

Review Essay

**Romanticism with a Difference: The Recent
Criticism of Karl Kroeber**

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Karl Kroeber's first book, *Romantic Narrative Art*, appeared in 1960. The intervening three decades, enough time for a full human generation, have witnessed at least three generations of critical practice and theory concerned with British Romantic writers. M. H. Abrams had at that time given us *The Mirror and the Lamp* (1954) but not *Natural Supernaturalism* (1971); Harold Bloom had brought out *Shelley's Mythmaking* (1959) but not *The Visionary Company* (1961); Geoffrey Hartman was known for *The Unmediated Vision* (1954) but not for *Wordsworth's Poetry, 1787-1814* (1964). Among the major shapers of our thinking about Romantic literature, only Northrop Frye, with *Anatomy of Criticism* (1957), was in full flower. Paul de Man was writing about Wordsworth in French, and deconstruction was not even a distant rumor. Many of today's new historicists were worrying about acne and perfecting their jump shots.

Books Reviewed: Karl Kroeber, *British Romantic Art* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1986); Karl Kroeber, *Romantic Fantasy and Science Fiction* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1988); Karl Kroeber, *Romantic Narrative Art* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1960); Karl Kroeber, *Romantic Landscape Vision: Constable and Wordsworth* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1975).

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Some rudimentary acknowledgment of the distance Romantic studies has come over the past thirty years is necessary if we are to understand Kroeber's position in the field as it is articulated by his recent works, *British Romantic Art* and *Romantic Fantasy and Science Fiction*.¹ "Position" may seem an unlikely word given the obvious differences in subject matter of the two books; but comparable shifts in emphasis have been characteristic of Kroeber's career, as *Romantic Narrative Art* was followed by *The Artifice of Reality: Poetic Style in Wordsworth, Foscolo, Keats, and Leopardi* (1964); a computer-assisted study of Jane Austen, Charlotte Brontë, and George Eliot entitled *Styles in Fictional Structure* (1971); and *Romantic Landscape Vision: Constable and Wordsworth* (1975). Having explored early nineteenth-century culture across national boundaries, artistic media, and genres, Kroeber's work bespeaks a range of interests with few parallels in this age of increasingly specialized studies. I will attempt here to mark some essential continuities in his critical concerns, to describe his work's frequently elusive, but often abrasive, relations to shifting modes of Romantic study, and to discuss its growing interest in reexamining linkages among the Romantic, the Victorian, the modern, and the postmodern.

It is difficult to decide whether writers shape subjects or subjects shape writers. In Kroeber's case, concentrating his first extended study on narrative placed him in a critical posture that may at times have seemed uncomfortable but has proven fortunate. Kroeber was writing during the reign of high modernism, and little in the literary or critical climate of the time could have led him to view his efforts as anything other than marginal to the literary and intellectual community. His remarks on the first text he discusses accurately assess the intellectual situation he faces:

It is a commentary upon the present low estate of narrative verse that most modern techniques of literary criticism are derived from investigations of lyric and dramatic poetry. These methods have only limited usefulness in the study of narrative poetry, the outstanding characteristic of which, when it is contrasted to lyric or dramatic verse, is its movement, its flow in time. Of necessity a play is con-

1. References to Karl Kroeber's works will be cited as follows: *BRA* = *British Romantic Art* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1986); *RFSS* = *Romantic Fantasy and Science Fiction* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1988); *RNA* = *Romantic Narrative Art* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1960); *RLV* = *Romantic Landscape Vision: Constable and Wordsworth* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1975).

cerned with a dramatic situation. A lyric is—relatively—so brief that we may without danger of going far wrong consider it temporally self-contained, timeless in the way that a painting is timeless. But a narrative is a temporal process. As E. M. Forster observes, the question we ask of the storyteller is “What happens next?” A verse story like *Tam o’ Shanter* is, in fact, a dynamic system of probabilities created first of all by the order of the happenings which occur, and only secondarily by the nature of the protagonist whom they befall. If the brevity of a lyric makes it comparable in its timelessness to a painting, the dynamic continuity of narrative poetry makes it comparable to music. (*RNA*, 6)

One should not dwell at too great length on the proleptic nature of such an early extract, but a surprising amount of Kroeber’s intellectual project is anticipated here, both directly and reflexively.

