

Cambridge University Press

978-0-521-50967-1 - Fracture and Fragmentation in British Romanticism

Alexander Regier

Excerpt

[More information](#)*Broken origins: an introduction*

To fill a Gap
 Insert the Thing that caused it –
 Block it up
 With Other – and 'twill yawn the more –
 You cannot solder an Abyss
 With Air – ¹

How do we fill gaps? Why do we want to fill them? What is the nature of fracture and fragmentation, in contrast to wholeness and plenitude, and our fascination with them? How can we get a grasp on our intrigue with the conceptual, historical, and material fissures that we use to account for ourselves? Emily Dickinson's concentrated lines, written in 1863, broach these questions of fracture and fragmentation effectively. Her poem thematises how an anxious desire to fill a 'Gap' only leads to replacing the fracture with its origin, which is 'the Thing that caused it'. Any attempt to 'Block it up' with another substance results in the gap 'yawn[ing] the more'. But whatever caused the fracture to begin with must repeat this break. To 'insert' the cause of a 'Gap' is endlessly to reproduce the fracture. The impossibility of 'filling' this gap either with itself or with emptiness – with 'air' – leaves the fracture unrepaired at the centre of the poem. The 'Gap' turns into an 'Abyss' that cannot be soldered, marked by the parenthesis and incompleting punctuation in the poem. The origin of our means to solder turns out to be broken. This book traces a number of strategies in Enlightenment and Romantic writing that articulate a dynamic, in both thought and language, that resembles Dickinson's 'Gap' and its broken origins.

One of the main arguments of this book is that fracture and fragmentation provide a lens through which some central concerns of Romanticism can be analysed in a manner that is particularly effective in telling us something not only about Romanticism but also about ourselves. By

Cambridge University Press

978-0-521-50967-1 - Fracture and Fragmentation in British Romanticism

Alexander Regier

Excerpt

[More information](#)

opening up the notions of fracture and fragmentation conceptually, the book provides an exposition of the different manners in which the dynamic at work in Dickinson's poem operates in Romantic writing. Such an approach implies a set of claims, two of which are especially relevant here. First stands the claim that fracture and fragmentation specifically are two conceptual categories that are particularly promising for exploring Romanticism. They, rather than others, allow us to understand an important aspect of Romanticism anew. Secondly, the study maintains that 'Romanticism' is a relevant term, description, and concept in contemporary literary studies. While each chapter of the book addresses both claims in relation to its respective focus, this introduction will discuss them briefly in a more general manner. It will thereby provide a background for my particular readings of William Wordsworth, John Keats, Immanuel Kant, Thomas De Quincey, and Paul de Man.

The brief reading of 'To Fill a Gap' suggests that fragmentation and fracture are terms that enable our thinking about more general aspects of aesthetic criticism, such as poetic form, history, and philosophy. Fracture and fragmentation turn out to be particularly fertile for certain forms of critical analysis. One of the central aims of this book is to understand and circumscribe how these two notions achieve such a productive status, both critically and historically – and, furthermore, why such an understanding is best developed in connection with Romanticism. Fragmentation and Romanticism have a special relationship, and we can understand both of them much better through comprehending their interrelation. As a result, we can reconfigure the way we think about a term such as 'Romanticism'.

In the most general terms of such a reconfiguration, this book concludes that it is precisely Romanticism that teaches us how to think about, and investigate critically, many of the central pillars and assumptions of our conceptual frameworks. Historically and conceptually, Romanticism provides a large number of the materials and methods that constitute our thinking about aesthetics, history, and criticism. Crucially, this not only is a claim about historical sources but also concerns our contemporary modes of thought. It is Romanticism that teaches us to think about 'Romanticism' as a category, even if the term designating the period only comes into existence much later. On a concrete level, the book explains why, and how, fragmentation is a particularly good example of understanding some unique qualities of Romanticism that help to shape our current way of thinking, especially about aesthetics. The focus on aesthetics at this particular moment does not result from a philosophical privileging of this sphere (although there are plenty of very good arguments for singling out

Cambridge University Press

978-0-521-50967-1 - Fracture and Fragmentation in British Romanticism

Alexander Regier

Excerpt

[More information](#)*Broken origins*

3

aesthetics). Rather, it is the simpler reason that aesthetics and literary criticism form the main areas of my study. Although I want to gesture towards a continuous presence of Romanticism in a variety of disciplines, this book does not want to develop a universalising history. It focuses mainly on literature, criticism, and aesthetics. And although it is certainly comparative, it does not claim expertise in all of the disciplines that its fields of study connect with. Romanticism is central to us, and fragmentation is central to Romanticism. While this relation is not exhaustive, aesthetics certainly can indicate its relevance, and the richness and complexity of the terms involved in it.

