



Romanticism on the Net

Afterword: The Object Lessons of the Virtual Museum

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Abstract

Emphasizing the mutability and volatility of Romantic matter, the essays collected in this special issue evoke a museum in motion. This afterword, however, focuses on a secondary line of argument running through *Materialising Romanticism*—this issue’s account of how the Romantics often used things to move themselves. To bring that account to the fore and demonstrate its continued relevance to our twenty-first-century pandemic moment, as to twenty-first-century distance learning, I explore the Romantic-era invention of concepts of armchair travel and armchair travelers—figures who use material objects to jump-start experiences of imaginative transport and of traveling in place. As an initial illustration of such uses, I engage with an early-nineteenth-century parlor amusement called the myriorama, which promised that an almost infinite number of landscapes could be created through the manipulation of only twelve or sixteen cards. I turn next to two Romantic-period literary examples—Xavier de Maistre’s memoir of house arrest and how-to book for mental travel, *Voyage autour de ma Chambre*, and the episode in *Mansfield Park* that dramatizes the lessons in both dwelling and escape that Austen’s heroine Fanny Price reads off the collectibles she has gathered up in the manor house’s old schoolroom.

Biographical Note

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1. There is no single itinerary for a visitor to follow in touring *RÊVE (Romantic Europe: The Virtual Exhibition)*, the collection of objects representing Romanticism that Catriona Seth and Nicola Watson have curated since 2017. There is no single entry point, either, into the

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virtual museum that this issue of *Romanticism on the Net* conjures into existence as it presents the findings of the team of academics, archivists, and curators whom Seth and Watson recruited. Instead, by way of registering the diversity of the objects—manufactured and natural, common and strange, portable and entrenched, here and gone—that have spoken and speak about Romanticism, this special issue highlights the multiplicity of the approaches that scholars of Romantic materiality and Romanticism’s materializations might adopt. Each of the essays here maps European Romanticism differently. Each modifies the organization of *RÊVE* in its own way. It is in part through those rearrangements that the authors make their arguments. Collectively, they install and reinstall the museum’s artifacts into new relations of proximity and make them speak differently about the Romantic past on each occasion.

2. The Romantic objects showcased in the museum assembled for readers of RoN are sometimes possessed of remarkable substance and heft—one advantage of a virtual museum being that a tree or boulder will be as comfortably accommodated by its vitrines as a lavender-water phial. Other objects are paper thin and/or as light as air—traits defining the particular insubstantial substances that Samantha Matthews and Cian Duffy lodge within their essays’ display cases. Sometimes the matter and matters that the contributors call to our attention define the outdoors: hence the stones, trees, and waterfalls studied by Patrick Vincent, Fiona Stafford, and Nigel Leask. On other occasions, the artifacts define the indoors, and household goods like dinner services and writing tables also get a look-in while we tour. With some consistency, though, the contributors to this issue suggest that

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the objects arrayed within their virtual museum's vitrines have been detained there only momentarily and that their motion has only been paused.

3. In his essay on the things Romantic travelers carried on their journeys, for instance, Will Bowers points out that the landscape prospects most cherished by this era's tourists were the ones that they could see only once, the scenes that flashed fleetingly into existence on the surface of their Claude glasses. The images that these optical devices created, fixed only so long as the sun remained up and the traveler continued holding up the mirror, were "essentially transitory." Bowers's Claude glass stories help us appreciate how the Romantic museum that he and his fellow authors have dreamt up in concert impossibly, fantastically, encompasses phenomena that, at the start of the nineteenth century, remained uncollectible and unduplicatable.¹

4. This is a notable dimension of the museology that informs this issue: that the authors so often emphasize objects' impermanence, as well as their changes of state and repurposing. The authors here tell us, for instance, of how paper manuscripts can be reused as kindling and of how trees that are rooted in place can even so be fashioned into timber for ships and sail away. They consistently play up the mutability to which both inanimate matter and, as Diego Saglia emphasizes, human flesh are subject. (Barbara Schaff takes this emphasis to its logical conclusion in her essay and puts into the frame various examples of absent, lost, unpreserved, dispersed, and decayed objects.) That abiding theme of Romanticist studies, the interaction of materiality with ideality, preoccupies this group of authors—a register, maybe, of the paradox that they had to negotiate, having been commissioned to argue for

