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Dissertation Project

The Figure of the Idiot in Nineteenth-Century Lyric

In my dissertation, I closely read poems written throughout the nineteenth-century focusing on idiots and idiocy, asking not simply what idiocy is, but also what it can do. I contend that the often unspecific (modern) accusation of idiocy rarely reveals more about the nature of the target, rather the anxieties of the accuser (a la Ronell, *Stupidity*). However, I also question to what extent the modern connotations of idiocy depart, particularly in the long nineteenth-century, from the Greek signification of the private citizen and what other meanings idiocy takes on. I begin with these queries in Wordsworth's "Idiot Boy" and "We Are Seven," tracing them through Wilhelm Waiblinger's later poetry, Dostoyevsky's novel and Rilke's "Das Lied des Idioten," among other poetic examples. Instead of narrowing the inquiry of idiocy by asking who is an idiot and why, I aim to open up the question by asking what the so-called idiot evokes. What other potential ways of thinking and knowing are written off as unsettling or idiotic? And, in poetry, how are these alternatives enabled?

Dissertation Committee

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