

**Haekel, Ralf.** *The Soul in British Romanticism: Negotiating Human Nature in Philosophy, Science, and Poetry.* Trier: Wissenschaftlicher Verlag Trier, 2014. Pb. x, 345 pp. € 28.50. ISBN 978–3–86821–527–4.

Reviewed by **Dr. Justus Conrad Gronau:** English Department, Christian-Albrechts-Universität zu Kiel, Olshausenstraße 4, D-24098 Kiel, e-mail: gronau@anglistik.uni-kiel.de

DOI 10.1515/zaa-2016-0044

In the history of Western philosophy as well as the natural sciences, the concept of the soul has undergone fundamental transformations. In his book *The Soul in British Romanticism: Negotiating Human Nature in Philosophy, Science, and Poetry*, Ralf Haekel manages to provide the reader with comprehensive insights into the manifold discourses that played a role in the development of the concept of the soul in British Romanticism. In the wake of Plato's *Phaedo*, his *Phaderus*, and the Christian tradition, the soul has predominantly been associated with transcendence, immateriality, and immortality. As Haekel demonstrates, however, for the Romantic poets the concept of the soul is considerably more complex, frequently welding together contradictory aspects of both traditional transcendental and modern immanent concepts of the soul.

The book is structured into two parts, in the first of which Haekel is concerned with the soul as a *concept* in philosophy, natural philosophy, and modern science. Here, Haekel concisely discusses classical and Renaissance concepts of the soul in Platonism and Neoplatonism (especially Ficino), within the Aristotelian tradition, and in Christianity. Yet, Haekel shows that the concept of the soul in British Romanticism is not only informed by Plato and Aristotle but also by mechanistic philosophy, physiological theories such as vitalism, proto-biological theories developing out of the discovery of the nervous system, as well as research on the brain. Following Aristotle's idea of the vital function of the soul, Haekel convincingly illustrates that around 1800 life was understood as an immanent entity, and the principle animating life is only rarely conceived of as emanating from a transcendental divinity, but increasingly regarded as material.

The first part of the book indeed reads as a *tour de force* in key questions in the history of philosophical thought and human consciousness. The discussion revolves around central passages of Descartes's writings on the substance dualism of soul and body and around debates in British empiricism sparked off by Thomas Hobbes and John Locke about the ontological status of the soul. In addition, the reader gets to know about the correspondence between Samuel Clarke and Henry Dodwell regarding the mortality or immortality of the soul, and about the idealism of George Berkeley compared to David Hume's rather phenomenological approach to the world. Illuminating excursions into the development of neuroscience with thinkers such as David Hartley and Joseph Priestley show them to be as important influences on the Romantic poets as Erasmus Darwin's concept of the embodied mind or the advent of mind-dissecting phrenology.

As it becomes clear in the first part of the book that Romantic literature makes use both of traditional transcendental and 18th-century concepts of the immanent soul, Haekel questions the Foucauldian claim of an abrupt break between the classical and the modern episteme around 1800: "It is more apt to say that science in the Romantic period was characterised by conflicting theories simultaneously struggling for predominance" (60). Coleridge, for example, does not approve of the mechanistic philosophies following Bacon, Descartes, and Newton, and shields himself from the increasing immanentisation of the soul by elaborating a model of the soul in line with Platonic, Neoplatonic, and Christian perspectives. Haekel takes Coleridge's *Kubla Khan* as an example of the "co-existence of mutually exclusive theories of the soul during the period of Romanticism" (80). The poem is at once regarded as supporting the idea that thought is an immanent product of an opium-induced brain, and as employing a concept of a transcendental mind because the pleasure dome would, after all, be built in air. Whether or not, however, the reader agrees with Haekel's quasi New Critical claim that the poem "to a certain extent [...] achieves organic unity" (80), and whether specifically this tension of the material and immaterial component of the soul as mind depicted in the poem "actually increase[s] the poem's quality" (80), should be open to debate.

The second part of the book concerned with the soul as *form* in aesthetics, poetics, and poetry argues that the medium of the latter was particularly apt to negotiate the "basic uncertainty as to the soul's nature and status" (123). Haekel asserts that it re-enters into the discourse as an aesthetic quality in the form both of the imagination and as the self. The creative imagination, Haekel argues persuasively, emerges as the abode in which transcendence and immortality are negotiated anew. As such, the imagination generally serves as a metaphor for the transcendental in the immanent medium of poetry. To support his thesis, Haekel provides readings of Blake's *The Four Zoas*, Wordsworth's *Immortality Ode* as well

as Coleridge's *Dejection. An Ode* with regard to the soul's forms and functions within these poems. In the context of Coleridge's subdivision of the imagination into an epistemological and an aesthetic power, Haekel offers an excellent discussion of how the Coleridgean imagination, and particularly his concept of the symbol allowing the "consubstantiality of signifier and signified" (167), adopts the function of the soul, thus mediating between immanence or materiality and transcendence or, in the case of Coleridge's theology, God.

Additionally, according to Haekel, the soul was also understood in conjunction with ideas of self-hood in Romantic literature. In this context, the book examines how the function of the soul as self is re-inscribed into the medium of poetry itself, and argues that the narrative or discursive construction of the self replaces the transcendental constitution of the soul as self. This is illustrated in the analyses of Keats's romance *Endymion* and of Mary Tighe's epic poem *Psyche; or, The Legend of Love*. Moreover, these chapters interestingly disclose the gender-bias of the discussions about the soul, because in contrast to their male counterparts, female Romantic authors tend to "consider the soul to be androgynous" (182).

In his last chapter "Towards a Media Theory of the Soul," Haekel considers the aporia that an immaterial soul can only be expressed by a material medium, as "the soul in literature necessarily rests on the materiality of its own medium" (199). Providing key passages from P. B. Shelley's poetological writings, the conclusion is that "between 1800 and 1820 there occurs a paradigm shift within the system of literature – a transition from a proposed immediacy of poetry to a keen awareness of its medial condition" (202). With regard to this medial self-reflexivity, Shelley's *Epipsychidion* serves as an example of becoming aware of the fact that even the most imaginative poetry must eventually be communicated by language and therefore cannot provide immediate access to some transcendent realm of immortality.

The aim of the present study "to describe the historical development of the discourses on the soul, and, on the other hand, to investigate the close connection between the soul and the genre and medium of poetry" (11) stands as an ambitious task. As a consequence thereof, the hybrid variety of discourses on the concept of the soul at times evokes the impression that 'soul' describes a rather imprecise umbrella term for all sorts of things: transcendence, the principle of life, pure reason, the brain, the self, to name but a few. Of course this fleeting character of the concept of the soul is not Haekel's fault, and the forte of the book is thus to accept precisely this challenge of delineating the contours of a term so widely used in Romantic poetry. The book should not only be of great interest for scholars in the field of Romanticism, but also for anyone interested in key questions in late 17th to early 19th century metaphysics and epistemology.