



*Romanticism on the Net*

**Introduction: Materialising Romanticism**

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**Biographical Note**

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Fig. 1: A “Blue Italian” plate by Spode, design launched 1816. Author’s own photograph.

On this Sunday autumnal morning  
I arrange a set of postcards on the table’s  
surface—all Turners from the 1840s  
with billowing waves and detonating suns.

I juxtapose them in ways entirely my own—

I rotate them in the style of a gyre:  
the ships and shorelines disappearing  
till all that’s left is one big creation myth—

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like how once everything we know  
was crammed inside the size of a dice.  
All this at some remove from the Clore  
with its taut ropes and exclusion zones.

Under my hands I see the paint sail  
outwards and into the grain—the edges  
fizzling away and atmospheres escaping  
into the larger lozenge: the place of prayer.

– Patrick Wright, “Imaginary Museum: After J. M. W. Turner”

**One**

1. Can we define Romanticism? If you answered an immediate “Yes,” possibly followed by a mark of exasperation like those reserved for recalcitrant students who appear not to be putting their heart into the task—“Obviously,” “Of course”—was your response immediately qualified by a “but,” a “though,” or even a “No”? While not framed as such, it was, in many ways, the implicit question behind *RÊVE (Romantic Europe: The Virtual Exhibition)*, its parent project the AHRC-funded network *DREAMing Romantic Europe* (2018–20), and this special issue of *Romanticism on the Net*.

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2. From its inception, our project sought to set up a network of academics and curators. Networks are impalpable, based on goodwill, contacts both formal and informal, common experiences, and sometimes instinctive appreciation of one another. This network was to cross disciplinary and geographical borders, to bridge divides, and to try, from a series of different, sometimes conflicting answers to address an opening question: “What is Romanticism?” The initial desire of getting curators and academics, galleries, libraries, archives, museums, and universities across Europe to work together demanded an agreed framework beyond this conventional (if ambitious) research question. Setting up a common project was an obvious way to give shape to the collaboration. Rather than conceiving a traditional conference or set of essays, we hit upon the idea of building an imaginary museum. From its inception, this aim was paradoxical, foregrounding the profoundly Romantic tensions between the virtual and the material. Our imaginary museum would be created online, a virtual exhibition which could bring together objects held in different places, objects, in the widest possible sense of the term, which might indeed be places or even events; objects, too, which have disappeared, been lost, remodelled, or destroyed. By using the material turn as a means of approaching Romanticism, so often defined through sentiments rather than things, imaginative arcs rather than materialities, we would offer up a kaleidoscope of answers as to the “what” of Romanticism, one which allowed room for a wide variety of approaches and sensibilities. But they have this in common: where other scholarship has typically started from how literary Romanticism thought about and represented objects, *RÊVE* has concerned itself with exploring how objects have been used, and are still being used, to think about and represent Romanticism.<sup>1</sup>

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3. The remit for project participants was simple: choose an object which speaks of Romanticism in the literary-historical sense, and with one photographic image and a one-thousand-word text, explain why it merits its place within this collection's fluctuating contours. *RÊVE*—the French word for *dream*—is a dream of a museum, one which will never exist otherwise than in a virtual format. Cross the threshold and you can row out to a Scottish island, climb a Swiss mountain, look warily over the Lakagígar volcanic fissure, take a Portuguese train with a Hungarian travelling box, bring English souvenirs back to Italy and Poland as well as Tahitian artefacts to Germany, or swim between continents with Leander and Byron. Here the exceptional and the mundane sit side by side, locks of a famous poet's hair jostling ephemeral playbills or a deposed empress's album. There are mass-produced items and carefully custom-crafted ones, natural wonders and works of art, witnesses to despair like mementoes of slavery, and to great hopes like the ring John Keats gave to Fanny Brawne. You will encounter famous names in the history of the Romantic era, from Austen to Wordsworth via Chateaubriand, Erdödy, Goethe, and many others, but also see anonymous figures brought out of the shadows, accompanying travellers down mineshafts, or crafting scientific instruments. Your senses will be attuned to the quality of the air, the temperature of the water, or the warmth of the fire. *RÊVE* transports you, the reader, across Europe and beyond its borders in order to involve you in reconsidering what Romanticism is.
  