The attractive power fragmentation holds for aesthetic criticism, and the reading of poetry in particular, has a history. This trajectory is part of the appeal that the link between fragmentation and Romanticism holds. And it is not surprising that one of the most important – and ultimately broken – origins of this history is to be found in works of the Romantic Period itself. Most readers will associate the importance of the fragment for literary criticism with the writings of early German Romanticism. Friedrich Schlegel and Novalis are two commonly cited figures, and their writing raises many questions that are invoked and cited by contemporary criticism. Some passages have become ubiquitous in certain contexts of literary and cultural criticism. A good example is Schlegel's memorable statement that 'A fragment must be, like a small work of art, wholly isolated from the surrounding world and in itself complete, like a hedgehog.'² Irrespective of whether this statement is derided or embraced, whether its influence is welcomed or repelled, its critical presence (alongside many other *Athenaeum* fragments) is remarkable. It is indicative of the power that authors such as Schlegel and Novalis, as well as their forms of writing, hold on many different parts of criticism today. In this aspect, *Fracture and Fragmentation* is no different. Much important work on the fragment, in several languages and periods, deeply informs the thinking of this study and its links to wider interpretative issues. However, while this book is happy to invoke such a powerful genealogy, it also wants to present something emphatically new. It aims to do so in relation both to specific scholarship on Romanticism, British and German, and to our wider thinking on fragmentation. In order to make these points clearer, the introduction will discuss below how scholarship has understood fragmentation in the past and what we can learn from it. Before this rather technical discussion, however, I will sketch briefly the versatility of fragmentation. My focus will lie on how fragmentation helps us to reconsider the way Romanticism shapes many of the frameworks that underlie our current self-understanding

Cambridge University Press

978-0-521-50967-1 - Fracture and Fragmentation in British Romanticism

Alexander Regier

Excerpt

[More information](#)

as critical subjects, including our understanding of the very category 'Romanticism'.

One aspect of the fragment that has ensured its continuous presence in the field of criticism is its status as an oxymoronic, yet critically self-replenishing and productive, concept. A genre or concept that fulfils its self-definition by being incomplete – fragmentary – has an evidently problematic representational status. Especially since it not only contains and performs this internal contradiction, but also becomes representative – typical – of Romanticism. As a result, the contradiction that the fragment harbours becomes essential both to itself and to a certain version of Romanticism. Criticism can react to such a conceptually irresolvable problematic, and its history, in two ways. It can understand it as an invitation to continue an investigation whose results will necessarily be shaded by that contradiction. Alternatively, it can abandon such an attempt owing to its necessary shortcomings. This book takes the first route. In fact, it considers that there are several reasons why a fresh and sustained reconsideration of fragmentation and Romanticism is not only welcome, but necessary. One of them is that fragmentation, as I have already indicated, helps us to define what is special about Romanticism. A second is that fragmentation, as it is understood here, emerges as a critical lens that concentrates the analysis of central philosophical, philological, and linguistic moments of Romanticism in a new way. It allows us to discover and read texts in a critically innovative and alert manner. Thirdly, fragmentation allows us to formulate a sophisticated philosophical question that leads us back into the period of Romanticism. It illustrates how we depend on that period for the formulation of our self-understanding, including the questions we deem to be critical. Simultaneously, however, it also insists on the relative brittleness of the sources it provides, avoiding an all-too-celebratory invocation of these roots.

Fracture and fragmentation strike us as tools and concepts of considerable import because we are still situated in a Romantic framework that allows us to recognise them as such. In many ways, this book is an explanation why such a situatedness within Romanticism is, contrary to the received opinions of many current scholars, something to be embraced. The book makes clear why this is not simply a naive or retrograde claim. It will show how fragmentation highlights that Romanticism includes and performs on itself the analytical apparatus that makes its own critique possible. Therefore we do well in returning to a close analysis of the thought, language, and concepts which prove so foundational for our contemporary approaches. The reader will have to judge whether these

Cambridge University Press

978-0-521-50967-1 - Fracture and Fragmentation in British Romanticism

Alexander Regier

Excerpt

[More information](#)*Broken origins*

5

sources do indeed exhibit a meta-critical character. Either way, it is worth insisting that the initial interest we take in them, irrespective of whether we ultimately judge them to be critical, objectionable, or ideologically suspect, is often shaped by their own self-formulation in a much more significant manner than we assume.

