

## Research Project

### Transcendental Poetics and the Futures of American Romanticism

#### Third-party funded project

**Project title** Transcendental Poetics and the Futures of American Romanticism

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**Organisation / Research unit**

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*Transcendental Poetics and the Futures of American Romanticism* builds on the premise that “romanticism [...] is a living, as yet unrealized possibility,” as Nikolas Kompridis has put it. Accordingly, it traces the romantic project from its inception in the late eighteenth and early to mid-nineteenth centuries through the twentieth century to today. In order to do so, the book sets in with American transcendentalism, particularly the work of Ralph Waldo Emerson and Margaret Fuller, which it understands as the distillation and poignant expression of romanticism as it incorporates and builds on the earlier European romantic discourse. Scrutiny of this original phase of romanticism in the first part of the book yields the following definition of the romantic project: Romanticism emerges as the attempt to draw up a comprehensive and accurate account apt to reconcile the human (thought) and nonhuman (nature) worlds decisively divorced by Kant’s critical project. In order to do so without sliding back into dogmatic metaphysics, that is, without relinquishing Kant’s critical insights, it needs to come up with a genetic theory (that is, a theory of creation) able to ground thought *in* nature without reducing thought to mere mechanism. Such a project remains very much a transcendental project, but “transcendental” now comes to signify a real ground in nature, the romantic Absolute, rather than the mere conditions of thought. To comply with Kant’s critical project, this Absolute needs to be located beyond the limits of thought. That is, the Absolute has to remain inaccessible by means of rational, conceptual thought. If this is the case, the only remaining option is *aisthesis* or aesthetic intuition. It is precisely this wager on *aisthesis* that makes the project of the reconciliation of thought and nature romantic. Since works of art in general and literary works in particular (due to their linguistic constitution) amount to the material manifestation of aesthetic intuition, art and literature attain central importance in romantic discourse—they become the royal road to truth, to the Absolute. This is why romanticism is a genuine literary-philosophical project (with literary-philosophical to be understood as a compound here).

The remainder of the book traces this project by focusing on two paradigmatic moments each in the twentieth and early twenty-first centuries. Thus, in its second part the book reads Gilles Deleuze as a twentieth-century romantic philosopher and the major late-modernist poet Charles Olson as his literary counterpart. Close readings of their works show how these writers extend the romantic project. Deleuze’s two singular achievements in this respect are his thorough immanentization of the transcendental (that is, his extrication of any remnants of transcendence) and a strong account of ontological univocity, two steps already prefigured in the Spinozism of the original eighteenth- and nineteenth-century romantic discourse. Similarly, Olson’s poetic as well as theoretical program emphasizes the metaphysical underpinnings of human experience. In a truly romantic spirit Olson’s poetry attempts to make tangible the grounding of human experience in nonhuman nature.

In the third and final part, the book turns to contemporary debates in the philosophy of mind. Taking its cue from what David Chalmers has called the “hard problem of consciousness,” it shows how this

debate takes up and extends the romantic discourse on the relation between human and nature or mind and matter in its attempts to explain the relation between non-physical thought and physical matter, a conundrum that was already at the heart of the original romantic movement. Of particular interest here is what analytic philosophers call dual-aspect monism, the analytic counterpart to Deleuze's continental theorizations of immanence and univocity. As to the realm of literature, the final part scrutinizes how contemporary literary works take up this very conundrum thematically and express it formally, thus providing an aesthetic complement to scientific discursivity. The main focus will be on a close reading of E.L. Doctorow's last novel *Andrew's Brain* (2014). As is the case throughout the book, the respective chapter is not merely interested in the novel's thematic appropriation of neuroscience; rather, in the wake of Emerson's insistence on experimentation and Olson's significant poetic as well as poetological innovations, it brings to the fore the very interrelation of content and form the novel displays. In order to do so, the chapter traces how the novel's flaunting of cognitive and narrative coherence in and through literary language constitutes a genuinely aesthetic exploration of the "hard problem."

The book concludes by recapitulating the trajectory it has drawn and by risking a glimpse into the future.

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