4. As long as they respected the format—one image and a text—contributors could offer several objects either to develop a theme or to showcase diversity. To test the robustness of the concept, we ran three study days. These were held just outside Paris (at the Maison

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Chateaubriand), in Ravenna (in association with the new Museo Byron), and in Grasmere (at Dove Cottage). We invited participants to put up the one picture and speak for under ten minutes to the object's characteristics, provenance, origins, and anything which made it emblematic of—or for—Romanticism. The excitement of these encounters demonstrated the efficiency of the approach, which we then elaborated and deployed in other venues. We exported the concept to a specific place—the Cowper and Newton Museum—and asked all the participants, having toured the rooms, to choose an object and present it on the spot, before writing up a duly-researched presentation. We took it to Ravenna where Teresa Guiccioli and Byron lived and loved and where students from a local secondary school met the challenge of writing their own posts based on the new Museo Byron's collections and on the sites frequented by the Italian countess and her poet. We sent it to Frankfurt, where visitors could access *RÊVE* via an interactive floor map as part of the launch exhibition of the new Deutsches Romantik-Museum in 2020. And, more conventionally, we took this groundbreaking approach to conferences in Chawton, Nottingham, Edinburgh, Bologna, Kraków, and Budapest.

5. We hope that as you wander through the museum you will find objects you would yourself have included—perhaps Landseer's *Monarch of the Glen* or a letter by Jane Austen—but also others which will surprise you and even unsettle you: which will force you to think of Romanticism differently. During the project, we have experienced these varied emotions and been obliged to confront our own initial conceptions. In response, we added a layer to the straightforwardly historiographical by inviting contemporary creative responses to

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Romantic objects, commissioning different artworks, from a postcard to a musical suite, including the poems which open and close this special issue.

6. One of the central aims of *RÊVE* was to study what emerged about Romanticism via the juxtaposition of objects. What were the common characteristics across Europe? When nations were at war with each other, were their sensitivities analogous? How did Romanticism view the wider world? What scope was there for recognising the suffering of others alongside the nostalgia and self-centred feelings so often associated with many writers of the time? What role might nature play? And did the Industrial Revolution help or hinder the expression of Romanticism? What were Romanticism's blind spots? How did Romanticism as a recognisable mode come into being? When did it begin and end? As the number of objects began to mount, noticeable series and affinities started to emerge. We invited several participants to curate collections, offering the casual visitor to *RÊVE* an occasion to follow a thread as one might when visiting a temporary exhibition. As a result, *RÊVE* has proposed a format which can be used by others to engage different publics, from schoolchildren and casual visitors to museums, both real and virtual, to academics, curators, and other specialists.
  
7. It is in recognition of this radical potential of *RÊVE* as an "imaginary museum" that we have chosen Patrick Wright's poem as epigraph to this volume of essays designed to reflect upon *RÊVE* and its findings. Wright's poem suggests that the institutionally grounded concept of Romanticism, embodied here in Turner's imagery with its agreed aspects and perspectives, can be unsettled into constant flux, inflected by our individual sensitivities

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and personal spaces. It constitutes an implicit invitation to reflect on our own thought processes and expectations, on the way the paths we tread, the turns we take, the associations we make create meaning. Beyond this, Wright's poem suggests some of the profoundly Romantic tensions between the material and the virtual with which *RÊVE* has grappled. Through that most mundane, commercial, and material of objects, the postcard, we are thrown into the turmoil of a storm at sea. Imagined materialities of water, light, and air change and charge the literal materiality of the poet's desk, as the postcard's edges fizzle away to allow atmospheres to escape. To illustrate other complexities that characterise the project, we have chosen an image of a deliberately familiar and apparently unexciting object, a blue and white earthenware plate (fig. 1). The design is one which has been imitated since it was first used by Josiah Spode, one of a generation of master potters who brought about extraordinary innovations from the end of the eighteenth century onward. The "Blue Italian" design managed to be at once sought after and mass-produced. Spode chose to represent semirural scenes considered to be picturesque. And yet this Italianate view encapsulates various composite elements to produce a pleasing prospect which does not appear to represent a specific vista. By owning such a piece, you acquired a share in an imaginary scene. The plate is one of a series in more ways than one. "Blue Italian" continues to be produced and embodies "Englishness" across the continents while being based on Italian landscapes—those which countless, often anonymous, seventeenth-century artists sought out and sketched—and boasting a border which hearkens back to Oriental Imari porcelain. It is at once whole, unlike the shards found by urban archaeologists and mudlarkers, and a mere part at once, one must suppose, of a day's production at the factory, and of a service owned by an individual or a household. Such



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plates, like the finer ones manufactured by another Josiah—Wedgwood—at neighbouring Etruria, are implicit testimonies to trade wars between East and West, to Europe’s hotly contested desire, across the nations—Great Britain, Saxony, France, Italy, Bavaria, and others took part—to find the secret of mass-producing elegant tableware and beating China at its own game. Spode’s transfers and work with cobalt to achieve the different shades of blue were admired by many including, no doubt, the purchaser of this plate. A provincial product, it beckons beyond the piece of clay, raw matter of the simplest kind. Through the transmutations brought about by the potter’s skill, the shaping, firing, decorating, and glazing, it becomes a work of art despite the slightly clumsy proportions of the figures, both animal and human, which seem to have been grafted onto varying superimposed perspectives. Speaking of industry and innovation, of economics and currencies, of foreign lands and peoples, the plate above all imbricates the material and the quotidian with the imaginary and the fantastic, and as such, opens onto the preoccupations driving the essays that make up *Materialising Romanticism*.

