

Guest Lecture

Tuesday, 04 December 2018, 1:00 pm

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Transcendental Poetics and the Futures of American Romanticism: A Primer

Transcendental Poetics and the Futures of American Romanticism builds on the premise that “[R]omanticism [...] is a living, as yet unrealized possibility,” as Nikolas Kompridis has put it. Accordingly, it traces the romantic project from its inception in the late eighteenth and early to mid-nineteenth centuries through the twentieth century to today.

In order to do so, I begin with American transcendentalism, particularly the work of Ralph Waldo Emerson and Margaret Fuller, which I understand as the distillation and poignant expression of romanticism as it incorporates and builds on the earlier European romantic discourse. Scrutiny of this original phase of romanticism yields the following definition of the romantic project: Romanticism emerges as the attempt to draw up a comprehensive and accurate account apt to reconcile the human (thought) and nonhuman (nature) worlds decisively divorced by Kant’s critical project. In order to do so without relinquishing Kant’s critical insights, it needs to be able to ground thought *in* nature without reducing thought to mere mechanism. Such a project remains very much a transcendental project, but “transcendental” now comes to signify a real ground in nature, what the romantics called the Absolute, rather than the mere conditions of thought. To comply with Kant’s critical project, this Absolute needs to be located beyond the limits of thought. That is, the Absolute has to remain inaccessible by means of rational, conceptual thought. If this is the case, the only remaining option is *aisthesis* or aesthetic intuition. It is precisely this wager on *aisthesis* that makes the project of the reconciliation of thought and nature romantic. Since works of art in general and literary works in particular (due to their linguistic constitution) amount to the material manifestation of aesthetic intuition, art and literature attain central importance in romantic discourse—they become the royal road to the Absolute.

Following up on Kompridis’ diagnosis above, I trace the development of this project by means of close readings of what I take to be some of its paradigmatic twentieth- and twenty-first-century exemplars. These close readings track the very means and techniques with which these texts purport to theorize and, importantly, unveil the Absolute. In the colloquium, I will first elucidate the overall project as delineated above in order to then zoom in on one of my exemplars. As additional incentive, YOU get to decide which one.