We might note first and above all the contrarian streak in Kroeber’s study. At a time when the lyric and the dramatic modes were accorded such privilege that they had come to underpin even our understanding and appraisal of novels, he is writing about narrative. Further, he begins his book with Burns and ends it with Sir Walter Scott, British, but not English, writers, both of whom were (to our continuing detriment) as decidedly out of fashion then as they remain today. With a chapter exploring the verse narratives of George Crabbe, Leigh Hunt, and Thomas Hood, followed by a lengthy chapter on Lord Byron, Kroeber forecasts which portions of early nineteenth-century poetry were to become the casualties of *Natural Supernaturalism*. Kroeber was then somewhat ambivalent about the growing lyricization of literary discourse: On the one hand, his chapter on what he called “Visionary Lyrics,” poems like Wordsworth’s *A Night Piece*, Coleridge’s *Kubla Khan*, and Keats’s *Ode to a Nightingale*, rightly insists on their narrative roots; on the other hand, he seems overly eager to award the palms for perfecting “Romantic transcendence of narrative” to such moderns as William Butler Yeats, who “wrote many visionary lyrics which are superior to those we have analyzed, in the main because they carried out fully principles the Romantics at first treated experimentally” (*RNA*, 62).

Finally, we might mark Kroeber’s appeals in this paragraph to the evidence of the other arts. At this time, he accepts comfortably the modernist assimilation of lyric poetry to the spatial conditions of visual art, and he does not balk at assigning pure spatiality to painting and pure temporality to music. He was to spend much of a decade rethinking the relationship

between literature and painting, in large part by exploring the temporality of Romantic painting, as we see in both *Romantic Landscape Vision* and *Images of Romanticism: Verbal and Visual Affinities* (co-edited with William Walling in 1978). He continues this project in *British Romantic Art*, which also includes substantial discussions of music in a provocative chapter on poetry and song.

When reviewing Kroeber's critical canon, it is less useful to think of an abiding literary or aesthetic theory than of certain topics, or places of discourse, that he revisits and revises. Some of the repeated topics are historical (the differences among art works of different ages, our own differences from nineteenth-century artists and their audiences); some are polemical (a nervousness about the strictures of classic modernism that has become increasingly antagonistic, an impatience with historical treatments of romanticism based in a narrowly lyric or lyricized canon); some are works (*Michael*, *The Prelude*, *The Rime of the Ancient Mariner*, *La Belle Dame sans Merci*); and some are great, but marginalized, figures (Burns, Scott, Byron). There is an emphasis everywhere on readings across genres and media, on nationalism and internationalism, on interactions between societies and their art, on the creative potency of art, and on the human imagination.

The fact that Kroeber's is a revisionary canon makes it particularly sensitive to revisionary art. He writes on landscape in Wordsworth:

A Wordsworthian landscape is inseparable from the history of the poet's mind. Much of his best verse concerns unimportant incidents which become significant when, subsequently, Wordsworth perceives them to have been decisive to his maturation. Without the poet's self-consciousness the events would remain trivial. Even a spectacular scene, such as the view from Snowdon, would be superficially sensational, were it not means through which the poet becomes aware of enhancement of his imaginative power. Here history in the mode of reflexive consciousness enters into poetic landscape as a genuine equivalent of the painter's chiaroscuro. (*RLV*, 105–6)

Anyone in academe could recite the potential drawbacks of a revisionist critical project when compared to our more commonly accepted linear or progressive models. But Kroeber's pattern as a critic, his willingness to revisit and reoccupy the sites of his former power, revisualizing their importance from later and different vantage points, has given him remarkable advantages as well.

