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NASSR Caucus: Introduction

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This year, the *European Romantic Review* and the North American Society for the Study of Romanticism confronted an unprecedented challenge: how to assemble an issue of the journal linked to the annual conference when COVID-19 forced the cancelation of the 2020 NASSR gathering, superbly organized by Terry Robinson and John Savarese, scheduled to take place in Victoria College at the University of Toronto. Normally, that issue publishes scholarship actually presented at the conference in plenary sessions, selected seminars, and a sample of panel presentations. How might one provide a similar ensemble without an associated conference from which to draw? Fortunately, a solution soon presented itself: a gathering of papers associated with the society's caucuses. Some time ago, NASSR established these caucuses in order to ensure that the conference included scholarship in subfields that might otherwise not have a consistent presence each year, hoping to make the conference an inviting space for colleagues with a wider range of expertise and to foster exchanges between senior and junior members in each domain. Thus it was not difficult to envision how these caucuses, already a space of ongoing collaboration, could provide the resources for assembling an issue of this kind. The coordinators of the caucuses took up this challenge readily and organized the collection published here; we thank them for their efforts and for the willingness of our colleagues to contribute essays for this issue. The journal and NASSR are thus delighted to collaborate on the creation of this special issue under these extraordinary circumstances.

Because these essays emerge from the efforts of each of these five groups, rather than from a response to an overarching conference theme, they represent a useful cross-section of work ongoing in subfields of Romanticism today. This issue thus makes its own specific contribution; it showcases the broader range of scholarship the caucuses were meant to foster. But it also turns out that without any advance coordination, these essays work through a shared concern, broadly conceived, on a movement past totalization, intentionality, identity, or closure, and accordingly provide variations on the theme of disruption or dispersion. It is telling that this shared concern emerges from papers written in this array of subfields; that pattern suggests that scholarship in Romanticism retains certain features even when deployed within a series of distinct contexts.

The two essays in Comparative Literature and Thought both trace a disruption or impasse that intervenes into a process that would otherwise reach a teleological or historical completion. Placing Hegel within a series of treatments of irritability in English and German, as well as physiology and philosophy, over several decades, Tilottama

Rajan shows how in his work this troublesome middle term upends the dialectic, creating something indigestible within the dynamics of speculation. For Hegel, irritability is so fundamental a property that it shapes animal subjectivity, becoming a “psycho-ontological” term, so that in disease negativity becomes the very structure of the self. Hegel works out these thoughts most fully in his *Philosophy of Nature*, in which the apparatus of sublimation fails, as spirit does not ultimately find itself in nature. The attempt to bring physiology into philosophy, then, does not allow for the absorption of world into thought but creates “an indeterminate, porous negation,” so that “the reproduction that results is not a totalization, but the organism’s carrying forward of its disparities.” Rajan’s account thus delineates Hegel’s thought about irritability while also showing that his thinking is diseased by its own preoccupation with what it cannot assimilate, falling prey to philosophy’s resistance to itself.

Kirill Chepurin places Romanticism in a similarly vexatious position between bliss and modernity, between “the radical immanence of the world” that dissolves the subject, providing it an experience like that of heaven, and a modernity that forever postpones the arrival of its telos, blocking every avenue of escape. Drawing on key moments in Schelling, Coleridge, and Wordsworth, Chepurin shows how Romanticism resists the foreclosure of bliss that informs Kant’s optimistic endorsement of the labors of time, as well as Darwin’s insistence that behind the apparent beauty of nature lies the violence of reproduction. Repudiating the endless progression toward a deferred heaven, Romanticism creates a clash between the world and bliss, finding hints of the latter in childhood, death, or the fatal love of Mary Shelley’s *Matilda*. In opting for a blessing prior to the subject and outside mediation, Romanticism seeks what could overwhelm the world in an all-consuming conflagration, a wave of cosmic power that is too vast for humanity. It thus reaches an impasse, a disordered state caught between an infinite void and the finitude of earth.

