

Counter-Exemplarity and Romantic Form

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It is my pleasure to introduce Johannes Türk, who is an associate professor of Germanic Studies here at Indiana University. He is the author of numerous essays, edited volumes, and a monograph on immunity and literature from Roman law to the biomedical sciences (published last year by Fischer). I would also like to introduce Anahid Nersessian, an assistant professor of English and Comparative Literature at Columbia. She is the author of articles in venues like *ELH*, *Studies in Romanticism*, *European Romantic Review* (among others). She is also has a monograph, "Utopia, Limited," currently under review and is now working on a book about calamity and climate change.

What Johannes's and Anahid's essays have in common, I think, is that both develop a theory of counter-exemplarity. That is, both are interested in the idea of the bad example (the example that doesn't establish itself as a source of knowledge). Furthermore, both of you seem to be attracted to the artistic possibilities that lurk within such bad examples. For Johannes, such possibilities are integral to the form of the novella, at least with Kleist. And for Anahid, such possibilities are integral to the concept of figuration, especially seen in a thrilling reading of Wordsworth's lyric "Nutting."

So just to recap: Johannes's paper is called "Vault and Wall," after the famous metaphor employed by Hume in the *Enquiry Concerning the Principles of Morals*. The wall represents the measure of human happiness achieved by the exercise of natural virtues (such as benevolence). This is version of happiness built gradually, brick-by-brick. It is not especially endangered by the loss of one brick. The vault, on the other hand, represents the measure of human happiness achieved within a more formal system of justice. This is a structure in which each brick supports one another other with the weight of its own gravity. Should one brick be removed, the entire structure would collapse. This leads to a reading of Kleist's novella *The Earthquake in Chile*, which seems weirdly to vindicate individual over general happiness. That is, the happiness of the couple spared by the Chilean earthquake seems to be worth more than the misery of the community destroyed by the earthquake. This is Johannes's conclusion: "What emerges in the novella instead is a narrative in which the events can no longer become an example for any rule." For Johannes, this idea—the counter-exemplarity of narrative—runs counter to the older tradition of the novella, from Boccaccio to Cervantes, especially as seen in works like Cervantes's *Exemplary Novels*.

Anahid's paper is a fascinating attempt to connect literary concepts like figuration to questions introduced by analytic and cognitive disciplines like prototype theory. So, questions like: Can you recognize a shade of blue that you have never seen *as* blue? (Evidently, you can.) It turns out that the Romantics were interested in precisely such questions. As Anahid describes it, Wordsworth's lyric "Nutting" opens a similar set of questions through the use of phrases like "one of." Here is what she says, for instance, about just four words: "one dear nook/unvisited": "The most significant feature of this nook is that the boy has never been to it before. But if the speaker has never been to it before, how can it already be 'dear' to him? Does the proleptic adjective count the nook as dear prior to its destruction because it will be dear afterwards? To complicate matters, when he arrives in the grove, he wonders if this one, which he has never seen, is like those he has seen, 'a bower beneath whose leaves/The violets of five seasons re-appear' and so on." Thus, for Anahid, Wordsworth offers a poetics of what Barthes would call

“nescience,” of “not knowing” rather than knowing. Wordsworth’s poetry, in other words, offers examples that do not necessarily suggest themselves as exemplary.

And this brings me to my question, which is the same for both of you. And that is: don’t we have a word for the phenomenon that both of you are describing? That word is, quite simply, “Romanticism.” For it seems to me that the phenomenon that both of you are describing (the nonexemplarity of the literary example) has been told before, though perhaps couched in different terms—particularly the well-discussed eighteenth-century aesthetic notion of the “parts versus the whole.” Or perhaps, in the Germanic tradition we might describe it as the movement towards the idiosyncratic as an aesthetic endeavor. My favorite demonstration of this idea comes from William Blake’s annotations to Joshua Reynolds’s *Discourses*. Here we have an example of a prominent Romantic responding very directly to a more neoclassical aesthetic. Just to take one example, this is what Reynolds (the neoclassicist) says about history painting: “this disposition to abstractions, to generalizing and classification, is the great glory of the human mind.” So, just looking at the painting we have on the cover of the reader, I think this is what Reynolds would say. And here is how Blake (the Romantic) annotated this passage: “To Generalize is to be an Idiot. To Particularize is the Alone Distinction of Merit. General Knowledges are those Knowledges that Idiots possess.”

So it seems to me that both of your papers might be seen as simply rephrasing a rejection of Johnsonian poetics. (Not that there’s anything wrong with that project). Johnson, of course, famously described the task, the business of the poet: “to examine, not the individual, but the species; to remark general properties and large appearances. He does not number the streaks of the tulip, or describe the different shades of the verdure of the forest.” Could we not say that is what Kleist and Wordsworth are doing? They are numbering the streaks of the tulip.

The larger question for this group then becomes: what do we gain by invoking this language of exemplarity? Are we actually accessing any ideas that we could not in discussing the parts versus the whole, or the emergence of the idiosyncratic? And I’ll say that this runs to my bigger reservation about cognitive studies—that quite frequently we are simply giving new names to things and ideas that we already know.