

Tristram Wolff

Born 1981 in Hanover, New Hampshire; B.A. Comparative Literature (Translation Studies), Brown University, 2004; PhD Candidate and Graduate Instructor at UC Berkeley, Dept. of Comparative Literature (English/German/French), 2006-present

Dissertation Project

“Romantic Etymology and Language Ecology”

This dissertation project unearths an alternative tradition of theories of etymology and the discourse of language origin from the literatures of European and American Romanticism. Part history of science, part intellectual and discourse history, and part re-reading of literary encounters with the figure of “natural” or “non-arbitrary” linguistic roots in a series of writers participating in Romantic traditions (Herder, Humboldt, Blake, Horne Tooke, Coleridge, Thoreau, and as ‘coda’, Proust), the project proposes an affinity between the *media-* and *context-dependence* of contemporary linguistic pragmatics and the broadly *ecological* poetics of a Romantic etymology that strives to dissolve language into the matrix of its social and natural environments.

The literary tradition I describe both expanded on and productively distorted the emergent disciplinary domain of comparative philology, to admit with the sense of language’s historical sedimentation a poetic reimagining of language attuned to its processual, temporal dimensions. I argue that the “linguistics” latent in these poetic texts invests language not just with history but with *time*, on a range of scales from the subjective or psychological to social, species, and (most problematically) geological or “deep” time. Moreover, it is often by rhetorically exploiting the disjunction between just such timescales, by layering or mingling them, that these elements of Romanticism have attempted to reconfigure our attachment to the world. If searching “etymologically” through nature (variously construed) for the extent of language’s arbitrariness has long made for a bad fit with the science of linguistics, and has contributed to the misunderstandings and embarrassments of Romanticism, I illustrate how the temporally sensitive and contextualizing projects of linguistic pragmatics offer a chance to read these Romantic episodes with new eyes, with an awareness of the stakes of their complexity.

Dissertation Committee

Prof. Anne-Lise François, UC Berkeley Department Comparative Literature
Prof. Steven Goldsmith, UC Berkeley Department of English

Prof. Michael Lucey, UC Berkeley Department of French
Prof. Judith Butler, UC Berkeley Department of Rhetoric and Comparative Literature
Prof. Niklaus Largier, UC Berkeley Department of German

Recent Paper/Article

“Romantic Etymologies of *Walden*” (Presented at 2010 International Conference on Romanticism, Texas Tech; forthcoming from *Essays in Romanticism*)

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