

German Studies Association Annual Conference
44th Annual Conference (1–4 October 2020), Washington, D.C.

Panel Series: **The Forces of Nature in German Romanticism**

The Romantics had a significant aesthetic and epistemological interest in theories about the origins and interactions of what they called “natural forces”. Immanent forms of attraction and repulsion, gravity and electricity, *Bildungstrieb* and reproduction, but also the formation of language or bodily and medical phenomena were discussed as forces of nature. “Sollten die Naturkräfte gerade in gegenseitigen und individuellen Verhältnissen stehn, wie die Glieder an unserm Körper?”, Novalis pondered in his *Fragmente*. In Achim von Arnim’s *Das Loch*, for example, a chorus of ghosts embodies “die bildende Kraft der Natur”; E. T. A. Hoffmann and Caroline de la Motte Fouqué explored the effects of magnetism as a “geheimnisvolle Kraft der Natur” (*Serapionsbrüder*) or as “unbegreifliche Einflüsse in der Natur” (*Die Magie der Natur*), while Friedrich Schlegel reworked the theory of natural elements into a thinking of nature as a dynamic “Wechselspiel” of “Kräfte”, imbuing “Stoff” with “Form” an vice versa (*An die Deutschen*). Evidently, the notion of “Kraft” is crucial for the Romantics and their aspiration to fathom how every single thing relates to the whole and how the whole is mirrored in every single thing. But which forces of nature are at work to keep everything in check? How can these forces be conceptualized and imagined scientifically, philosophically and poetically? And which natural forces can become a threat, for example, in times and terms of natural catastrophes?

Arguably, conceptual approaches to forces of nature around 1800 are closely connected to reconfigurations in the natural sciences (i. a. in physics, biology, physiology and geology) and to Romantic *Naturphilosophie*, most prominently the works of Friedrich Wilhelm Schelling. In Schelling’s speculative approach, natural forces are described as antagonistic interactions ranging from the laws of physics and chemistry to electricity and ultimately transcending nature into the metaphysical realm. Force, according to Schelling, “heißt, was wir wenigstens als Princip an die Spitze der Naturwissenschaft stellen können, und was, obgleich nicht selbst darstellbar, doch seiner Wirkungsart nach, durch physikalische Gesetze bestimmbar ist” (*Ideen zu einer Philosophie der Natur*). Originating from the realm of physics but ultimately permeating through all of nature, the all-encompassing yet not representable principle of force allows to conceptualize the unity of nature as a generative and dynamic entanglement of *natura naturata* and *natura naturans*.

With the notion of force, it is precisely the agency of nature that comes into focus. In this respect, the literary works of German Romanticism can themselves be considered an experimental testing ground for the mysterious qualities of natural forces. Weaving textual interconnections between sciences and literature, Romantic texts articulated the agencies of nature in its diverse forms and materialities. As a result, Romantic text gave shape to proto-ecological notions as well as sometimes highly anthropomorphized or mythological representations of nature.

The panel series seeks to investigate how German Romanticism imagined and discussed “forces of nature” and aims to reconstruct the semantics, poetics and aesthetics of natural forces in German Romanticism (see also the institutional context of our panel, <https://www.imaginarien-der-kraft.uni-hamburg.de/>). We are particularly interested in how these imaginations can be (re-)read from the perspectives of cultural studies (i. e. approaches from STS, ecocriticism, new materialism etc.). Possible fields of inquiry include, but are not limited to:

- concepts and functions of natural forces in Romantic literature
- aesthetic engagements with notions of natural forces (in different literary genres but also in the arts more generally, i.e. in painting, sculpture etc.)
- Romantic ecopoetics (following up on the works of i.e. Jonathan Bate and Kate Rigby) and proto-ecological approaches to nature in connection to a thinking about forces of nature
- forces of nature in Romantic *Naturphilosophie* and *Naturwissenschaft* (e. g. in Schelling, Steffens, Ritter, Oken, Baader etc.)
- the interplay of physics and metaphysics in the discussion of natural forces; borders and boundaries between natural and supernatural worlds, science and literature
- temporalities of natural forces between cause and effect (slow vs. spontaneous reactions, deep time, temporal articulations of possibilities and potentialities etc.)
- visibility and explicability: the interplay of aesthetics and epistemology (experiments, observation, collections)
- matter and materiality of natural forces (following up on the works of Karen Barad, Jane Bennett and others)
- force and power: notions of control, containment and (shared) agency between non-human and human actors

The panel is organized by Frederike Middelhoff (University of Hamburg) and Adrian Renner (University of Hamburg).