelude*; Coleridge’s *Rime of the Ancient Mariner* and “Kubla Khan”; Byron’s *Childe Harold* and *Don Juan*; Shelley’s *Prometheus Unbound* and “Mont Blanc”; and Keats’s early poems and his Great Odes.

Using the tools of Speculative Realism affords Gottlieb the opportunity to challenge longstanding tenets of “Romanticism” such as the idea that “it is a classroom commonplace that the Romantic poets were uniquely interested in the powers of the human imagination” (8). Complicating this chestnut, Gottlieb argues that the Romantics’ preoccupation with questing

after “knowledge of the absolute”—the very thing Meillassoux proposes in his idea of the human mind finally moving beyond the limitations of Kantian finitude to the transcendental—indicates how they seek to overcome “the subject/object dualism that SR also seeks to think beyond” (8). Gottlieb is a careful reader and thinker, though, and by no means finds this transcendental quest for “knowledge of the absolute” as the totalizing end destination of the authors he discusses. Instead, in thinking about Wordsworth’s early poetry “an object-oriented perspective helps clarify the stakes of Wordsworth’s hesitations and qualifications in ‘Tintern Abbey,’ by allowing us to see them as admissions of the world’s unknowable plenitude rather than of the mind’s inherent limitations” (30). The traces of Object-Oriented Ontology (OOO) in early Wordsworth that Gottlieb unearths resolve, however, into a later anthropocentrism that deposits Wordsworth firmly back into the correlationist circle. In the Simplon Pass episode, for instance, Gottlieb finds that, for the more mature, confident Wordsworth, revising *The Prelude* for what will be the 1850 version, there is an “increasing certainty that nature only ‘means’ anything insofar as it is ‘translated’ by the Imagination into moral and spiritual uplift,” which contra Graham Harman and Timothy Morton, resurrects “Nature” as a homogenized entity engendered by the human mind—1960s Romanticism *par excellence* (51).

As his reading of Wordsworth demonstrates, Gottlieb’s book is self-consciously interventionist and should indeed be read that way, though this is to its credit: it seeks to push the field in new directions. Consider the reading of Coleridge’s use of *naturphilosophie*: rather than rehearsing Coleridge—the-plagiary, Gottlieb sees Coleridge’s sticky fingers as another way in which Speculative Realism surfaces in his work through the influence of Friedrich Schelling, a move that not only begins the necessary exploration of German Romanticism’s Speculative Realist investments but that also shows us a Coleridge in command of ideas that dovetail with his own poetic and philosophical inclinations. Nonhuman ontological thinking is what draws Coleridge to the German writers, not a desperate drive to meet his own writing deadlines and an amelioration of his monetary impoverishment—this nonhuman ontological urge likewise shimmers through Coleridge’s poems in Gottlieb’s reading of them.

There are so many surprising and innovative readings throughout the book that it is difficult to single any out, so let me offer just one more, this from the Keats chapter. Gottlieb draws on both Bennett and Bryant here because, taken together, they show us how Keats has “ways of thinking and feeling not only beyond the human but also potentially beyond life and death itself” (190–91). Non-anthropocentric thinking underlines Keats’s odes wherein criticism has shared “a working assumption

that Keats's nightingale is best understood as a symbol" (207), even as, on Gottlieb's reading, "the resolute materiality of Keats's nightingale . . . demands or at least allows for a different kind of approach, one that sees its significance not in what it means or stands for but in how it operates" (208). Here Bryant's idea of "onticology" overlaps onto Bennett's vibrant matter and "the bird's being—what it eats, its mating habits, its health and disposition—goes undescribed and remains unknown to the speaker-poet. In this way, the nightingale exists on an equal ontological footing with Keats" (213). This equality of being reflects what Bryant calls "flat ontology" which "is not the thesis that all objects contribute equally, but that all objects equally exist. In its ontological egalitarianism, what flat ontology thus refuses is the erasure of any object as the mere construction of another object" [Bryant, 290] (Gottlieb, 210). "To Autumn" functions in the same fashion according to Gottlieb, a kind of "machinic" (219) Bryant assemblage that is also flatly ontological: "the poem 'thinks' autumn, not really as a season (despite its first line), much less as a state of mind (for as previous critics have noted, there is no 'mind' or active subjectivity in this ode), but rather as a machine for creating poetic effects. Autumn, in Keats's subtly powerful representation, is a machine that operates on inputs—the dropping temperatures, the changing quality of light—to create a variety of seasonally appropriate outputs" (219). Gottlieb ends his book on this poem because "it embodies the more general anti-anthropocentrism and anti-correlationism at the heart of so much SR and SR-related work—and, as I have tried to show throughout this book, at the heart of much canonical Romantic poetry, too" (223). And, indeed, Gottlieb's book does just that, in consistently illuminating and rigorous fashion that will stir up much-needed debate over the state of the field and beyond.

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D. B. Ruderman. *The Idea of Infancy in Nineteenth-Century British Poetry: Romanticism, Subjectivity, Form*. New York: Routledge, 2016. Pp. 274. \$140.

A critical understanding of childhood, the figure of the child, and the philosophical and cultural construction of infancy and childhood remains largely absent from the general discourse of literary scholarship. This is not to say that excellent new work on childhood is not being done in the fields of literary and cultural studies. Routledge has continued the strong "Studies in Childhood" series that originated at Ashgate under the editorial