Having begun with skepticism about the adequacy of "current" understandings of the arts, Kroeber has never found himself frozen into intellectual postures. In this, his work may not be unique in his scholarly generation, but it is rare enough to be remarked on. One of the least-edifying spectacles in the recent professional life of romanticists has been the response of some of our leading figures to emerging modes of literary study of the period, a response that has gone beyond intellectual disagreement to mean-spirited trivializations, first of deconstruction (which received only glancing blows because of the institutional eminence of many of its proponents and fellow travelers) and now especially of new historicism. Never having been part of the modernist/organicist/romanticist establishment, Kroeber is able in *British Romantic Art* to find common ground, sometimes uncomfortably shared, with such critics as Jerome McGann and David Simpson. As a formerly lonely upholder of the claims of narrative, he is able in *Romantic Fantasy and Science Fiction* to embrace its current critical prestige, embodied in the attention focused on M. M. Bakhtin, almost as Wordsworth did the advent of the French Revolution: "Nothing out of nature's certain course, / A gift that was rather come late than soon" (*The Prelude*, 9.247–48).

British Romantic Art is quite a title, unmodified as it is by any conditioning or limiting subtitle. Readers who infer that they are about to encounter a systematic, totalizing treatise on the subject are likely to be disappointed, perhaps baffled. And yet, the title is accurate, as Kroeber's opening sentence specifies with admirable precision: "In this book I discuss works of art associated by time and place, Britain at the beginning of the nineteenth century" (*BRA*, 1). The operative term here is *works* of art: Kroeber will engage but never center ideas of art, theories of art, schools of art, or periodizations of art. To talk about differences between Romantic and earlier eighteenth-century art, he moves directly to a juxtaposition of two composite visual and verbal narratives: Hogarth's sequence, *Industry and Idleness*, and Blake's prophecy, *The Book of Urizen*. To conduct his ensuing discussion of Romantic and Victorian art, he moves to cross-readings of two paintings, Constable's *Salisbury Cathedral* and Millais's *The Blind Girl*, and two poetic narratives, Wordsworth's *Michael* and Tennyson's *Enoch Arden*. Although the two chapters finally incorporate a substantial amount of social, intellectual, and aesthetic history, they do not depend on it. No argument is even brought forward for the characteristicness of the verbal and visual texts contrasted. Kroeber's presentation of Romantic art, then, is committedly undefinitional and unsystematic, and

ultimately it is open-ended. His book leaves space for another book, even a series of books, written by others and bearing the same title, that might engage different exemplary texts and reveal different characteristics within them and different sets of contrastive features between or among them.

Kroeber was committed to intertextuality before it was an English word. The kinds of narratives described in *Romantic Narrative Art* were determined inductively through comparative readings. Something like his current critical procedure was reached as early as *The Artifice of Reality*, in which readings of texts of Italian Romantic writers are balanced against readings of the English poets, without claims of influence or even mutual knowledge. A chapter on Ugo Foscolo's novel *The Last Letters of Jacopo Ortis* (1802), for example, is set against a chapter on Wordsworth's *Prelude* as a means of illuminating Romantic responses to the French Revolution. A major change between this earlier work and *British Romantic Art*, however, is that Kroeber has shifted his comparative focus from investigations of similarity to investigations of difference, or perhaps to the discovery of strange and elusive similarities in works of overt difference.

Although Kroeber's critical practice can be described, its findings elude easy summary. A large part of the reason for this is its fierce insistence on the *particular*, the *circumstantial*, the *contingent*, the *historical*, and the *ectypal*—words that ring throughout the study. A critical study predicated on the significance of the particular in an art work and that sees as a dominant hallmark of that work its demand for a personal engagement with its audience is unlikely to allow easy separations between the conduct of an examination and its findings. So let me provide an example from what may seem the most audacious chapters of the book.