## **Two**

8. Before we plunge into the various itineraries through the holdings of *RÊVE* offered by the essays collected here, it seems worth pulling out and reflecting on the overarching answers that the virtual exhibition offered up to that initial question, “What is Romanticism?” and to the question folded within that *what*—“What is a Romantic object?” Perhaps unsurprisingly, the concept of Romanticism proved impossible to enclose within hard boundaries: viewed from Britain, Rousseau and Goethe are central to Romanticism,

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whereas in France and Germany, both figures epitomise Enlightenment; viewed right across Europe, the Romantic period stretches from perhaps the 1780s in the far west through to close on the 1880s in the east. In sharp contrast, the concept of the Romantic object turned out to be tightly circumscribed. It became plain that it was a special category of object, composed of the tangible and intangible, of materiality and narrative. Investigation into the invisible invested within the material proved best conducted through the medium of narrative; contributors found themselves writing something not unlike what cultural anthropologists and archaeologists term “object biography.” Writing the cultural biography of a thing, according to Igor Kopytoff’s influential formulation, entails asking a set of questions:

What, sociologically, are the biographical possibilities inherent in its “status” and in the period and culture, and how are these possibilities realized? Where does the thing come from and who made it? What has been its career so far, and what do people consider to be an ideal career of such things? What are the recognized “ages” or “periods” in the thing’s “life,” and what are the cultural markers for them? How does the thing’s use change with its age, and what happens to it when it reaches the end of its usefulness? (Kopytoff qtd. in Blackwell 12)

The crucial difference between this idea of the cultural biography of a thing, which has dominated the museological world for perhaps twenty years, and the object biographies that make up the exhibits in *RÊVE* inheres in distinctively Romantic narratives of sentiment. The objects exhibited in *RÊVE* have typically served as occasions, reservoirs,

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and repositories of sentiment, personal and collective. Their “use” is (often exclusively) sentimental in this sense. Such objects have typically acquired a sort of agency and are treated as capable of encounter with the observer. They are self-conscious, singular, unique, and very often associated with a celebrated individual. Of the 151 exhibits contributed to *RÊVE*, sixty-seven titles follow or include the construction “[Name]’s [Object].” These include “[Wordsworth’s Wishing-Gate](#)” (Cowton), “[A Page from Keats’s Anatomy Notebook](#)” (Bertonèche), and “[Sir Walter Scott’s Slippers](#)” (Schaff). Analysis of content, however, suggests that the number of items associated with a named person actually stands at 125.

9. While such objects are composed of an uneven mix of the physical and the symbolic, the practices and discourses that create them as Romantic turn out to be remarkably stable. A Romantic object comes into being when its financial value as an object (conceived as the cost of the materials plus the labour costs) is perceived as substantially less than a symbolic value which resides in its uniqueness and irreproducibility. This is true for things which from the outset were designed to inscribe themselves within a genealogy of important objects and for objects which did not originally pretend to be symbolic. Romantic objecthood is the product of extensive cultural work, and this is true whether we are considering the natural phenomenon of [Mont Blanc](#) (Bainbridge) or the elaborate [tea caddy](#) (Brant) dedicated to William Cowper’s memory. The creation of a Romantic object involves practices that we might describe as pre-museal—visitors’ books that collect often codified responses to a view considered to be picturesque, travel writing that records much the same sort of thing, or acts of reframing objects through narrative, physical modification,

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or recontextualisation. These practices are capable of transforming old and far-off pre-existing things, such as [Shakespeare's chair](#) (Watson) or the [Tahitian mourning dress](#) (Schaff). They are also capable of manufacturing new ones such as the [table of inkwells](#) (Hovasse). The marked prominence of [Teresa Guiccioli's travelling chest](#) (Saglia) and its sentimental collection of relics of Byron within this volume of essays suggests that as a proto-museum apparently preserving and offering access to the lost past, it is an especially Romantic object. These generalisations may be measured against the occasional exhibit within *RÊVE* that seems to test and rebuke the whole notion of the Romantic object by remaining resolutely “unromantic” through lack of association with a singular person, text, or event (see Reynolds on [a lace boudoir cap](#)). Overwhelmingly, *RÊVE* illuminates the processes by which objects came into the perpetual ownership of the dead. It illustrates, too, how a new sense of affect or story dwelling within the material object produced new practices of dwelling upon and alongside the object.