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why matter matters for Romanticism and to do so contributing to a virtual exhibition. These authors also play up the tensions between the evanescence and volatility of things and the collector's, museum-keeper's, and home-maker's shared desire to house, preserve, and eternalize them. In this museum, the objects are in motion, their meanings unfixated.

5. But from the epigraph of this issue on, another, complementary line of argument glimmers into view. *Materialising Romanticism* also from time to time reminds us that the Romantics, like us in the twenty-first century, also used things to move themselves—that they looked to their household furnishings to foster those experiences of imaginative transport in which they might travel, but would travel in place. (Indeed, the English term *arm-chair traveler* was a Romantic-era coinage, with the *Oxford English Dictionary* identifying the year 1809 as the date of its debut in print.) And, of course, as Seth and Watson will have anticipated, many of us are likely to avail ourselves of *RÊVE* in just this Romantic way—stuck at home or the office, riveted to our laptops, apparently going nowhere, but using its resources to pursue multiple itineraries, scholarly and fanciful, that we would otherwise be unable to access.

6. Thus the speaker of the poem by Patrick Wright that supplies this issue's epigraph records how while shuffling and reshuffling his set of postcards imprinted with Turner paintings he creates and re-creates new landscapes. In lending itself to such uses, the card collection at the center of "Imaginary Museum" resurrects the scenic myriorama: a parlor amusement

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from the 1820s, which was touted to its purchasers as being the source *in potentia* of a multitude of landscapes. Armchair travelers could conjure those into being merely by arraying the lithographed cards they had purchased, each imaging a different bit of scenery, into one new topographical arrangement after another. While publicizing this invention, the myriorama's first English manufacturer, Samuel Leigh, offered the calculation that the sixteen picture cards contained in each set would "admit of the astonishing figure of 20,922,789,999,000 variations" (qtd. in Hyde 406). Leigh, it seems, is pitting the almost infinitely reconfigurable virtual landscapes that the myriorama's customers access while ensconced in their parlors against the real landscapes accessed by travelers who have had to walk or ride or sail to see them—and asserting that arithmetic alone proves that in their variety the former must surpass the latter.² In her article here, Sophie Thomas remarks, to an analogous effect, on how a virtual exhibition platform invites users to encounter its objects via "pathways of their own choosing" and how this exhibitionary mode has a capacity, accordingly, to scale up, "in a potentially limitless and transcendent way, the associative power of things." In fact, Thomas could have borrowed from the idiom that in the 1820s marketed the myriorama and could have said that, for armchair travelers of the 2020s possessed of a digital connection, *RÊVE* represents a "inexhaustible Source of Amusement" (Leigh qtd. in Hyde 406).

7. As we consider what kind of guidebook might be adequate to the museological possibilities dreamt up in these essays, we might also turn to a set of object lessons—instruction in things' powers to form associations and thereby move us—first imparted to armchair travelers in a book from the start of the Romantic period.

