Paul Hamilton, *Orientation in European Romanticism: The Art of Falling Upwards*. Cambridge Studies in Romanticism. Cambridge University Press, 2023.

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In his latest book, following such field-defining titles as *Metaromanticism* (2003), *Coleridge and German Philosophy* (2007), and *Realpolitik* (2015), Paul Hamilton opens a new avenue for Romantic studies. The overarching objective of *Orientation in European Romanticism*, which it is strategically circumspect in stating outright, is to construct a criticism that moves beyond theory, thereby countering a discourse that has long had a particularly strong hold on Romantic studies. Unlike Jacques Khalip's post-theoretical focus in his *Last Things* (2018) or Claire Colebrook's "Extinct Theory" (2011), who still aim at designing a theory after theory, Hamilton decisively moves away from abstraction: he asks that critics read for those points where texts show up the instability and insufficiency not of language, as theory has habitually done, but of theory itself. The focus of his criticism, then, is theory's inability to render the full complexity of experience: its preferred object are those texts that actively retreat from theorisation, and that do not recuperate such resistance to theory by staging a higher-level theoretical recuperation. Criticism, then, must submit to a procedure which Hamilton, in a turn of phrase which he takes from Hölderlin (5), and develops in the longest chapter of the nine that compose the book following its introduction, calls *falling upwards*. Such bouleversement mimics the text that is studied: critic and author undergo experiences of disintegration, after which the work of critical reading and literary writing nevertheless continues, not in pursuit of a grand unifying theory but in order to record the conflicts between experience and theory, and to gesture at the dimly visible alternatives that open as practice takes priority. This book, then, may have *Orientation* in its main title, but *Disorientation*, a term which recurs at crucial junctures throughout the argument more properly captures its programme, which is to follow texts as they lose themselves, and to examine the benefits of being lost.

Rather than a fully articulated view of what criticism might turn into as it singles out the frictions between theory and practice, *The Art of Falling Upwards* pursues its analysis through a sequence of authors: for each of these authors and a broad selection of their works, Hamilton considers the specific ways in which they abandon the strictures of theorisation. Kleist, Hölderlin, Hemans, Moore, Foscolo, Balzac, Sand and Leopardi *via* Rilke: all come in for close readings in which the operative word is *close*, in that Hamilton studiously avoids reimposing a totalising theory following each author's highly individuating rejection of such theorising. Such closeness inevitably creates a difficult book, which demands from its reader that they abandon the comforts of theory or of a unifying narrative. Offsetting the book's initial appearance of fragmentariness, however, the chapters are thematically linked by the recurrence of a handful of diagnostic terms; established by the introduction as broad concepts rather than means of structuration and organisation, they acquire meaning as each analysis unfolds: *disorientation* (rather than orientation); *process* (rather than result); *music* (over textuality); *translation* (over creation); and so on. Two chapters stand out in their development of the latter two terms. The book's second chapter most thinks through the meanings of *music* as it considers how Hölderlin's texts aspire to a paradoxically depersonalised practice of improvisation which abandons the rigours of form; a shift of the focus of construction, then, from meaning to tonality. The final chapter, which shifts to modernism and thereby offers a retrospective coda to the argument, offers another key term in ex-

amining Rilke's translations of Leopardi, locating in translation an eminently processual form of writing which pivots not on definitive articulation but ongoing engagement and performance. Like other such circulating terms, *translation* also describes Hamilton's method: the monograph seeks to translate between authors and cultures, nimbly moving between Germany, Britain, Ireland, Italy, France, and finally returning to Germany: this reading is not undergirded by intimations of an an international or a European Romanticism. Here, as he does throughout his critical readings of individual authors and shared terms, Hamilton's critical method centres on the resistance of his authors to the overdetermination of any sort of coherence.

Among the thematic strands that connect the chapters, the conflict between theory and practice is the most important: this basic dichotomy is granted further weight by a series of relatively tacit equations and associations. The practical pendant of the book's central contrast is located in poetry, which shorthands for various genres and modes of literary writing; less conventionally, theory is equated to philosophy. This second equivalence grants Hamilton's argument much of its analytical energy, in that it allows him to telescope between, on the one hand, the Romantic text and its concrete engagement with its contemporary philosophical habitus; on the other, the present-day practice of criticism and its engagement with literary theory. That is, Enlightenment and Romantic philosophy are presented as the precursors to modern theory, and their structures and strictures are found to continue into the present. Such gestures may themselves be critiqued as essentialist if not theoretical, but they do give this book the capacity for wider traction than the authors and the period which it chiefly examines. They also serve to connect what may initially appear, partly as a result of its own framing, a free-floating monograph to an extensive tradition of Romantic and post-Romantic thought, which has long contended with the legacies of late-eighteenth-century philosophy. Insofar as Hamilton particularly nominates Kant as the chief target for his counter-theoretical, or para-theoretical, criticism, he joins a long line of Romantic writers and Romanticist critics. Philosophically and rhetorically sound as this three-step equation of theory, philosophy, and Kantianism is, some frictions must occur as we move between these epistemes. Most pragmatically, if perhaps also pedantically, not all authors discussed in the book can be said to have been acquainted with the finer points of transcendental thought, rendering their dissension from Kantian thought a much vaguer affair. Sensing the complications of establishing large connections even as he also insists on the virtues of incoherency, Hamilton writes that those who are "entirely unacquainted with the Kantian matrix nevertheless also enrich poetic prescriptions until it is no longer manageable by Kant's philosophical prescriptions or assumptions of hegemonic cultural continuity." (11)

