Book Reviews

Zoe Beenstock, *The Politics of Romanticism: The Social Contract and Literature*. Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2016. pp. vii + 228.

In Zoe Beenstock's intriguing study, a specter haunts Romanticism: the specter of Jean-Jacques Rousseau. William Wordsworth, Samuel Taylor Coleridge, William Godwin, and Mary Shelley — those "overdetermined synecdoches" of British Romanticism — are, she claims, deeply responsive not just to Rousseauvian political theory but to the philosopher himself, who posthumously embodies the temperament of the age (6). Narrowing down the overwhelming scope suggested by the book's title, Beenstock turns to Rousseau's influence upon British literature of the subsequent generation. By refining her focus to consider the philosopher's afterlives in canonical Romantic texts, she addresses the question of how Rousseau's version of social-contract theory (the idea that society's institutions exist to govern brutish individual human natures) fits into the transition from the Enlightenment to Romanticism — a key point of current critical debate in both literary studies and the history of political thought. Is Romanticism a liberal reaction, epitomized by the French Revolution, to the Enlightenment's repressive, institutionalizing vision of the social order? Or is Romanticism, instead, a conservative turn *against* the radicalism endorsed by Enlightenment philosophers, a radicalism which culminated in the Terror of the 1790s? For Beenstock, the answer is *both*, and this duality is captured in the enigmatic and shape-shifting Rousseau, who in this book is both a figure for Enlightenment principles and an apostate from them.

The book's key claim about Romanticism's relation to the Enlightenment is a striking departure from other historiographies: "Romanticism develops as a critique of radical changes in political theory of the mid-seventeenth to late eighteenth centuries and of the new theory of a social contract" (1). In the first and second chapters, which describe Rousseau's context and his corpus, Beenstock presents the philosopher as the dominant Enlightenment articulator of the social contract, and she shows how he inherits and revises the idea (from Thomas Hobbes through the Scottish Enlightenment and the German Idealists) that human nature needed social regulation. According to this trajectory, Rousseau is (atypically) Hobbes' direct intellectual heir, in that both writers use "imagery of a fragmented body politic held together by violence rather than volition" — a violence which all the philosophers in this intellectual history depict in metaphorical terms, as an anatomized or dismembered body (as in Hobbes' *Leviathan*), as a body in chains "providing both intimacy and constraint," or (prefiguring Rousseau's haunting of Romantic texts) as a ghostly "invisible hand" that "binds

 © 2018 Johns Hopkins University Press

people involuntarily to each other" (25, 29). Beenstock's placement of Rousseau in a strict continuum with Hobbes (in fact, in a "more or less direct line uniting Hobbes with Wordsworth") is unusual and suggestive, since the republican Rousseau is more often understood among philosophers to be in a vexed, combative relation to the sovereigntist Hobbes (45). Robin Douglass expresses such a typical view in *Rousseau and Hobbes* (2015): "Rousseau probably never read *Leviathan* [but] nonetheless appears to have viewed Hobbes' political proposals as being diametrically opposed to his own" and as "destructive of every republican government" (3). And yet, for Beenstock, it is this *difference* (which remains, in her book, implicit) between Hobbes and Rousseau — the radically different ends which they see the social contract as serving — that makes Rousseau the pivot-figure in this story of the transition from the Enlightenment to Romanticism. Rousseau inherits the social contract's inherently conservative project to control human nature; yet he is also a forward-looking republican who seeks to correct the freedom-limiting impulses of his philosophical predecessors. Both sides of Rousseau's character, which in Beenstock's book take on the metonymic weight of the Enlightenment and Romanticism, frame the exploration of the philosopher's afterlives in British Romantic literature.

Beenstock couples her radical revision of this epistemological trajectory with a call for a new disciplinary approach to reading Rousseau's work across genres. In the second chapter, where she discusses Rousseau's writing on individualism, she takes scholars of Romanticism to task for reading Rousseau's "literary and philosophical enterprises" as "distinct entities" (5). Actually, recent scholarly work on Rousseau already tends to treat his aesthetic and philosophical texts together. As Julia Simon says in *Rousseau Among the Moderns* (2013), "the history of Rousseau's critical reception traces a gradual widening of the corpus from an early narrow focus on the political theory toward the integration of fictional and nonfictional works of a decidedly more literary bent"; Simon's book, which brings Rousseau's work on music into dialogue with "the rest of his corpus," takes for granted that his literary and philosophical works are already integrated (Simon 2–3). Beenstock argues for an interdisciplinary method: reading "a common set of figural and rhetorical registers" across Rousseau's range of genres, including "literary" texts such as *The Confessions*, *Rousseau, Judge of Jean-Jacques*, and *Julie*, "philosophical" works like *Social Contract,* and "hybrid" texts, such as *Discourse on the Origins of Inequality* (5–6). This section's central insight is its discovery of Rousseau's motif of the "split self as a parody of the social contract," which he employs to particularly good effect in his challenging dialogues (51):