10. The notion, so pervasive within the holdings of *RÊVE*, that certain objects are imbued with a quasi-subjectivity that lingers within them and that therefore they can provide a way of accessing the past can be traced back into the eighteenth century, although it comes to full maturity in the nineteenth century and still casts a very long shadow. Of course, the idea that a person might leave a quasi-living trace of themselves within material objects and places long after their deaths was not peculiar to the late eighteenth century or to Romanticism proper—the history of venerating the healing powers of religious relics certainly stands behind it, along with the more nebulous history of ghosts and the antiquarian enthusiasms of the later eighteenth century for things obsolete, whether ruins

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or armour, which Walter Scott would come to ingest, indulge, propagate, mock, and embody in his life and work. But the idea obtained new force from about 1789, when what Rosemary Hill identifies as a dawning sense of “heritage” took hold, on both sides of the Channel, along with a new cultural form, the modern museum. A new desire for personal encounter with “the remains of history” combined with a surge of consumerism and a growing culture of celebrity to produce a distinctively *Romantic* way of dealing with the past, which melded direct inspection of material evidence from the past with experiments in imagining the past as having been inhabited by real people (Hill 29).

11. One way of investigating how Romantic agency came to dwell within certain objects is to look at the history of how eighteenth-century culture understood and represented sentimental objects. Within the early consumerist culture of mid- to late-eighteenth-century Europe, sentimental objects may be read as both anomalous and symptomatic. Anomalous, because they are supposedly exempt from circulatory systems of exchange value; symptomatic, because that supposed exemption reveals an anxiety about increasing consumerism. In this sense, and as Deidre Shauna Lynch has argued, mid-eighteenth-century sentimental fiction, with its trope of the exchange of keepsakes between friends and lovers, inverts and doubles the it-narrative, which takes as its “hero” inanimate consumerist objects. Such late-eighteenth-century representations of the sentimental keepsake (a word that as Lynch notes emerges in 1790) prefigure the Romantic objects collected within *RÊVE* (Lynch 63). These are universally marked as objects withdrawn from ordinary associations, from ordinary economies of use value and exchange value, and from ordinary space and time. They belong to other systems of social exchange, often

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considered archaic, residual, or supplementary to high capitalism: the gift, the heirloom, the souvenir, and the museum collection. For all their undoubted materiality, these objects represent flows of affect and affection, past and future, epitomised in narratives for which they serve as prompts and material evidence. Hill relates this new interest in objects from the past to a Romantic idea of history as a fusion of the inquiring intellect and the object of the inquiry, resulting in the emergence of a new idea of an object's "authenticity": "What an object looked like and how it made one feel might count for as much as what it, materially, was" (Hill 30). Or indeed, more.

12. To illustrate this, and to unpack and historicise the practices which created notions of Romantic posthumous "dwelling-within-objects," we can resort to a famous story of how a collector, a Chinese porcelain tub, a tabby cat, some goldfish, and a poet achieved imaginative centrality to that prototype Romantic dwelling, Strawberry Hill. In 1749, the fabulously wealthy son of then prime minister Robert Walpole began a mould-breaking aesthetic experiment in Gothic taste, a fake castle at Strawberry Hill in Twickenham, just outside London down the River Thames. Walpole's giant folly was "built to please my own taste, and in some degree to realize my own visions" (Walpole, *Description* iv).<sup>2</sup> These visions were historicist—the idea was to create an immersive environment which collapsed the imaginative space between past and present, making it possible, so to speak, to inhabit grand narratives of the national past.<sup>3</sup> Accordingly, Strawberry Hill was stuffed with antique art and furniture, with an emphasis on the Tudor. Because it was imagined as dramatising the collector's unique identity, it was also garnished with exotica and given piquancy with "curiosities"—objects valued as novel, rare, or strange—displayed in self-

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consciously dramatic mode.<sup>4</sup> Central to this idea of the curiosity is the sense that its provenance or its allusive powers give it such value as it has. Indeed, as Lynch notes, Blackstone's account of property law considers curiosities as not really property: "property that it is no felony to destroy or detain, because their value is not intrinsic, but depending solely on the caprice of the owner" (Blackstone qtd. in Lynch 37n). Hence Walpole's susceptibility to the charm of the gossipy anecdote that he almost certainly began by retailing in person to his guests and then attached to the description of many items listed in the successively elaborated iterations of his *A Description of the Villa at Strawberry Hill* from 1760 through 1774, 1784, 1786 and finally 1791.<sup>5</sup> Of his many curiosities, we might pick out two as especially instructive. The first is listed thus in 1774: "A speculum of kennel-coal, in a leathern-case. It is curious for having been used to deceive the mob by Dr Dee, the conjurer, in the reign of Queen Elizabeth. It was in the collection of the Mordaunts, Earls of Peterborough, in whose catalogue it is called, *the black stone into which Dr Dee used to call his spirits . . .*" (77). This sense that the object had a hidden, agential life also extends to an item of Chinese blue and white export porcelain, part of the extensive collection Walpole amassed for his "China Closet."<sup>6</sup> This was a large Chinese tub or vase in which he seems to have kept goldfish, an expensive luxury item first imported to Britain from China in 1720. Walpole's tabby cat drowned at his London house in an attempt to claw out the fish in 1747; as part of an elaborate in-joke, he commissioned his friend Thomas Gray to write an ode on the occasion. The resulting "Ode on a Favourite Cat Drowned in a Tub of Goldfishes" was published by Walpole first in 1748 and then again in a deluxe illustrated edition of 1753; by the 1760s, Walpole had moved the tub to Strawberry Hill and redisplayed it on a specially commissioned Gothic plinth with the first