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In the fourth chapter of *Voyage autour de ma chambre*, the 1794 travelogue, albeit of a peculiar kind, in which the French aristocrat Xavier de Maistre documents the six weeks of house arrest imposed on him for dueling, he stresses that this journeying around his room will “rarely follow a straight line” (8). It instead will be a matter of zigzagging—following “every line possible in geometry” (8). “I go from my table toward a painting hung in a corner, and from there I set off obliquely for the door; yet although in setting out my intention is to reach that spot, if I happen to encounter my armchair along the way, without hesitation I settle right down into it. —What a splendid piece of furniture an armchair is . . .” (8–9). And so on, as Maistre continues his demonstration that enumerating the furnishings of a domestic interior, however mundane, can be very instructive. This is largely because every object Maistre regards seems to set his mind wandering. Each ignites a train of thought that takes him out of his cramped quarters, and each sets him circumnavigating an inner world of vastly more generous dimensions. (Little wonder that in French Canada during April 2020 Maistre’s text was promoted by the public broadcaster Radio Canada as a kind of self-help guide to surviving the COVID lockdown.)³ Boxfuls of cards forming “endless landscapes” were not yet available for purchase when this book was written—but the *Voyage* in its own way promises its audience that the object world is inexhaustible, that it can yield an almost infinite number of permutations. Early in the memoir, Maistre proclaims his distaste for people who execute predetermined agenda in predictable ways and who “control their steps and ideas” (8): refusing that kind of linearity and indulging in both zigzaggy domestic voyaging and zigzaggy writing are techniques enabling

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him to present space as infinitely expandable—or at least as the occasion for an infinite number of journeys.

8. Maistre's bedchamber setting for these object lessons might have been an appropriate candidate for inclusion in Schaff's essay on loss. *Expédition nocturne autour de ma chambre*, the sequel that Maistre wrote in 1795, but whose publication he delayed for almost thirty years, tells of how shortly after he had served out his sentence, Turin was attacked by the Austro-Russian forces whose cannons razed the outer wall of the room in the town's citadel that he had occupied during that period of confinement. Devotees of the *Voyage autour de ma chambre* were thus disappointed of opportunities to make pilgrimages to this site. But even if the attack had not taken place, loss would have been in the cards all the same. In some passages, Maistre frames the *Voyage* as a how-to book for would-be mental travelers (*hey, kids*, he is saying, *do try this at home*). But at other moments, this memoir represents this author's journey as an unduplicatable experience, irreducibly his and his alone. The interior he traversed over those six weeks could never be rediscovered. As Joseph de Maistre explained while prefacing a reissue of his brother's work in 1811, Xavier's voyage differed from the more celebrated voyages of Magellan, Drake, Anson, and Cook, which "can be repeated" (187): "they are traced on all the maps of the world by elegant dotted lines, and everyone is free to dash off along the trails blazed by these daring men. Such is not the case with the *Voyage Around My Room*; it has been done once and for all, and no mortal could ever dream of beginning it again . . ." (187). Neither the cartographer's

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diagrams nor the topographer's description will measure up to narrative when it comes to representing Maistre's wanderings. In this preface, Joseph foregoes on his brother's behalf any claim that the *Voyage* might serve as a generalizable model or that its author might be exemplary. Instead, the exact meanings granted to the small things of this limited world depend wholly on the idiosyncrasies of a singular subjectivity as those unfold over time.

9. An episode in Jane Austen's *Mansfield Park* makes a comparable point. Austen's minimalism usually has her keeping her distance from what Thomas dubs "the ever-rising tide of material things that marked the turn of the nineteenth century." It is Austen's usual way to care about a room, Andrew Elfenbein observes, "not as a collection of objects but as an interweaving of place and action" (115). In her 1814 novel, however, she deviates from her customary reticence about setting and in a lengthy section of its sixteenth chapter has her narrator inventory the contents of the East room, the chamber in Sir Thomas Bertram's house where his niece, our heroine, is accustomed to take refuge in moments of distress. For all her dispossession, this poor relation does have a room of her own, and *Mansfield Park* associates Fanny Price, more so than any other character, with things of her own. In this chapter's descriptive set piece, we read, first, of Fanny's "plants, her books . . . [and] her writing desk" (178). Later that inventory is supplemented, as the narrator informs us that the room's

greatest elegancies and ornaments were a faded footstool of Julia's work, too ill done for the drawing-room, three transparencies, made in a rage for

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transparencies, for the three lower panes of one window, where Tintern Abbey held its station between a cave in Italy, and a moonlight lake in Cumberland; a collection of family profiles thought unworthy of being anywhere else, over the mantle-piece, and by their side and pinned against the wall, a small sketch of a ship sent four years ago from the Mediterranean by William, with H.M.S. Antwerp at the bottom, in letters as tall as the main-mast. (178–79)

We read next of a tabletop covered with work-boxes and netting-boxes, presents from Fanny's cousin Tom, who evidently cannot be bothered to vary his gifts, and read that Fanny "grew bewildered as to the amount of the debt which all these kind remembrances produced" (179–80).