> J. J. finally forms a miniature society in exile at the end of *Rousseau, Judge of Jean-Jacques*. He imagines these two parts of himself, together with the Frenchman, as a mini-community that echoes the holy trinity. . . . The individual is no longer alone, but has become a company of three,

> consisting of the writer (Rousseau), his works (J. J.), and the intended reader (the Frenchman). Literature replaces the society which has produced such passionate need for fragmentation and aesthetic withdrawal, forming a new contract among its members. Rousseau . . . push[es] its logic to a grotesque extreme as society finally emerges as a company of one, exposing the sociability of individualism as a deathly singularity. (51)

Throughout Rousseau's prose fiction and political writing, Beenstock reveals, many such speakers are composed of distinct parts of themselves — just as a society is made up of its barely-controlled individual members. Rousseau's recurrent motif of the split self, in turn, offers a model of individualism that critiques earlier political philosophers by "turn[ing] loneliness into a social vision" (47).

This review has dwelled at length on the first two chapters, because Beenstock's book is more valuable for its re-evaluation of Rousseau within the history of political philosophy, and especially for its account of the philosopher as a lens into the relationship of the Enlightenment to Romanticism, than for its analyses of British Romantic poetry and prose. The chapters on Wordsworth and Coleridge are ambitious in scope, in that they strive to provide a comprehensive account of each poet's oeuvre as well as of Rousseau's influence. This leads to some unevenness in the analysis of individual works. For instance, Beenstock's close reading of *The Rime of the Ancient Mariner* argues that "Coleridge's many digressions from the ballad form [enact] the ship's loss of control," and that the metrical irregularities "foreground . . . Coleridge's theoretical concern with the tension between part and whole within the social body." And yet, the "standard Habbie," a ballad stanza form that Beenstock cites as the "regular, sociable" framework from which Coleridge deviates, is prone to significant variations in the writing of virtually all balladeers, not least Robert Burns (91). In the Wordsworth chapter, the reading of the 1805 *Prelude*'s Book 10 claims that "the poet dissects his own body from the body politic" in an act of separation from the social contract — even as Wordsworth's speaker says he probes not himself, but "The living body of society / Even to the heart" (111). The more successful readings include provocative accounts of Coleridge's conversation poems, notably "Reflections on Having Left a Place of Retirement." But the controversial details in the close readings unfortunately often pertain to the evidence for the persistence of the social contract in Romantic poetry.

More convincing are the chapters on Rousseau's haunting of British Romantic social covenants in works of prose fiction: William Godwin's *Fleetwood* and Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein*. In Godwin's novel, Rousseau, who is depicted first as a madman, is later "fictionalise[d] as a dead character whose legacy affects the living and migrates into the character of Fleetwood, as well as into Godwin's discussions of his own character," in order to critique the institution of marriage (141). The issues of legacies, madness, and reanimation in Godwin's novels return in Rousseau's sustained but less literal haunting in Mary Shelley's book. In *Frankenstein*, Beenstock finds traces of Rousseau (and Godwin) not

only in Victor's "paternal deficiencies," but also in his "political theory" informing the Creature's program of education and the broken social contract that is the destruction of the female monster (166, 159). As a literal emblem of a split self, the Creature's "xenograft" body is the most potent symbol of a Rousseauvian social contract: "he grotesquely allegorizes Rousseau's general will and its predecessor, the older model of the body politic" (172). Given this fascinating context of Rousseau's afterlives in the Godwin-Shelley circle — and the fact that the formal qualities of prose fiction are less important for this section than the trope of Rousseau's ghostly self as a signifier for his political theory — one wonders at the omission of "The Triumph of Life," a poem which Percy Shelley left unfinished upon his death, which is likewise haunted by the shade of "what was once Rousseau" (Shelley 489). Read together, though, these chapters on Godwin and Mary Shelley convincingly illustrate the reach of social contract theory into British Romanticism, as Rousseau's politics are recurrently found in the residue of his distinctive literary imagery — or, more disturbingly, in his actual phantasmal presence.