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stanza of the Ode by way of caption. After 1778, the tub was moved outside to a covered walkway, its new location described thus in 1784: “At each end, a blue and white china flower-pot, and in the middle the tub ditto in which Mr Walpole’s cat was drowned; on a label of the pedestal is written the first stanza of Mr Gray’s beautiful ode on that occasion. . .” (Walpole, *Description* 11). Illustrated in the catalogue of c. 1790, it was captioned with the poem in both the catalogue entry and subscribed under the plate. When the entirety of the collection at Strawberry Hill was sold off in 1842, the tub survived the general Victorian ridicule of Walpole’s aesthetic because it was a celebrated “item of association” (*Catalogue*).

13. This story demonstrates how a piece of Chinese import porcelain was progressively converted into a sentimental object. The tub’s original exotic meanings are relocated to British time, space, and aesthetic by means of the Ode. Richard Bentley’s frontispiece of 1753 registers this by representing a Chinese fisherman in a pavilion on the left with the fishing tabby cat on the right. It is also inserted within a friendship exchange between collector and poet. Its meanings survived the deaths of cat and fish, Gray and Walpole, coming to epitomise the sociability and the aesthetic of Strawberry Hill. Accordingly, it featured in the exhibition *Lost Treasures of Strawberry Hill: Masterpieces from Horace Walpole’s Collection* (October 2018–February 2019) on loan from the Lewis Walpole Library, and reappeared in 2021 in an exhibition entirely devoted to this “beautiful object with a macabre history.”<sup>7</sup> The tub’s emptiness contrasts with the many stories that it generates—the story of Selima’s death, the story of Walpole’s and Gray’s friendship, some part of the story of how Walpole set about making Strawberry Hill, the story of showing,



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seeing, and selling the collection, and subsequent artists' interpretations of the stories—like William Blake's illustrations of several scenes in what would have been the margins of the poem's text and the oil painting attributed to Martin Ferdinand Quadal in which a tricolour cat perches unsteadily atop a see-through fishbowl against which a volume is propped up, opened at the page showing the "Ode on the Death of a Favourite Cat," with the viewer left to supply the rest of the sentence. The actual bowl's transmutations prefigure the transfigurations that objects underwent to become "Romantic"—an autobiographical specification to time, space, person, relationship, typically combined with the notion of gift, memorial, souvenir, or inheritance, a flickering of fullness and nothingness. Of course, as Jane Austen jokes in *Emma*, poking fun at poor Harriet's filched keepsake, this is not enough to make a piece of "court-plaster" into an object that anyone else, let alone an entire culture, will value; what is needed in addition is a general desire to use that object as a portal to access the past (Austen 265). To make that happen, as in the case of the tub, the object typically acquires an implied voice, very often realised as written inscription or caption. As Silvia Davoli, curator of Strawberry Hill, remarked apropos the 2021 exhibition, "The history of the goldfish bowl perfectly exemplifies the close relationship that Walpole established between the house, the collection and the written word. Like in a pop-up book, Strawberry Hill emerges from Walpole's collection of architectural prints, while, conversely, a domestic accident and a real object are forever immortalized thanks to their descriptions on paper" (Davoli qtd. in Moss). Here Davoli echoes Walpole's characterisation of Strawberry Hill in his preface to *Description* as "a paper fabric and an assemblage of curious Trifles" (i). The in-dwelling meanings of the tub-as-curiosity are fully realised only when it is resident at Strawberry Hill, conceived as it was by Walpole

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in his will as an entire artwork composed of items to be “treated as heirlooms and kept and preserved entire at the house,” a directive realised nowadays in the shape of a museum open to the public.<sup>8</sup> We continue to live with this idea that objects mean more when encountered in their “proper” place.