Fragmentation, by definition, resists totalisation. Yet it remains a continuously important subject in philosophy and literature, especially in relation to Romanticism. The analysis of both fragmentation and Romanticism repeatedly suggests that they are unable to provide an exhaustive account of one another. Nevertheless, we are continuously drawn back to this conjunction of Romanticism and fragmentation. This seems, at least on the face of it, puzzling, since we know historically the conjunction to be limited in its ability to provide a satisfactory answer. Fragmentation seems to reveal its oxymoronic dynamic to be part of its categorisation as typically Romantic. It would seem appropriate, then, to discard it as an analytical tool, if we are interested in giving a seamless account of either fragmentation or Romanticism. Especially because, although fragmentation, or indeed the fragment, might resist totalisation, this does not necessarily imply that they resist explanation. The inquiry and the object of inquiry are logically distinct. Nevertheless, the case of fragmentation is peculiar in this regard. The fragment, because of its contradictory nature, invades the form of inquiry that it is subject to. That does not mean that they are equivalent, or that I want simply to repeat the Romantic discourse (imagined or real) that identifies them. Nevertheless, this book believes that any attempt to explain fragmentation exhaustively is bound to fail. But it also maintains that this is not a sufficient reason to abandon our inquiry. The continuation of a necessarily failing discourse is not simply a repetition or mimicry of previous analyses. Nor is it a confusion between the mode and the object of inquiry. It is, however, an acknowledgement that the historical and conceptual parameters of this book are, despite its explanatory ambitions, limited by the subject of its analysis. And that these limitations, both historical and conceptual, need to be embraced in order to maximise the book's potential. In the case of fragmentation this is particularly pertinent. As will become clear, an explanatory attempt of fragmentation that incorporates an awareness of its own necessary failing is ultimately more convincing than a discussion of it which does not believe that its subject of inquiry sets unsurpassable limits.

At least since the Romantic Period, criticism keeps returning to fragmentation as a source of explanation and discussion. Moreover, it seems that the resulting accounts often profit, rather than suffer, from the unsuccessful but

Cambridge University Press

978-0-521-50967-1 - Fracture and Fragmentation in British Romanticism

Alexander Regier

Excerpt

[More information](#)

felicitous conjunction between fragmentation and Romanticism. Both these categories accommodate layers of critical investment that allow and demand a constant return to their deep tensions and contradictions in the knowledge that they cannot be resolved. Even though we know that neither fragmentation nor Romanticism is completely successful in its explanatory function, we continue to find them helpful – maybe for that very reason – in defining one another. Thus, the seemingly simple question why, as present-day Romanticists, we still find the interplay between fragmentation and Romanticism intriguing betrays a commitment to the terms and history in which that question is posed. Both the terms and the history reveal that we always fail in our attempt to account for fragmentation and Romanticism. But they also insist that we nevertheless continue to return to, rather than discard, their discussion. One of the objectives of this book is to illustrate how this dynamic reveals the critical depth of fracture and fragmentation rather than their limitation.

There has been a historically robust interest in issues of fragmentation and ruin, which remains present today. Naturally, it is important to attend to how the chronological and geographical specificities of this interest develop. It is also crucial, however, to recognise that these terms are present in many of Romanticism's self-definitions. They play a major role in describing relevant aspects of the defining literary and aesthetic categories of the period. This presence singles them out as promising candidates in refining our account of Romanticism. However, there is not only a historical precedent. I also want to claim that the notions of fracture and fragmentation are helpful in ways of reading specific texts. They invoke considerations of a conceptual and thematic kind in relation to works or arguments as well as draw our attention to formal aspects of textual breaks and fissures. And these, in turn, allow me to uncover the specifically Romantic aspect of these texts. My readings can thereby show how fracture and fragmentation are pervasive in many aspects of writings which we normally do not consider under these headings. For instance, sometimes we might find a thematic concern with fragmentation in a seemingly coherent and cohesive text. Thus my championing of fracture and fragmentation as critical notions is motivated historically as well as hermeneutically. As a result, the book discusses many texts that are not often considered in relation to fragmentation.

