

In Honor of Karl Kroeber

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This collection of essays is a rich testament to Karl Kroeber's wide-ranging literary and artistic interests, his intellectual rigor, and his endearing skepticism about received critical truths. Part of a great post-war generation of literary scholars in America, Karl has been distinguished for the range of his passions and the eclecticism of his critical interests. The essays underscore Karl's influence not only on Romantic studies but also on the visual arts, narrative theory, Native American literature, fantasy and science fiction writing.

Karl's delight in stimulating, and in provoking, colleagues and students across the disciplines is in keeping with his desire, expressed in his *Ecological Literary Criticism* (1994) and elsewhere, "to make humanistic study more responsible" (1). What that statement means to him is spelled out in "American Universities: A Personal View," which appeared in *boundary 2* (2000). The essay reminds us of Karl's place as the child of distinguished pioneers in anthropology; it also conveys how his youthful immersion in anthropology, in the methods and objects of anthropological study, contributed to his lifelong interest in literature that dramatizes the interconnectedness of humans and their environment. His experiences from childhood onward within the American academy, culminating in his chair as Mellon Professor in the Humanities at Columbia University, provides Karl with a powerful platform from which to critique aspects of the modern university intellectual. He has vividly chronicled the failure of the academic "star system," for example, to create viable publicly significant thinkers, a failure that for him calls into question the future of humanist study itself.

Ultimately it is humanism—as a study that will suggest how to live our lives more fully and completely – Karl has sought to give new force through the diversity of his scholarly engagements. He explains: "For me, an especially disheartening rift is that opened up by the failure of humanists even to try to understand remarkable recent accomplishments in the natural sciences. This failure, accompanied by humanists' ideological dogmatism . . . has drastically diminished the influence of academic humanism on the practical discourses of our social and political life" ("American Universities" 149). Kroeber's distress on this score was evident at the panel on "Green Romanticism" chaired by Alan Liu at the 1992 MLA convention in New York City, when in his role as respondent Karl criticized the view that the natural world in Romantic literature is an exclusively ideological construct. In turn, Kroeber later argued for ecological criticism as part of a larger effort to reclaim relevance for the humanities that he fears they are losing.

The essays in this volume share Karl's enthusiasm for uniting the literary and the scientific, the social and the personal, the popular and the elite, and the American and the British. Several contributions here stand in dialogue with Kroeber's work on science and ecocriticism, including Regina Hewitt's reading of property in Joanna Baillie's plays; Gillen Wood's discussion of John Constable's sky studies in light of changes in the British climate, both meteorological and social; and James McKusick's genealogy of the nightingale as European songbird and poetic trope. In contrast, Carl Woodring's account of the history of the centaur takes up an "unnatural" component of the Romantic and later nineteenth-century mythos. Martin Meisel explores how the Romantics' interest in science and mathematics shapes the content and form of Tom Stoppard's plays, in particular his *Arcadia*, which bounces between two times: 1808 and the "present day." Joseph Viscomi offers a new reading of "Lines left upon a Seat in a Yew-tree," providing the grounds for thinking of "Lines" as a dramatic monologue critiquing Gilpin's idea of the picturesque. Marilyn Gaull lays out two forms of narrative growing out of different conceptions in the 1790s of natural history and practice, one associated with fossils and the other with clones. Steven Jones advances a textual model of various forms of contemporary popular culture, including television and video games, influenced by Kroeber's views on ecocriticism and narratology.

Other essays reflect Kroeber's wide-ranging interests both within British Romanticism and beyond it. Mark Jones expands on our understanding of the public sphere in Keats's time, tracing its manifestations in accounts of his biography as well as his later poetry. David Simpson takes up Kroeber's interest in the American Indian through an analysis of Robert Southey's poems about Native Americans, which Simpson positions as a corrective to the Byronic caricature of the later Southey as hardened political reactionary. William Deresiewicz explores how Thomas Hardy's representations of women problematize the hope, expressed first by feminists like Mary Wollstonecraft, that ordinary men and women could be friends. And finally, Ursula Kroeber LeGuin contemplates the marginalization of fantasy literature as childish and for children alone, in light of the stunning popularity of J.K. Rowling's *Harry Potter* series as well as the revival of popular interest in J.R.R. Tolkien's Middle-Earth.

Taken together, these pieces call attention to the exceptional arc of Kroeber's scholarly career. One way to conceptualize the significance of that career is to recall Isaiah Berlin's famous division of intellectual personalities into the hedgehogs and the foxes, the title of his study of Tostoy's view of history (1953). Borrowing his metaphor from classical sources, Berlin identified as hedgehogs the thinkers and writ-

ers who know “one big thing” that they apply ruthlessly to every problem they consider. The foxes, by contrast, move “on many levels, seizing upon the essence of a vast variety of experiences and objects for what they are in themselves, without consciously or unconsciously, seeking to fit them into, or exclude them from, any one unchanging, all-embracing, sometimes self-contradictory and incomplete, at times fanatical, unitary inner vision” (1-2). The ranks of literary scholars have always had their fair share of hedgehogs, and it is such

rigidity and single-mindedness that Kroeber’s work has consistently critiqued and offered alternatives to. This same receptivity and intellectual curiosity have made Karl a great teacher and mentor, as those of us who have studied with him well know. His efforts to envision a more responsible literary method have made his colleagues and students aware of the importance of seeing things “for what they are in themselves.” It is this tendency that the diversity and vibrancy of this collection honors.