In the book's conclusion, Beenstock reveals Rousseau's tenaciousness in later historical periods — ranging from Thomas Carlyle's image of society as a "living corpse, a secular monstrosity that fractures into pelts, hides, and parts" to Sigmund Freud's "growing awareness of the Nazi menace" (186, 192). As is true throughout the book, the scope is ambitious, which means that certain connections are difficult to follow and the direction of the argument is sometimes unclear, but each reading provides insight into the unlikely persistence of the tropological signifiers of the social contract. *The Politics of Romanticism* is at its best not when attempting to provide wide-sweeping accounts, but when explaining Rousseau's striking influence as a catalytic political thinker for the transition from Enlightenment political idealism to Romantic revisionary critique. Above all, the book is a fascinating afterlife study: just as Rousseau split his living self into separate entities when he wrote about the social contract, his British Romantic followers depicted the philosopher as a revenant when they returned to his most enduring political theory. Beenstock's revelation of this curious literary haunting makes a strong case for our re-visitation of Rousseau and his successors.

Arden Hegele
Columbia University

Works Cited

Douglass, Robin. 2015. *Rousseau and Hobbes: Nature, Free Will, and the Passions*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Shelley, Percy Bysshe. 2002. "The Triumph of Life." In *Shelley's Poetry and Prose*, 2nd edition. Ed. Neil Fraistat and Donald H. Reiman. New York: Norton, pp. 481–500.

Simon, Julia. 2013. *Rousseau among the Moderns: Music, Aesthetics, Politics*. University Park, PA: The Pennsylvania State University Press.

Stefano Ercolino, *The Novel-Essay*, 1884–1947. New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2014. xix + 194 pp.

Stefano Ercolino theorizes "the novel-essay as the symbolic form of the *crisis* of modernity" (xv) and literary form as "a signifying structure that emerges in order to answer, on the aesthetic plane, specific symbolic needs posed by history" (xvi). To demonstrate these two theses, Ercolino discusses literature as one of many contextual forces, along with philosophy, history, music, and art, and shows that certain tendencies have led, in specific contexts, to the generation and sustainment of contingent artistic forms. The project is ambitious and the result convincing.

Ch. 1 dwells on the landscape within which the novel-essay emerged. The genre "rose from the exhaustion of naturalist aesthetics" (1); it was introduced by Huysmans with *Against Nature* (1884), and later defined by Huysmans himself in *Là-Bas* (1891) and by Stringberg in *Inferno* (1898). If naturalism presented itself as a poetics of "battle in favor of the truth [that] had an overt ethical implication" (8) — namely the representation of "the social stillness determined by the conforming and oppressive power of monopolistic capitalism" (5) — the movement was never as revolutionary as it claimed to be, and it ultimately embraced the *Zeitgeist* — the Enlightenment, positivism. It was, rather, "starting from *Against Nature* [that] Huysmans developed an antithetical aesthetics, rooted . . . in contempt toward the *Zeitgeist*" (6). He introduced the essay as "the critical form par excellence" to "awaken the critical potential of literature" (9) and had characters always "escaping from the materialism of their own age with their aesthetic and metaphysical quests" (7). *Against Nature* constitutes the birth of the novel-essay plus the germination of the modern oppositional and fragile character — the "I" traversed by irrationalistic philosophies and psychoanalysis that inaugurates "a new attitude toward modernity: not only critical but also desperate" (9). Seven years later, *Là-Bas* opened with a fierce attack on naturalism, on its "materialism, mediocrity, and vulgarity" as a "vile carrier in art of bourgeois ideology" (14), a thesis replayed in Strindberg's *Inferno*: "the naturalistic phase was potent and fruitful, but it has served its purpose" (19). Huysmans and Strindberg converged on the need to overcome both romanticism and naturalism — on the need for *synthesis*, which, for Ercolino, is the need of the novel-essay and the need of modernity. This aesthetics originated when "positivism's materialist reductionism and determinism both fell into crisis in the last decades of the nineteenth century" (20), leaving the ground for the rise of the "philosophies of Schopenhauer and Nietzsche" (20). As a result, synthesis became the needed response to Western European "distinctions-oriented rationality" (23). By denying distinction and seeking synthesis, the novel-essay was fighting at least 250 years of European history, launching "a direct attack against the heart of the ideological apparatus of modernity" (28) by "supporting the impossible synthesis of what philosophy and art had separated for centuries" (27). Moder-