10. Austen's engagement with household stuff is minute, prosaic, even, but it brings to light, as Maistre's object lessons do also, the inseparability of matter and idea and of presence and distance, in ways that will feel familiar to readers of this issue. She comments shrewdly on the affective regime that during her lifetime was engendering new ways of dwelling with objects, as with the memories with which objects were newly saturated. Scarcely one of the articles she has enumerated, the narrator of *Mansfield Park* tells us, "had not an interesting remembrance connected with it": "Everything was a friend, or bore [Fanny's] thoughts to a friend" (178). By means of this mental voyage around her room, Fanny uses these assorted, anthropomorphized remembrancers to reconnect herself to the very relations from whom she has sought momentarily to escape. (This project of self-discipline comes the more easily because, like other travelers who have been educated in the

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picturesque, Fanny finds that “the whole was . . . so harmonized by distance, that every former affliction had its charm” [178].) The episode confirms Seth and Watson’s proposal in their introduction that Romantic objects are those consecrated by narratives of sentiment.

11. Fanny’s conviction, explored in an earlier chapter of *Mansfield Park*, that it will be a delight to tour Sotherton, the Elizabethan manor house belonging to her cousin’s fiancé, and there “warm her imagination with scenes of the past” and connect all she sees with “history already known” (99), suggests that she would likely concur with another of the propositions about the Romantic object Seth and Watson set out in their introduction: that this object will be apprehended best when encountered in the proper location. The writers’ house museums that so often focus the attention of their contributors, and which are documented in the videos made *in situ* by curators Emma Yandle, Jeff Cowton, Simon Brown, and Kirsty Archer-Thompson, thus embody the premise that the meaningfulness of objects linked to authors—those authors’ books included—depends on those objects being housed.

12. At the same time, our engagement with the digital materialities of this issue might prime us to remember that locatedness on occasion has some disorienting dimensions. A second look at the furnishings of Mansfield Park’s East room might clarify those. The space has been dubbed Fanny Price’s “British Museum” (Burgess) and her “theater of the past” (Dames 57). We might also, however, think of it as a site hosting the kind of telepresence—the sensation of being present and yet at a distance we feel when we project ourselves into fictional environments—that contemporary theorists of virtual worlds often engage. Their

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theories have been taken up by scholars of the nineteenth century: Rachel Teufolsky, for instance, has written of how the nineteenth-century English parlor, far from being hermetically sealed off, was a portal, “opening onto a series of shifting views” (2); Alison Byerly has examined how the very moment when travel was becoming accessible to a broader public, staying home and fantasizing about travel became a popular pastime (2). Some of the things collected in Fanny’s room suggest her affinity for such traveling—her desire to use her imagination to be in two places at once. By referencing those transparencies that image beauty spots in Wales, Italy, and Cumberland, by referencing the sketch that William Price sends from the Mediterranean, but which also, weirdly enough, originates on a ship named for a city in Belgium, by conjoining the near distant and the distantly near, Austen in this chapter identifies some of the escape routes that the object world proffered people at the start of the nineteenth century (Of course, she has given us a heroine disinclined to fully take advantage of them.) These things might also remind you, readers, of how, while you sat before your laptop screens, the displays in Seth and Watson’s virtual museum moved you.