The next pair of essays, organized by the caucus in the History of Science, Medicine, and Psychology, follow the shift from privileged categories to more capacious and inclusive practices. Tim Fulford shows how Humphrey Davy, accepting his position as a celebrity chemist, distances himself from the scientific inquiry associated with provincial, dissenting radicalism—a practice that had been associated with political radicalism and was relatively gender inclusive—to cultivate instead the persona of the scientific genius, bringing that performance into the heart of the era’s conservative scientific establishment. In doing so, he reinforced male homosociality and marginalized the contributions of women, even as he struggled to maintain a position distinct from the role of a professional expert at the service of industry. In a countervailing move, Jane Marcet deploys a continental, cosmopolitan mode as she introduces his research in *Conversations on Chemistry*, deliberately feminizing and democratizing it in a book that ultimately reached sixteen published editions, in the process creating a vogue for the educational dialogue.

Lisa Ann Robertson, in turn, demonstrates that Erasmus Darwin consistently deploys a posthuman account of humanity’s place in the nonhuman world. Extending the framework he inherited from David Hartley and Joseph Priestley, who in contrast to Descartes provide philosophies of the embodied mind, Darwin interprets cognition within the context of how an organism, relying on its capacities and needs, engages with the world. Contending that emotions precede reason, whether in human or nonhuman

animals, he frequently deploys personification to display how plants experience the full array of emotions, much as he argues that animals and insects possess a capacity for language, knowledge, and invention. His stance, however, suffers from a tension between his belief in a providential view of nature and the need for reform, in effect trusting nature while seeking to improve it. In this respect, Robertson's account exposes how a nonhuman ethics may always be haunted by a dissonance between the affirmation of nature and the demand for a more capacious engagement with the world.

The two essays representing the Race and Empire Studies caucus further contribute to this broad theme of dispersion. Katherine Bergren shows how anonymous newspaper parodies of the first nineteen lines of Lord Byron's *The Bride of Abydos*, relatively indifferent to the content of that poem or its initial publication in Britain, used its metrical form and accent on place to meditate on a wide variety of themes, most notably rights for African Americans before and after the Civil War. Bearing a "rhizomatic relation" to the initial text, invoking other parodies as much as the original, these poems enact a form of "reuse value: an informal, iterative, and collectively produced value based on the poetic properties capable of feeding a textual cycle of consumption and production." Of sixteen such parodies, some of which celebrate American liberty or refer to life in new territories or states, two uphold the rights of African Americans—an abolitionist poem of 1839 and an anti-lynching text of 1894—and one speaks for white resentment against Reconstruction in 1871. The formal qualities of the original text thus provide a structure for anonymous authors to create new phrases regarding the rights of African Americans and in doing so to expose fissures within American national identity.

Taking up Sylvia Wynter's critique of "ethno-astronomy," which through its emphasis on spheres allows "Man" to differentiate between his capacity to make worlds and others who merely inhabit them, Devin Garofalo demonstrates how what came to be known as the "nebular hypothesis" of William Herschel, as well as its description by thinkers such as Thomas De Quincey and John Pringle Nichol, dissolves these spheres into "gossamer mists" and thus destabilizes the link between Man and world, undoing assumptions that subtend an imperialist imaginary. Placing form and shape into question, this hypothesis puts pressure even on the notion of visibility, conceiving of the appearance of a nebula as a mode of disappearance, a move that "threatens the liberal subject and his cosmology of reference." Furthermore, it undercuts the attempt to gain a secure concept of nebulae, contesting what Frank Wilderson calls "the ruse of analogy," the system of comparisons through which that subject maintains the "fantasy of referential contiguity," instead allowing the breakdown of analogy to bring a "non-identitarian world" to consciousness and envisioning the Earth as "an impossible interweaving of worlds," a "Glissantian opacity."

The essays for the caucus in the History of the Book, Editing, and Textual Studies constitute a small cluster on the place of color in the history of the book. Kirstyn Leuner explores how Anne B. Poyntz wished her *Je ne sçai quoi* (1769), a collection of letters and odes, to be published with the by-line "By a Woman" and in red ink, whereas it appeared with the rubric "By a Lady" and only the four-page dedication in red. Following the practice in the field of women's book history, Leuner foregrounds authorial intention, arguing that Poyntz's inability to impose her wishes on the publication process reveals the limits of her agency in relation to that of publishers, patrons, subscribers, and printer's readers, a situation on which she comments within the volume itself. Indeed, her

dedication and letters foreground a series of instabilities, including the color of the blush, which on the face of a woman at once evokes guilt and draws the attention of a love interest to her, resulting in marriage (as her reference to *As You Like It* suggests). Her lack of agency in controlling the appearance of her book continues to ramify, for in various digital platforms available today her book appears without the red ink being clearly or consistently visible.