14. Many of the objects held within *RÊVE* illustrate variants of this process of abstracting material objects from everyday circulation as ordinary commodities to become repositories or dwellings for collective meanings related to the past.<sup>9</sup> Such objects, however, exemplify the ways that Romantic-period culture goes beyond Walpole’s sense of the material object as a curiosity, to speak of a new sense of the intrinsic aliveness of objects, trembling on the edge of agency and consciousness, vividly aware of preserving sentimental transaction with the dead.<sup>10</sup> Whereas the eighteenth-century it-narrative ironises individual agency in response to consumer capitalism, the narratives that Romantic objects embody typically insist that individual consciousness is exempt from it.<sup>11</sup> Rather than delineating circuits of exchange, they construct sociable commerce between the living and the dead through animating the dead. At their most Romantic, such objects are stripped of prior or alternative uses or meanings and understood as de-commodified or even as anti-commodities. One example will serve to illustrate this impulse to engineer the dead’s ability to “dwell” within material objects. In 2020, Christie’s auctioned an 1834 copy of Joseph Severn’s posthumous portrait of John Keats in his study at Hampstead. This had at some point been provided with a frame. An ingeniously hinged compartment therein contains what is said to be a lock of Keats’s hair: “As the literary world anticipated the 200th anniversary of the poet’s death, Christie’s offered a rare portrait depicting Keats on the day he penned *Ode to*

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*a Nightingale*—the frame containing a lock of his hair—as well as one of nine known death masks. Joseph Severn, *Portrait of John Keats at Wentworth Place on the day of his composing ‘Ode to a Nightingale,’* 1834. Oil on canvas. 23½ x 17½ in (59.7 x 44.5 cm). Estimate: £50,000–80,000. John Keats, death mask, circa 1898–1905” (“Joseph Severn’s Portrait”). Painting, lock of hair, and death mask are here combined to produce a posthumous space of intimacy—and considerable value, even today.

15. Prompted by Lynch’s reading of the representation of material culture in sentimental fiction as a way of helping readers accommodate themselves to the new world of commercialised social relations, and by John Plotz’s argument that Victorian culture came to confer “latent subjectivity” on “particularized objects of sentiment” to cope with the anxiety “that such objects are no better than cold material,” we might argue that Romantic objects tell a new story about how representing persons through things rethought as inalienable and ungeneralisable belongings could organise individual and, by extension, collective affective relations with the past (Lynch; Plotz 332–34). The idea of the inalienable and ungeneralizable Romantic object derives from Susan Stewart’s discussion of the souvenir, and it may well be that in some sense all the objects in *RÊVE* are rightly to be considered in the light of souvenirs of the past (Stewart 132–51). Indeed, the painting and its frame survive as “Romantic” objects only because later nineteenth-century collectors identified them as such, and this is also true of many of the objects collected in *RÊVE*. It is a paradox fundamental to *RÊVE* that an object is “Romantic” because it has been said to be—and experienced as such—by subsequent private and public collectors. “Romantic” objects have generally been fabricated and refabricated, collected and relocated by Victorian

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imaginations (Mole). In investigating and expressing the essence of Romantic objects, we have actually found ourselves describing how apparently stable material objects have evolved new meanings and powers over the last two centuries. Here we stumble over the exemplary if obscure itinerary of William Cowper's lavender-water phial. This little pharmacist's bottle sits in a glass cabinet in the parlour at Orchard Side, now the Cowper and Newton Museum. It bears an old, almost illegible cardboard label around its neck which claims that it once belonged to Cowper, that it was used by him just before he died, and that it had then been given to William Wordsworth. Wordsworth was an admirer of Cowper's poetry, but it is not clear that he knew him personally. If the story the bottle's label tells is true, it likely sat first in Dove Cottage and then in Rydal Mount for much of the nineteenth century, before being gifted by Dorothy Dickson, Wordsworth's great-granddaughter, to the institution that preceded the Cowper Museum, the Memorial Library, on the centenary of Cowper's death. As this story suggests, one aspect of the Victorian construction of the Romantic object is the import of place. Indeed, the affect and meaning of the bottle change according to where it is—from a descriptor of poetic influence to a deathbed witness. Of course, Cowper will never have used this phial at Orchard Side itself, having long moved away. The story thus also describes the ways in which Romantic place was a Victorian construct (Watson, "Romantic Dwelling").

16. As this suggests, the Victorian sense of the Romantically placed object inspired the set-up of many Romantic writers', artists', and musicians' homes from the 1890s onward as assemblages of such objects. Preserved and celebrated as Walter Scott's home after his death in 1832, Abbotsford would be a powerful model for establishing such museal houses

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for the long nineteenth century. The celebration of [Scott's chair](#) (Archer-Thompson) at Abbotsford epitomises the Victorian fascination with objects displayed in such houses. Much more recently expressing a similar feeling, Jeff Cowton of Wordsworth Grasmere has argued that displaying a volume of [Dorothy Wordsworth's journal](#) at Dove Cottage “in the very place in which it was written,” would confer upon it a new power which rests “upon the immediacy of the access . . . promise[d] to the quotidian and local intimacy of the creative life”.<sup>12</sup> The processes by which objects became “Romantic” through coming into the perpetual ownership of the dead turns out to have been the prehistory to nineteenth-century habits of memorialising Romantics through significant objects significantly placed.<sup>13</sup> We still live within this affective regime. The story of the Honresfield Library is exemplary. Withdrawn from auction in spring 2021 following a fundraising campaign insisting on the need to retain literary manuscripts within the UK, the holdings were broken up to allow the complete working manuscript of *Rob Roy* to be housed in Abbotsford and two of Jane Austen's letters to be sent to Chawton Cottage, with returning “home” being seen as more important than preserving the integrity of the collection (see “Donating”).