nity was looking at itself, and all it saw was contradictions and deep cracks. The novel had to become a novel-essay, because the essay, as stated in Adorno's "The Essay as Form," "challenges the ideal of *clara et distincta perception* and indubitable certainty" and should be "interpreted as a protest against the four rules established by Descartes' *Discourse on Method* at the beginning of Modern Western science and its theory" (28).

Ch. 2 traces the development of the novel-essay. Formally, the genre became characterized by "an effect of suspension, dilation, rarefaction, and, in some cases, even of an explosion of the plot" (38) and anticipated the major experiments of modernism: "the breakup of the plot [and] the subversion of narrative time" (38). From *Against Nature* to Thomas Mann's *The Magic Mountain* (1924), the novel-essay challenges the Bildungsroman, a form called to legitimize "the ideological paradigm of modernity" (42). And in Mann's novel (itself a Bildung), Ercolino explains, "the farewell to the Bildungsroman is definitive" (42): "never a *Bildung* had been so rich and complete; never a *Bildung* had been so *useless*" (44). Mann made clear that the Bildungsroman had become impossible: there was no ideology to adhere to, no path to follow. He did so by introducing the essay into the novel: "tens of pages are not really necessary to explore Naphta's pedagogy of terror . . . with nerve-wracking dialogic and reported-speech essays" (46). The information the essays bring serves no purpose: it is "no longer possible to truly learn anything in the age of abundance" (47). And in this sense, the essay, in "its genre indeterminateness" (48), mimes the awareness of a lost absolute. Yet, as argued in Musil's "On the Essay," the essay satisfies both the recognition of indeterminacy and "the sore need for unity and meaning manifested in the shattered Europe of the fin de siècle" (54). As a result, the novel-essay can respond to socio-historical circumstances by combining the recognition of indeterminateness and "the strain of universality" (52). This latter strain constitutes the *raison d'être* of the novel-essay; to demonstrate this, Ercolino analyzes novels that only *seem* to fall under the category of the novel-essay, in an egregious critical move that definitely defines the genre: "the presence of the essay in a novel is *not* enough for it to be defined as a novel-essay" (75), and neither is the presence of a cast of characters that represent different or opposite ideologies in conversation. The difference is in the *function* of these features. In Dostoevsky, for example, both features are given preeminence, but there is never a need for ideas and ideologies to converge into a dialectical synthesis. In Dostoevsky "any dialectical synthesis . . . becomes impossible. This is exactly what does not happen in the novel-essay" (73). In fact, we are facing "two substantially opposed modalities in literature" (75): the novel-essay, which emerged in France and Germany, "answered the crisis with synthesis and closure" (75), while the Russian polyphonic novel answered the crisis "with polyphony and openness" (75). For Ercolino, "form is always political" (78), and a novel's specific formal ends depend *completely* on their socio-historical context.