A perennial bogeyman of Romantic literature and Romanticist criticism, Hamilton's reworking of the *Kantkrise*, brought into focus by the opening chapter on Kleist, sees the philosopher emerge as a theorist whose effort was to contain, constrain and stabilise experience and its digestion in writing. Arrayed against this almost legalistic approach to literary writing and philosophico-theoretical reading stands poetry, which is recurrently revealed to be "working within an economy of thought different from the Kantian one in relation to which Romanticism has usually been understood." (61) Hamilton, of course, is hardly the first critic to note the irrepressibility of the Kantian economy of thought, but his method in charting its impact and its rejection is new: the texts he studies do not dissent from Kant by constructing a a rhetorical theory in the style of Paul de Man (237), or by effecting a dialectic idealism in the fashion of Schiller and Hegel, "which won't wash either" (19); rather, they place themselves outside the jurisdiction of Kantian thought. As the regulating distinctions that make experience possible—between the object and the subject, inside and outside, individ-

ual and community—collapse under the pressures of a faithful description, literature becomes, in Alain Badiou's phrase (17–8), not unaesthetic but inaesthetic. Literature purges its obeisance to philosophy; "a process in which it can be seen to be both *falling* in the estimation of its original Kantian philosophical sponsor and *rising* upwards in that of fellow artists." (5) Such concepts as the sublime continue to condition texts, but they now initiate "a movement of speculation by which an original regulation of the deregulated continually recasts itself in different discursive locations, transgressing the boundaries of all sorts of constraints in order to find more symbols of its own freedom to do so." (9) As its own brand of the sublime, then, counter-Kantian literature uses as its orienting idea an endeavour to become non-Kantian. It may accordingly be seen to remain ensconced in the confines set by Kantian, or at least theoretical, thought; Hamilton, however, argues that literature continues to engage with theory in a way that never allows it recuperate from its disorientation: the meeting of literature and philosophy creates texts which may be "false philosophically but recognisable existentially." (37) No alternative path opens; as such, it is unclear if it is entirely credible to argue that "[p]hilosophy is not thereby surpassed, but given a new beginning." (77) Nor is the precise hierarchy between philosophy and poetry absolutely clear, in part because establishing their precise relationship would itself furnish grounds for orientation: they continually circle each other. "[F]reeing poetry from philosophical prescription," Hamilton notes, "has poetry come back to its philosophical sponsor with difficult questions." (48) While this is a book that is highly specific in its readings, it is also radically unspecified in the narrative which it constructs: whether this non-committal stance is all that easily replicated in other studies, and whether it can spark a conversation between critics, remain open questions.

The refusal of *Orientation in European Romanticism* to set a clear course means that its readings may often appear improvisational and provisional. The latter qualification is at once the book's greatest strength and greatest potential weakness. Since the texts which Hamilton studies forbear from abstracting a conclusion from their deliberations, their critical reading similarly finds it difficult to establish a point of closure. The very final chapter concludes by doubling down, examining not one author, language or period but two. The two preceding chapters reflect on the implications of disoriented reading and writing: Balzac offers a "comic pessimism" (157); Sand an ironic "optimism." (194) Such readings take a step back to consider questions of transfer or affect, but this is the only close the book can offer. The chapter on Balzac's *comédie humaine* is both one of its best and one of its most symptomatic in this regard. Following a series of readings across the French writer's oeuvre, Hamilton can tease no final system from the *comédie*: a theory of how to read beyond theory, and finally without theory, is a difficult thing to accommodate. Balzac responds to "the processual, mobile character of the world" (163); as a result, "[h]istory in Balzac produces symptoms, not understanding. To understand history you must constrain yourself to a theory," but this Balzac will not deliver. (167) After all, "the Kantian aesthetic has been so dominant a way of thinking about literature and art that writing displacing it looks aesthetically precarious," and critically precarious. (19) Elsewhere, Hamilton writes that "[p]oetry subtracts philosophy from everything and deploys the remainder, which looks suddenly positive when indecently redeployed in this way." (17) This positive valuation is far from necessary or automatic, but it may serve to ground a criticism that transforms the undoing of Kant, philosophy and theory into a platform for creativity. The coda offers an invitation to focus such regained creativity on a much wider repertory of texts and comparisons than we may hitherto have been comfortable with.