### **Three**

17. *Materialising Romanticism* looks again at some of the more than 150 objects offered to *RÊVE* over the sixty or so months that the project has been unfolding. Our hope is that by systematising and reflecting upon the findings of *RÊVE*, we can make them yet more useful to scholars. These essays, some in the form of short films, create a new set of collections by which to navigate the holdings of *RÊVE*. Like *RÊVE* itself, the format of this volume

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was from its inception deliberately experimental. Academic contributors were asked to write short essays prompted by single word titles designed to focus thought on the physical world in relation to Romantic-period culture through articulating objects featured in *RÊVE* within their reflections. Curators were asked to make short films answering the question “What is the most Romantic object in your collections?” The resulting pieces are organised on a trajectory moving outward from the private to the public, from the intimacies of the Romantic body toward the spaces of the Romantic museum. Diego Saglia’s essay “Bodies” tells how artefacts enable us to outline narratives about Romantic-period notions of the physical, as well as the experiences and affects associated with it. Through examining mourning objects, he exhumes competing, though interlaced, forms of dispersal and collection, fragmentation and recomposition. We then take a brief tour to Abbotsford, to explore the celebrity of the room in which Sir Walter Scott died, as an illustration of some of the propositions put forward by Saglia. We return to Samantha Matthews’s consideration of Romantic anxieties and practices around paper as both literal and figurative, with its physicality, ephemerality, portability, sociability, and sheer fantasy, from paper money to waste paper, from vanity publishing to wallpaper, from letters to manuscripts to books themselves. The video essay filmed at Dove Cottage picks up on Matthews’s closing meditation on what is lost when the materiality of paper is represented within the virtual; Jeff Cowton presents the manuscript of Thomas De Quincey’s *Confessions of an English Opium-Eater* in one of the places it describes, the parlour of Dove Cottage, by implication hinting at the ways Romantic agency accrues to a literary manuscript as witness to embodied time and place. From the darkness of Dove Cottage, we escape into the fresh air with Cian Duffy’s meditation on how air is conjured up in Romantic-period cultural texts

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across Europe, concluding with a consideration of actual and metaphorical air in the specific context of the (Romantic) museum, with its complex evocation of “the air of the past.” Patrick Vincent’s essay turns to stone, natural and shaped, showing how pervasive it was in European Romanticism, contributing to the age’s historicism and new understanding of revolution both in natural history and in politics, to the development of landscape aesthetics and tourism, and to the sentimental culture of mourning. Vincent’s argument—that rocks came to be seen as fragile material objects with a life of their own, a nascent eco-Romanticism potentially dissolving the subject-object divide—sits illuminatingly against Nigel Leask’s exploration of the Romantic enthusiasm for wild waterfalls with their assault on the senses and his more sceptical analysis of the ways that this tourist aesthetic discarded as surplus to requirements meanings associated with contemporary realities of land use and industrialisation. With Fiona Stafford’s essay “Wood” we turn to Romantic takes on trees and their afterlives, touring celebrated yews and oaks and meditating on famous artefacts, with an eye to the political meanings of native and exotic wood in the period. Introduced by Simon Brown’s video essay on the importance of Newstead Abbey to the exiled Byron, the final three essays in the collection sit together as a triptych. Will Bowers’s “Things on the Move” considers Romantic mobility with special reference to tourism, discussing the portable objects—the money, the Claude glass, the travelling library, and the travelling box—that voyagers took with them. By contrast, Sophie Thomas investigates the fate of Romantic objects when, detained in a museum, they turn out to be surprisingly mutable, variably organised, framed, documented, overlooked, misappropriated, and forgotten. Finally, Barbara Schaff’s “Loss” meditates on the ways that ruins and relics become Romantic through representing the erosion of

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materiality as a form of meaning, before considering the political and practical implications of the wholesale loss of the material belongings of many Romantic women writers for modern-day museum-making.