Ch. 3 opens by discussing Musil's *The Man without Qualities* (1943). Musil used the essay "to explore the shapeless territory of the 'nonratioid,' the territory from which any rational certainty is banned, but which insistently demands to be investigated" (83). He called it the "other condition" (84), of which "essayism is the equivalent" (85). The "other condition" is yet another try at *univocal meaning*; what it is "is neither an objective nor a subjective state. It is, rather, an indistinctness of the object and the subject — a sort of cognitive loop that seems to anticipate contemporary theories on the extended mind" (89). Musil was trying to solve the unsolvable puzzles that trapped Western thought, of which the worst was, for him, language's (loss of) referentiality. He attempted to create an "interplay between mimesis and philosophy" (90), trying to merge what had been irredeemably split since Plato's *Republic* — the novel pertaining to mimesis (particularity), and the essay, with its strain for universality, to philosophy. This interplay, embodied in the novel-essay, is constituted by code leaps that jump back and forth between mimesis and philosophy, inserting itself in "a vein of *philosophical mimesis*" (93) that gained ground in modern literature, starting with Stendhal and Balzac, when "the novel began to compete with the great philosophical systems of German Idealism in the representation of the 'extensive totality of life'" (94). Yet, again, the novel-essay differs from previous and other attempts at philosophical mimesis. Take, for example, Voltaire's *Candide*. In it, "the entire narration is monologically oriented toward the mere denigration of Leibniz's metaphysics . . . [It lacks] the overt morphological hybridity of the novel-essay, as well as its sprawling speculative restlessness" (93). Or take Sartre's *Nausea*, known to embody "the bleak anthropocentrism and desperate solipsism of Sartrian existentialist philosophy" (99). *Nausea* is not a novel-essay because it lacks "a sufficiently high degree of *abstraction*" (97). The presence of Roquentin's "I" is overwhelming; everything is *subjectivized*; and concept is "almost never in the foreground" (97). The same applies to Proust's *In Search of Lost Time*. Proust's use of the essay is far more circuitous than a novel-essayist's. *Swann's Way* is "an example of *intermittent* essayism: a peculiar essayistic variety, which is very close to the aphorism and [in contrast with the novel-essay] is designed *not* to interfere with diegesis" (98). Moreover, Proust's "aesthetics of *indirectness* . . . is incompatible with the overtly declared conceptual dimension of the novel-essay" (100), namely the striving for synthesis. When all modernity had recognized the "shattered totality of life . . . as decadence" (103) and "the fragmentation of reality and meaning" (104) had been universally conceptualized, what *really* distinguished the novel-essay as a specific genre of modernist production was that it consciously struggled to achieve totality, remaining "the only genre of the modernist novel still able to approach [Nietzsche's] grand style" (106). And, in Ercolino's estimation, Broch's *The Sleepwalkers* (1931) represents "one of the most significant attempts of grand-style in twentieth-century literature" (114). It adopts the features of the novel-essay and opens up to the philosophy of Ludwig Wittgenstein, who "had expelled ethics and meta-

physics from the domain of philosophical reflection" (108). This, for Broch, meant that "the novel had to gather the 'immense metaphysical remainder'" after the "cleansing of metaphysics from philosophy" and to "give literary expression to those irrational experiences that philosophy was by then neglecting" (108). But, again, how does a novel like *The Sleepwalkers* differ from another historical novel like Tolstoy's *War and Peace*? While Tolstoy "had anticipated by about 15 years the essayistic turn that would occur in French literature in the last quarter of the nineteenth century" (131), the essay, in Tolstoy's novel, "does *not* perform a symbolic function" (131). Tolstoy was not looking for synthesis. What he wanted was "to write an 'aristocratic' novel which strengthened both the national consciousness . . . and the class ties of the landowning aristocracy" (131). *The Sleepwalkers*, "on the contrary, had a critical, *delegitimizing* ambition. . . . One *cannot* reduce literary form to mere morphology. . . . *War and Peace* and *The Sleepwalkers* belong to different historical periods . . . and respond to opposite symbolic needs" (132).

Ch. 4 deals with Thomas Mann's *Doctor Faustus* (1947). Adrian, the protagonist, is a composer who must confront "the exhaustion of musical language" (135). To do this, he has three options: parody, "a Hegelian 'end of art,'" or "the 'world text,' . . . the encyclopedic aggregate, the synthetic-totalizing work" (136). He chooses the third, but to do so signs a "desperate pact with the devil [which] is the consequence of the stifling demand of newness made by modernity, of its teleology of advancement" (137). So *Doctor Faustus* becomes an attack on the idea of the "synthetic-totalizing work," or, better yet, represents the auto-explosion of said project. Specifically, in the novel, Mann "seems to gather the conclusions that Adorno himself [in *Philosophy of Modern Music*] refused to draw out, . . . passing a thorny ideological ruling . . . against the avant-garde in general" (140). Adrian's existential parabola becomes "an explicit allegory of Germany that had sold its soul to Hitler and Nazism" (142), and so comes the auto-explosion of the novel-essay, as a novel like *Doctor Faustus* is unable to withstand its own critique, and the novel-essay becomes "the morphological and symbolic *crystallization* of the failed project of modernity" (147). The point about the auto-explosion in the finale of Ercolino's study is an insight not only into a previously undefined literary genre but also into a general dynamics of modernity: "the novel-essay seems to have been the only novel genre able to think modernity to the end" (147).

Paolo Pitari
Ca' Foscari University, Venice