Of the two terms that form the interpretative axes of my explanations, fragmentation is the more commonly used in Romantic studies. However, the category of 'fracture' here does not only figure as distinguishing a particular kind of fragmentation. Although the two notions are very closely

Cambridge University Press

978-0-521-50967-1 - Fracture and Fragmentation in British Romanticism

Alexander Regier

Excerpt

[More information](#)*Broken origins*

7

connected, there is a difference between them which determines how they are employed in the readings. Fracture describes a break that is located on a structural level. It is not a process, and does not encompass a temporal element in that sense. It might be historically or genealogically located, but that is not its deciding feature. Rather, it is a rupture of a structural and logical kind, a break that acts as an unbridgeable division between two spheres. One example of such a break is the division between nature and human which is often presented as an unbridgeable gap. Another instance of fracture is the deployment of a citation or a sign of punctuation (such as a parenthesis) to break a text. Fragmentation, differently from fracture, is a process. Even though it can be final, it is defined by a series of changes. It is the unfolding of a break that happens either once or over and over again. Examples of such a process include the Tower of Babel as an image for the fragmentation of language, or an epistolary correspondence as forming a fragmented body of writing. Fragmentation might be final in the sense that there is no way back or forward, but it involves movement to begin with. Thus, fracture can be likened to a condition, part of a structure; fragmentation more to a process, an unfolding. While the two can overlap, and often do in my analysis, it is important to remain aware of this distinction.

The seven chapters of this book comprise readings and critical discussions of seven instances in which fracture or fragmentation stand in a relevant relation to central literary or philosophical texts. Each chapter will illustrate differently why these notions offer particularly illuminating ways of approaching the material at hand. We will see how fracture and fragmentation become conceptual categories as well as heuristic tools, helping us to understand how certain writers construct the Romanticism we take them to represent. Each chapter illustrates how various ‘openings’ of ideas of fracture and fragmentation – thematic, figural, rhetorical – change the emphasis and objective of the analysis, without losing the overall focus. Depending on the text in question, I will present fracture or fragmentation as a theme, foreground the fragmentation of structures, or explore the use of the figure of fracture as a critical tool with a rhetorical dimension. The power of each individual case, as well as its successful role in a larger argument, illustrates that the multifaceted nature of fracture and fragmentation is a symptom of flexible strength rather than of loose definition. Such a sketch, stressing the heterogeneity of its subject matter, as well as of its forms of discussion, indicates the suppleness of Romanticism. It also brings me to the second implicit claim, mentioned in the opening pages, namely, the relevance of the category of Romanticism to our contemporary modes of inquiry.

Cambridge University Press

978-0-521-50967-1 - Fracture and Fragmentation in British Romanticism

Alexander Regier

Excerpt

[More information](#)

On a very direct level, this book explores how we might understand Romanticism, what Romanticism ‘is’, both conceptually and historically. This is evidently a large and complex field with a long and distinguished history of inquiry. It will be useful to provide a very brief and partial genealogy of the relevant critical context here. This will serve as a platform to sketch my own methodological heritage, as well as indicate how my approach differs from that of other scholars. Hopefully, it will thereby illustrate how this book contributes to the critical debate from which it has grown. One version of Romanticism that emerges out of my readings, which I believe is philologically and philosophically present in Romanticism historically, is a Socratic or meta-critical endeavour in the Hamannian sense. It is characterised by irony, humility, and a particularly developed understanding or practice of meta-critical reflection. It enjoys a constitutive scepticism regarding its own procedure that does not blunt its critical edge. The present book attempts to pursue this line and thereby attend to the possibilities of what Paul Hamilton calls a ‘reworking of the immanence of romantic self-critique’.³ One aspect of this reworking that is especially relevant, both in Romanticism and in its reading, is its focus and attention to the role of language and its connection to thought. It has been a classic contention that language plays a major role in Romanticism and the way we understand it. I will show how such a focus need not entail, as has been suggested, a conceptually weaker or historically less critical understanding of either Romantic thought or contemporary analysis. Focusing on language means, in Romanticism and here, focusing on thought. The widely discussed overlap between philosophy and literature is the most immediate illustration of this connection. Here literary language and philosophical insight can illuminate one another historically, negating mechanistic application of one to the other. Such a philological approach uncovers a Romanticism which stresses the importance of language to all forms of expression and thought, without making it out to be a simple forerunner of post-structuralism.⁴

This book presents a philosophical problem that lies behind the definition of, and our involvement in, Romanticism. The form of my discussion, an intertwining of philology, literature, and philosophy, already indicates how I suggest we can address this issue. Moreover, it explains why fracture and fragmentation help to focus and unravel this complex question in different forms. In this manner, I hope to explore further the fertile suggestion that ‘Romantic self-consciousness, pushed to its limits, seeks to shatter the reflection or image of plenitude it has created.’⁵ My intellectual allegiance here is not only with Hamilton, but, even more importantly, with

Cambridge University Press

978-0-521-50967-1 - Fracture and Fragmentation in British Romanticism

Alexander Regier

Excerpt

[More information](#)*Broken origins*

9

his shattering sources. The fragmentation of plenitude, the uneasiness that goes with this destruction, including its compensatory fantasies of organic wholeness, are deeply Romantic moves that amount to a leitmotiv of this book. They present a complex yet ultimately enabling strategy that cannot be diagnosed simply as a set of self-deluding beliefs which have to be discarded or superseded.