In a move reminiscent of new historical practice, Kroeber begins his discussion of Scott's historical fiction with commentary on a nonliterary text:

In this chapter I hope to illuminate the kind of imaginative response Scott's fiction requires by juxtaposing his romances with Carl von Clausewitz's *On War*, a document remarkably illuminating of the Romantic spirit so far as it is primarily concerned with the historical rather than the transcendental, centering its energies on the difficulties of representing and giving higher value to the ectypal than to the archetypal. Clausewitz assembled the text of *On War* during the greater part of his professional career, but late in life he decided totally to revise the work. He died after having recast only his first chapters, leaving an unfinished manuscript that, like many Roman-

tic works, was not intended to be a fragment but, instead, evidences an author's willingness continuously to rethink the fundamental principles he espouses. Full appreciation of *On War* demands an analogous lability of mind on the part of a reader, as do, in a surprisingly similar fashion, Scott's romances. (*BRA*, 105)

Because Kroeber's annotations are unusually full and generous, I think we may say that this is a literary relationship that has not been previously discovered. At the risk of understatement, this connection is not inevitable. The analogies, Kroeber remarks, issue mainly from Clausewitz's awareness of the contingencies of warfare: "The key to his revision of his life work is his development of the observation that war, his subject, is not a single subject—there are various kinds of war—and that no easily unified theory of war is possible. For Clausewitz 'war' is an abstraction specifically realized only in diverse wars, historically unique phenomena" (*BRA*, 108). Part of what accounts for success or failure in battle is a concept Clausewitz called "friction, . . . the inescapable inertia in all human enterprises, including the effects of ineptness, fatigue, confusion, timidity, laziness, and all the unpredictable factors of chance that frustrate planning—all the characteristics of life that no organization, no foresight, however meticulous, can fully anticipate" (*BRA*, 107–8). According to Kroeber, Clausewitz's awareness of the "ever-varied interplay of multiple contingencies distinguishes his work from both his Enlightenment predecessors and present-day armchair theorists of game theory and computer modeling. Like the Romantics, Clausewitz stands between Neoclassical and Modern intellectualizers of human phenomena. Unlike either of these, he embeds theoretical judgments in specific facts of historical actualities" (*BRA*, 109).

Scott's fiction, Kroeber holds, "may be grounded on an equivalent valuation of friction" (*BRA*, 109). Consequently, we may see the detail of Scott's many battle scenes, so tiresome to many readers, as crucial to his historical purposes: "His minute descriptions of topography, localized variations in the earth's surface, have been criticized as a wealth of contingent detail signifying nothing; indeed, such details are resolutely nonsymbolic, devoid of latent content. But Scott deals in localized particularities because he renders historically ectypal truths of unique situations and unique experiences" (*BRA*, 112). Kroeber's next chapter goes on to discuss "how, in England especially, the historical novel as created by Scott was almost immediately subverted" (*BRA*, 131). Psychologizing and essentializing history, Victorian and modern novelists alike look for timeless patterns rather

than an interplay between the fictional and the factual. Here, Kroeber draws on Dickens's *Barnaby Rudge*, Eliot's *Middlemarch*, and Conrad's *Nostromo*, contrasting their efforts to those of Scott and Tolstoy, the latter being "almost unique among later nineteenth-century novelists in retaining a powerful commitment to the Romantic view of history" (*BRA*, 140).

Kroeber is drawing a powerfully revisionary map of one aspect of the "development" of the novel, displacing a map that has consigned Scott to the margins of the form. Whether his use of Clausewitz is adequate to this challenge, and indeed whether his overall historical argument is finally persuasive, is to some degree beside the point. He has certainly succeeded in what is for him the characteristic Romantic intention of defamiliarization. He has presented overly familiar material in radically unaccustomed contexts, allowing his reader to see and reflect on it as though for the first time. No one who reads the central section of this book should be able to think about the representation of history in fiction in quite the same way again—whatever his or her old way had been.

Although Kroeber seldom indulges in direct polemic, the friction between his study and the dominant strain of Romantic criticism should be evident: He sees much of Romantic criticism as an extension of the intellectual project of modernism, which in its drive for totality, for unity, for intellectual symmetry and closure, and for the instantaneous illumination of spatial form has either ignored or misread the deeply circumstantial temporality of Romantic texts, visual as well as verbal. His readings return Scott and Byron to central significance in their age, and they also reassert the Romantic difference of some artists who have always been more easily assimilated to modernist understandings, especially Keats, Constable, and Turner. He says of modernist misuses of Turner: "This minimalist functionalism of much modern aesthetics misleads some into identifying Turner as a sort of precursor of abstractionism. But on the contrary, his work vividly embodies the fundamental Romantic drive . . . toward a rich structural theme. The Romantic quest is for plenitude, not essence, an affirmation of the multiplicity of competing vital principles and the self-transformative, self-destructive, and self-reconstituting character of fundamental energies of being" (*BRA*, 192).