Arranging for the Yale DHLab to visualize how William Blake used color in his illuminated books across several phases of his career in the *BlakeTint* project, Sarah T. Weston analyzes the resulting data in a mode of distant reading, reassessing Blake's claims about color, as well as the color terms in his poetry, in relation to changes in his practice. A careful reading of the data, she argues, provides a new narrative of his artistic career, showing that an initial phase of muted versions of many different colors gives way around 1795 to an emphasis on primary colors with firm outlines (the phase during which he wrote his well-known comments on the bounding line in the 1809 *Descriptive Catalogue*), which led in turn after 1818 to an exploration of complementary colors, especially of blue and orange, in a practice that resonates with Goethe's color theory, and then finally to a use of a fuller spectrum of colors after 1821. The use of color terms in the poetry indicates that for Blake they corresponded to aspects of humoral medicine; for him, as for Goethe, complementary colors were "mythological, organic, evolutionary." This digital analysis thus enables one to respect the minute particulars of his work in a new way.

The two essays representing the contribution of the Theory and Philosophy caucus work through the theme of this collection by attending to incomplete thought. Taking up one of the most formidable challenges in this collection, Soelve Curdts shows how Hegel, often taken to be a philosopher invested in the telos of a dialectical system, in fact demonstrates how thought, even as it contemplates finality, un-finishes it. Hegel argues that through irony, subjectivity becomes "absolute unto itself," refusing reference to something outside itself; through this step subjectivity "equates the ironic and the divine, thereby enabling its own dissolution." In specifying what it calls "externality-less externalization," however, this very argument finds itself absorbed in self-echoing phrasing, shifting attention from the system to its sonorous performance, creating a dissolution that the text cannot relegate to art. In this and other examples, as Adorno would insist, thought is bound to its instantiations and thus cannot complete a teleological thought. Invoking Jacques Khalip's treatment of the "last" alongside Derrida's reading of Hegel, Curdts suggests that the last, too, is a trace, making even the last an unfinished thought.

In an essay perfectly positioned at the end of this collection, Jack Rooney explores how Percy Bysshe Shelley, attempting to examine the operations of the mind through introspection, discovers that it is for that very reason infinitely elusive, a haunted and haunting space—a sense he confirms when, in his *Speculations on Metaphysics*, he breaks off his investigation in horror at the experience of *déjà vu*. Those who inherit Shelley's emphasis on the incomplete later in the nineteenth century, however, ironically close off its apparitional qualities: David Masson argues that poets place the phantasmal into the world by inventing powerful characters (from Prometheus to Lear), producing "realized unrealities," and E. S. Dallas suggests that poetry achieves a knowledge of the unknowable but does not give up its secrets. Masson thus creates a "singularly *unhaunted* ghostly

poetics,” while Dallas fashions a ghost that “never haunts and never appears.” Insofar as these later thinkers attempt to discern the “revealed quality of unfinishedness,” they ignore “Shelley’s impulse to *unclose*.” As it turns out, then, it is far more difficult to allow thought to remain truly incomplete than one might suppose; Shelley’s achievement in this regard is rare.

By concluding on this note, this group of essays affirms not only dispersion and incompleteness but also that range of concerns associated with them, such as dialogues that rework celebrity science into a democratized form of knowledge, practices that appropriate texts into rhizomatic reuse, or objects that dissolve worlds into ghostly referents. The direction of these essays overall is perhaps most evident in the congruence between the two readings of Hegel offered here. Essays that reveal how his thought does not complete itself, either because it cannot digest the world into its own operation or makes the telos unavailable through its very articulation, foreground with unusual force the impasses that shape Romanticism, its willing or unwilling subjection to what throws its projects into disarray.

In this regard, then, this issue speaks to the resilience that the world of scholarship, and not only that world, has demonstrated in the face of several contemporary crises, including the global pandemic; at times the challenges of these crises were so dire that this issue, too, was in danger of being incomplete. But in these essays, and in many other venues, Romantic scholarship responds not with the assertion of mastery but with a capacity to be haunted by what it cannot master, a negativity that it cannot transform into a feature of itself but must acknowledge makes its pursuits forever incomplete. On a number of levels, then, none of which we should discount or ignore, this issue locates Romanticism itself, as well as our readings of it, within a history whose principles elude us and whose boundaries lie beyond the reach of our thought.