13. Although the authors’ work with *RÊVE* began before 2020, the experience of the recent COVID years—a period when, as noted, Maistre’s memoir of his being marooned with his furnishings returned to public notice—might be another reason why you will likely concur with Seth and Watson and their contributors in finding the virtual museum good to think with. Indeed, with the closure of the brick-and-mortar museums, it was for a long time the

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only kind of museum many of us *could* encounter. Lockdown will have made us value in new ways the affordances of this project's digital platform. But it has also made more conspicuous a conundrum that goes mainly unacknowledged in this issue—which is that, even as it makes its argument for creativity as a function of local residence, the writer's house museum nonetheless requires *dislocation* from its visitors. We leave our home ground so as to pay homage to the inspiring power of *their* home ground.

14. During the pandemic, of course, we didn't. That period of enforced absence from the objects of our study—at least from their physical presence—was perhaps particularly troubling for people who, like many of the contributors to this issue, research the “physical” book and “material culture.” But there are of late indications that, prompted to reflect anew on their practice, humanities scholars *in general* might be readier than in the past to allot a central place to what Hans Ulrich Gumbrecht calls “presence effects”—effects that are often marginalized by our tendency to represent the humanities as a meaning culture whose central activities are decoding signs, looking for messages, explaining and interpreting texts.⁴ Gumbrecht argues that we and our students do not seek only to know what objects from the past mean. He would have us own up to our desire for presence—a desire to hold “the things of this world close to our skin” (106), which “makes us imagine how we would have related, intellectually and with our bodies, to certain objects . . . if we had encountered them in their own historical everyday worlds” (124). He also proposes that *deixis*—the Greek word for indicating with the hand—should be seen a cornerstone of humanistic pedagogy and scholarship.⁵ Our scholarship, he explains, *points* out for others what has come to impact our senses and *touch* us.

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15. *Deixis*, the term Gumbrecht invokes as he proposes that an oscillation between meaning effects and presence effects should be basic to the procedures of an aesthetic education, is also useful when it comes to specifying the kind of new work with digital materialities this issue embodies. Its etymology reminds us of how the essays in this issue achieve what they do in part by inviting their reader to click on links and through that manual action bring various objects before her: they accord the reader's fingers a crucial role in making objects that originate in the past both present and manipulable.⁶ In this way, too, the work gathered up this issue exemplifies beautifully the balancing act—one involving the interaction, as well, of historicism and sentiment—that Gumbrecht envisions. Even as it has us look backward to the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, *Materialising Romanticism*, in its embrace of the possibilities and pleasures of a digital platform, suggests new paths forward for our discipline.

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Notes

¹ We might recall in this connection Geoffrey Batchen’s proposal that the Romantic period can be understood not as originating photography exactly but as originating its necessary precondition, the *desire* to photograph.

² When marketing the second series of the *Myriorama*, in which the cards imaged bits of Italian scenery, Leigh undertook another calculation and found that if each of the arrangements that the twenty-four cards contained in this new set could be disposed in occupied individually a yard of square ground, then “they would, by being placed one after the other, cover the length of 352,527,500,984,695,1360,000 miles . . . to walk over which the wandering Jew, who is supposed never to rest, would require 10,060,716,352,305,768 years, 263 days, and 8 hours” (qtd. in Hyde 407).

³ On April 28, 2020, Maistre’s memoir focused an episode of the columnist Thomas Hellman’s radio show *Plus on est de fous plus on lit*, later made available as a podcast: <https://ici.radio-canada.ca/ohdio/premiere/emissions/plus-on-est-de-fous-plus-on-lit/segments/chronique/167239/thomas-hellman-xavier-de-maistre>. Accessed 24 January 2023.

⁴ See also Abbate: “In academic circles, one can see a contemporary turn to media, to modalities of communication, to actor-networks, to delivery systems for the aesthetic, as a turn to the material channels and physical manifestations of things that we no longer want to call texts precisely because that term denies their embodiment and, in enabling the abstraction, encourages cryptographic habits” (80).

⁵ I am indebted to Abbate for her discussion of the role of deixis in Gumbrecht’s redescription of the humanities.

⁶ See Green for an account of how curators’ digitization projects, rather than being on occasion for sensory loss, can remind audiences of the importance of touching and feeling.