18. Along the way, our contributors reflect on the experience of imagining exhibitions out of the holdings of *RÊVE*. The founding paradox of the entire project—an insistence on the materiality of Romantic culture expressed in a virtual medium—provokes responses here ranging from the reassertion of the intransigent physicality and “placedness” of the object to a more euphorically playful pleasure in the lightness of objects within this sort of museum; as Thomas writes: “From paintings to travelling cases, reliquaries to trees, folding screens to books, writers’ chairs to locks of hair, *RÊVE*’s exhibits perform or repeat the museum’s essential gestures by assembling and mediating objects for our considered inspection, while making space for things to form associations, to re-member, to move—and in turn, to move us.” For Stafford, the possibilities are explicitly futuristic: in “bringing together numerous individual narratives, which take new turns as they move into different contexts,” *RÊVE* proves to be “an evolving, rather than static space, full of virtual mobility, a museum that makes its visitors look forward as well as into the past.”

19. This volume, along with its related virtual walk-in exhibition, is meant to propose new ways of thinking through Romantic materiality, but we do not aspire to have the last word about it. For this reason, we close the volume with Clare Brant’s suite of poems, “Fragments of a History in a Dream,” inspired by *RÊVE*. These six poems revisit the dreamscape of Samuel Taylor Coleridge’s “Kubla Khan” to think about the sort of histories



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and visions *RÊVE* has retrieved and collected, subjecting them to the stringent criticism of persons and materialities that *RÊVE* has so far occluded or excluded. They wonder, too, about the suitability of the entire project of dreaming about the nature of Romanticism through a poetics of things in a world alive with sedition, surveillance, and war. These, then, are some of the outstanding questions unanswered as yet by *RÊVE*; we commend them to you, our readers.

### **Acknowledgements**

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**Notes**

<sup>1</sup> For two helpful surveys of recent scholarship relating Romanticism and materiality, see Guyer and Langan; and Singer, Cross, and Barnett.

<sup>2</sup> Preface to the 1784 iteration of *A Description*, first printed 1786. See Clarke.

<sup>3</sup> On Strawberry Hill as the *fons et origo* of the Romantic antiquarian interior brought to perfection in Abbotsford, see Hill 392–98.

<sup>4</sup> On Strawberry Hill as an aesthetic experiment, see Harney, ch. 3, where she argues that the ensemble is an original essay in contemporary concepts of imagination, association, and visual pleasure.

<sup>5</sup> The bibliographic and manuscript complications of the catalogue are laid out in forensic detail in Clarke, who also deals with the practice of visiting Strawberry Hill.

<sup>6</sup> It was an unusual passion for a man because collecting china was strongly associated with elite women. See Alayrac-Fielding, who argues that “porcelain collecting [was regarded] as an effeminate and dangerous practice” (para. 17).

<sup>7</sup> For details of both exhibitions, see “Lost Treasures Exhibition.”

<sup>8</sup> For Walpole’s will, see Walpole, *Horace Walpole’s Correspondence* 352.

<sup>9</sup> Just one object will have to serve here as paradigmatic of the processes involved: [Teresa Guiccioli's travelling chest](#). As Diego Saglia's entry in *RÊVE* notes, this chest began life as a luxury commodity; a "nécessaire de voyage" designed to hold containers of cosmetics and other grooming paraphernalia. Part of its luxuriousness was to do with the high status of its French manufacturer, identified on the box itself, and part was personalisation for its owner: the lid is embellished with the coat of arms of the Guiccioli and Gamba families. When Teresa Guiccioli repurposed this box to store mementoes of her affair with George Gordon, Lord Byron, it underwent a metamorphosis into a Romantic curiosity. Guiccioli filled the box with Byron's letters to her along with "objects collected many years after his death (like some rose petals from the gardens of Newstead Abbey)." Each memento was supplied with its own handwritten note. Thus, as in the case of Walpole's goldfish tub, the box became a curiosity through specifying it as a repository of bodies, time, place, and emotional experience via inscription. As a prototype Byron museum, it has also recently become a paradigmatic exhibit in the new Museo Byron in Ravenna, much as the goldfish tub has served as metonymic of many of the core remaining meanings of Strawberry Hill. Most strikingly, both tub and box materialise sentimental transactions. Arguably, however, Guiccioli's box is definitively "Romantic"; it understands itself as materialised (auto)biography.

<sup>10</sup> The paradigmatic poetic instance of this is John Keats's "Ode on a Grecian Urn," in which the funerary urn is loosened from its museal setting as an ancient object, coming alive through the mechanism of apostrophe and personification in the poet's imagination before withdrawing again into a deathly silence and stasis. See Johnson.

<sup>11</sup> On it-narratives and the ways that they undo the fictions of autobiography, see Festa.

<sup>12</sup> One might extend what Kate Rigby describes as Wordsworthian “rehabitation,” the necessity of self-consciously making a home despite previous radical dislocation, to the thought that all moderns are now in the same position (118, 137).

<sup>13</sup> In 1847, William Howitt’s fat volume of bio-topographical essays *The Homes and Haunts of the Most Celebrated British Poets* would systematise an imaginary spatio-temporal literary map of writers’ homes that had founded the contemporary national imaginary.