Kroeber is caught between two modes of Romantic criticism. His work is a celebration of the Romantic achievement. Attitudinally, then, it is in keeping with the older theological/organicist/formalist strain of Romantic studies that finds its apotheosis in *Natural Supernaturalism*. But Kroeber believes that that tradition of commentary has been unable to value the

Romantic achievement properly because of its attachments to modernist notions of order. For him, Romantic art is inherently unstable and indeterminate. It is indeterminate, however, "not because it is fragmented or inadequate but because it is like 'a fountain for ever overflowing with the waters of wisdom and delight'" (*BRA*, 230). This from his coda, a strong appreciation of Shelley's *Defence of Poetry*, reiterates the romanticism of plenitude his work has attempted throughout to establish. He is all too aware that those who share his sense of the indeterminacy of works of Romantic art are unlikely to share his and their creators' optimism about their origin and function:

Few critics in our time . . . do not work from the opposite premise, that art comes into being through injury or dislocation, a fault or fracturing of some kind, either psychological or sociological, perhaps both, and, consequently, that the endless interpretability of a work of art is due not to its being a fountain for ever overflowing but a *mise en abime*. For the Romantics art is an ever self-renewing surplus; for us art is an unfathomable chasm. Yet if we view all literary works as inherently unstable we are positioned, as earlier twentieth-century critics were not, to appreciate the destabilizing vitality in Romantic art, although in our gazing into the abyss we have perhaps moved farther away from understanding art as "a fountain for ever overflowing." (*BRA*, 230)

This is a hesitant stand, but a stand nonetheless. Caught between unbridgeable alternatives, Kroeber casts his lot with postmodernism, post-structuralism, and revisionist historicism as offering possibilities for understanding and appreciation that earlier forms of study had closed off.

Kroeber's contentions with modernism are nearer the surface of *Romantic Fantasy and Science Fiction*. His major concerns are the marginalization of fantasy as serious art within the modernist aesthetic; the misprision of Romantic fantasy under modernist aesthetic principles, in the face of which he provides intriguing corrective readings of such poems as *The Rime of the Ancient Mariner*, *La Belle Dame sans Merci*, and *Ode to Psyche*; and the revival of the possibility of fantasy in postmodernist art. The titular division of emphases in the work is misleading. Kroeber does devote a chapter to the differences between the forms, provocatively attributing the rise of both Romantic science fiction and Romantic fantasy to dissatisfactions with the triumphant humanism of Western culture. Both are reflexive formations, but they differ in their strategies. Science fiction,

evidenced by *Frankenstein*, is an extrapolative form, in which the writer “extends or projects or draws inferences from what is known or accepted (and the primary known fact of the modern world is that humanity dominates our globe).” Because the science fiction writer extrapolates scientifically, “he or she employs the basic style of scientific discourse—analytical, reportorial exposition.” Fantasy, on the other hand, seeks a sense of authentic otherness and must operate stylistically as “a primary form of literary self-reflexivity. It explores the deepest implications of oxymoron rather than attempting extrapolation” (*RFSF*, 10). Although he assures us that his contrast is not invidious, this is really a book about fantasy.

The intellectual center of Kroeber’s study is its sharply critical assessment of modernism’s program of total humanization, which the book sees as antithetical to the artistic presentation of otherness. “Fantasy,” he says,

presumes a heterogeneous discourse situation. It links human beings in a cosmos perceived as containing something other than humankind, and the audience response it evokes is predicated on an assumption of a human solidarity composed of heterogeneity, not homogeneity, just as *Mariner* and *Wedding Guest* are very different people coming from and going on to very different lives. With the spread of rationalized industrial systems around the globe, the value for the diversity from which fantasy derives and to which it appeals has been replaced by antithetical assumptions about human solidarity. These find powerful intellectual expression in structuralist modes of thinking which underlie our century’s dominant philosophies, anthropologies, and psychologies. (*RFSF*, 87)