My study often complements literary analysis with a reading of theoretical sources of Romanticism. It wants to address the philosophical dimensions of its central questions adequately. A familiarity with the most sophisticated thought of the period helps to strengthen our hold on Romantic texts without turning this grip into a clench. Some discussions in literary studies convey a sense of reluctance or trepidation when it comes to such an overlap of philosophy and literature. In contrast, this volume wants to display a determined confidence in comparative work. If a philosophical reading of Romanticism is intended, as it is here, it is more than advisable to include the relevant sources of that field in our analysis. Since German philosophy presents some of the most considerable thought of Romanticism, its central figures form part of some of my readings of British sources. I read these texts in conjunction with a view to the philological implications of the philosophical thought they present. The results illustrate why a comparative approach is both an intuitively and an analytically adequate method for our present concern. That is, the so-called crux of relating German philosophy and British writing here is not conceived of as a crux at all. It can be understood as an insurmountable barrier if the critical objective is to prove historical influence (or its absence). I do not want to deny the interest, and sometimes the crucial importance, of such source study. However, it is not the primary concern of this project (just as this introduction does not provide a comprehensive theoretical account of the book's own position). One larger methodological claim buried in such preferences is that a comparative approach can combine philological detail and historical specificity in a powerful analysis of Romantic texts. I hope my readings underwrite this approach successfully. The reading of *any* two texts in conjunction has to be performed with care, whatever the agenda of the critic. In fact, Romanticism does much to alert us to this demand. This project wants to rise to the challenge in an unabashedly cosmopolitan manner.

Highlighting the overlap and intersection between literature and philosophy here is not only an invocation of a particular version of the Romantic period or scholarship. It is also a positive assertion that we are still within Romanticism and, crucially, that there are far worse places to be. The book

Cambridge University Press

978-0-521-50967-1 - Fracture and Fragmentation in British Romanticism

Alexander Regier

Excerpt

[More information](#)

will attempt to show that this claim is less naive, or possibly reactionary, than it might appear to some. As we know, the question whether or not we remain in Romanticism is not new, and it remains one of the most difficult topics in current literary scholarship.⁶ It is often related to a discussion about the nature of modernity – an even more contested term – which, depending on the account, is a continuation, a replacement, or an erasure of Romanticism. There are various helpful ways in which to frame the different positions within this debate, including their respective motivations and parameters. One recurring issue, which brings our difficulties into focus, concerns the theorisation of the relation between historical continuity and discontinuity. How do we understand the accessibility or inaccessibility of a period such as Romanticism? Does it matter that the term itself became currency only after the period it describes began? More fundamentally: are we barred from certain ways of historical understanding through insurmountable epistemic breaks? Can the account of a subject that claims to be always transcendently self-present take sufficient care to recognise its own historical situation? Does chronological distance from a poem allow a reader to gain critical insights, which, while embedded within the text, no reader could possibly have had at the time of composition? The following readings demonstrate how seriously these questions ought to be taken.

The book starts with two common assumptions. First, that Romanticism is chronologically associated with the time between the mid-eighteenth and mid-nineteenth centuries. And, secondly, that Romanticism informs a wide array of notions central to our self-understanding. The relative vagueness of such a general time-span does not neglect historical specificity, especially when it comes to individual analysis of authorships, or the genesis of concepts, and I certainly want to claim more than a link of the fragment and Romanticism through their *Zeitgeist*. Recent decades have produced several powerful accounts which locate the emergence (and creation) of fundamental categories of our thinking (such as aesthetics, literature, or the subject) in the historical period between 1750 and 1850.⁷ Just as Romantic auto-criticism does not entail lack of precise reflection, the analysis of its historicity can be specific without having to predetermine its exact chronological limits. Thus, this book does not provide a *Begriffsgeschichte* in Reinhart Koselleck's or Erich Rothacker's sense, a history of the concepts 'fracture' or 'fragmentation'.⁸ Nevertheless, my approach takes its cue from a number of related discussions such as Peter de Bolla's *The Discourse of the Sublime* (1989) and David Simpson's *Romanticism, Nationalism, and the Revolt against Theory* (1993) that have illustrated how the emergence (and creation) of fundamental categories within our discourse, such as aesthetics