Kroeber is most concerned about the cultural imperialism expressed in modernism’s concept of the “primitive,” which he says enables thinkers as diverse as Freud and Lévi-Strauss to speak “as if all preliterate people were essentially alike,” enabling modern artists like Picasso to seize on the idea of the primitive as a “mere instrument for revealing truth about what to them is genuinely important, modern, Westernized man” (*RFSF*, 87–88). For Kroeber, Freud’s assertion of “correspondence between the infantile psychology of the individual and the infantile condition of mankind” (*RFSF*, 91) diminishes our humanity and sadly diminishes the creative potential of art.

To recover that potential, he turns to Keats, one of those “poets who entertained the possibility of creating fantasy in a world without superstition

or magic" (*RFSS*, 94). What Keats accomplishes in a poem like *To Psyche*, Kroeber argues, is to show the way in which "the poet's mind was aroused by its own creative self-consciousness to admit into itself a reality of otherness grounded in no external phenomena. It is this paradoxical activity, a realizing of something other than oneself through self-reflection, that is fundamental to the unFreudian psychology on which Romantic fantasizing depends" (*RFSS*, 95). The triumph of *To Psyche*, then, is Keats's ability to enchant himself, to create a ground of substantial otherness that does not lay claim to the discovery of a transcendent reality or to a "power beyond his own creative power" (*RFSS*, 109).

Kroeber finds the linguistic resources Keats uses to perform this humanistic miracle, "conjoining . . . imaginative freedom with a realization of the restraints the worlds of nature and culture impose upon the powers of fantasizing" (*RFSS*, 109), as underlying the best of postmodern fiction. He closes the book with an appreciative analysis of Gabriel García Márquez's "The Ghost Ship," which is reprinted in an appendix. García Márquez, Kroeber offers, "can justly be aligned less with his immediate predecessors than with the original Romantics. . . . For the Romantics as for García Márquez, what is true and real for any human being is defined by what that human being is capable of imagining, and the potency of such reality is determined by the degree to which such imaginings of it can be shared" (*RFSS*, 137).

Kroeber does not offer to collapse differences between romanticism and postmodernism. As he astutely notes, García Márquez writes "with a self-reflective urgency forced on him more urgently by an environment even more hostile to fantasy than that of the Romantic era," and "he helps us to imagine how language, any language, could create meaning, how it might determine, not merely refer to, the nature of the reality we live in." For Kroeber, the postmodern recovery of fantasy is an enabling gesture, as "it recovers for us a necessary sense that there is something other than ourselves for us to wonder at together" (*RFSS*, 139).

Romantic Fantasy and Science Fiction is a risky book and is an extension of the risky project of *British Romantic Art*. Considering the range of their cultural critique, which globally pulls Victorian and modern artistic modes together while differentiating them sharply from those of romanticism and postmodernism, the range of exemplification in the two books is narrow. This problem affects less Kroeber's discussions of romanticism and postmodernism than of the hostile territory between. Although there seems little point in disputing either the existence or the cultural prestige of

modernist devaluations of narrative, one is led to wonder whether the problem lies in the terrain or its mapmakers. A map of modern poetry that would seriously engage the Edward Arlington Robinson of *Captain Craig* or *Isaac and Archibald* might be able to rethink in a different way modernism's responses to Romantic narrative.² And William Faulkner, always in my mind uneasily assimilated to "the modern psychological novel," is situated somewhere between Scott and García Márquez. Faulkner's central work about historical change, *Go Down, Moses*, is also his central version of something very like Romantic fantasy, which does create an authentic otherness. Indeed, García Márquez is as unthinkable without Faulkner as Faulkner is without Scott. That Kroeber's criticism provokes such alternative constructions is a tribute not to its weakness but to its power. If the central function of literature is "calling forth the utmost strength of our imagining" (*RFSF*, 139), surely a central function of criticism is calling forth reimaginations of the history of literature.

2. My thanks to George Drury, who made me read Edward Arlington Robinson and think about Robinson's Wordsworthian revisionism.

