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Excerpt

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I

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Romanticism and the “schools” of criticism and theory

For students of English literature from the 1780s through to the mid 1830s, “Romanticism” and the “Romantic period” are not what they used to be – one good reason for a second edition of this volume. To be sure, “Romanticism” as a literary movement or a complex of beliefs and styles of art, and “Romantic” as a descriptor of that type of writing or writer, have long referred to “being like romance”:¹ to reworking an aesthetic mode, particularly the European quest-romance of the twelfth through the sixteenth centuries, where imagination, desire, and myth-making heighten what we usually take as perceived “reality” to extend its limits with symbolic suggestions that deepen, expand, or transcend everyday human awareness. Such a relocation of “romance,” in fact, was already in progress well before 1780. By then “romantic” as a signifier had already strayed from mainly describing supernatural tales of chivalry, including their expressions of love, parodied in Cervantes’s *Don Quixote* (1605–15), to characterize the assertively “natural,” but also mythological and idealizing, landscape paintings of Claude Lorrain and Salvator Rosa from the seventeenth century as these came to Britain from southern France and northern Italy (to many, then, the “regions of romance”) to become exemplars of grand sublimity within the late eighteenth-century culture of “sensibility” (Eichner, ‘*Romantic*,’ p. 5). It has thus seemed proper to connect “Romantic” with William Wordsworth’s claim in a revision of his preface to the 1800 edition of the *Lyrical Ballads* – for many the collection that launched British Romanticism – that these poems, whether written by him or Samuel Taylor Coleridge, take “incidents and situations” based in “common life,” including a revived “nature,” and “throw over them a certain colouring of imagination, whereby ordinary things” are “presented to the mind in [such] an unusual aspect” that readers can now “trace” in them “the primary laws of our nature ... the manner in which we associate ideas in a state of excitement.”² This paradoxical “return to nature” that also transfigures its basic impressions to arrive at “what is more integral than nature, within [the] self,” therefore became defined by 1970 as

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“the internalization of quest-romance” in the works of William Blake, Percy Bysshe Shelley, and John Keats, as well as Wordsworth and Coleridge – and even, in a more ironic fashion, George Gordon, Lord Byron – all according to Harold Bloom, one of the most prominent exponents of Romanticism by the 1960s.³ But after 1970–1, this scheme and other senses of one overall Romantic stance have come to be seriously questioned from many different points of view. For some, these critiques have meant exploding “the Romantic canon” both as a grouping of writers who disagree too much to be a movement and as a category wrongly limited to only six male poets plus a few more within their spheres of influence.⁴ For others, there has been so much “over-systemizing and simplifying” of a retrospective construct *called* “Romanticism”⁵ that the label has become problematic as a way of describing a cacophonous totality of conflicting voices, ideologies, gender roles, classes, genres, styles, and modes of publication in Britain during the time between the American and French Revolutions and the accession of Queen Victoria.

After all, there have never been steady “grounds” for the ascription of “Romantic” to this whole era in literature or of “Romanticism” to a unified vision shared by many writers. Certainly none of the British authors now given the label called their own work “romantic” with any consistency. True, both Coleridge and William Hazlitt did accept the distinction between the antiquated “classic” and the newly modernized “romantic” styles being advanced in Germany, particularly by Friedrich and A. W. von Schlegel, and echoed in France, especially in Germaine de Staël’s *On Germany* (1813).⁶ For Hazlitt by 1816, “classical” writing depicts conventionalized objects that bring “universal associations” with them as though they were outside of individual minds, while “romantic” objects gain affective power only from the super-added “ideas with which they are habitually associated” by particular observers and readers (Hazlitt, cited in Whalley, “England,” p. 211). Yet even Hazlitt did not apply this label widely to the poets around him, and the idea of any dominant literary movement proved impossible to sustain throughout the early nineteenth century. Though a “Lake School” (from England’s Lake District) was identified to include Wordsworth and Coleridge by 1802, the “Cockney School” label scathingly applied to Keats in 1817, by Byron among others (because of Keats’s suburban and middle-class status), revealed a cultural arena of competing schemes of poetry, even though Byron and Keats were quite similar in dividing their own uses of “romantic” between picturesque scenes from Continental Europe and states of erotic longing, like a Petrarchan lover’s, doomed by the perpetual distance of their objects of desire (pp. 194–6). It was not until 1833 that Coleridge was first designated “the founder of the romantic school of poetry” in a

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more comprehensive sense (p. 234), and that sense was so amorphous that Victorian criticism oscillated for decades between tight restrictions and over-generous vagueness regarding whom and what Romanticism encompassed (pp. 235–57).

Nonetheless, most critics of the twentieth and twenty-first centuries believe that “the Romantic” as both a period and a movement “canonized itself towards the end of [the nineteenth] century” (p. 157). At the same time, the reasons they accept this argument, then disagree on others, stem from a key factor rarely noted in these discussions: nearly all informed critics, past and present, base their labels and judgments not simply on “general principles” but on theories – their own or those of others – about the “nature” of valuable literature, its relationships with what it claims to represent and the cultural features of its time that helped produce it, its capacity for expressing its author’s beliefs and affecting its audience emotionally and intellectually, and its ways of using language to make verbal art, including allusive language already loaded with suggestions from much earlier or contemporary writing. Even the primary explanations for the different views of Romanticism we have already noted come from these more fundamental theoretical differences, many of them initiated or modified at the time of the Romantics, who developed their works out of several different philosophical orientations, most of them conflicted and undergoing changes at the time. Such is even more the case with university-based interpretive criticism since the dawn of the twentieth century. As institutions of higher learning have attracted both conservative and revisionary scholars of literature, quasi-“schools” of critical orientation transcending single universities have arisen to promulgate their methods of literary and cultural analysis in publications and classrooms, and their differences are all rooted in particular theoretical assumptions, however much some of these are the products of ideologies (or systems of beliefs) that are troubled by conflicts they only seem to have resolved.

To understand the debates about Romanticism and where they now leave it (if there *is* an “it”), we must therefore expose how the most influential views of what “Romantic” writing is and does, as well as the arguments that call Romanticism into question, come from basic theoretical stances built on interlocking and foundational, if sometimes conflicted, assumptions. Many of these genuinely look back and respond to stances *in* what we call “Romantic” writing, thereby placing Romantic and more current theory in frequent and revealing dialogues with each other. I therefore want to present an overview here of how the different “schools” of criticism that have done the most important work with Romanticism since the late nineteenth century have redefined and debated the “Romantic” in ways demanded

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by their different foundations in theory, nearly all of those with Romantic roots – though we should also keep in mind that these “schools” are not entirely separate, that they frequently incorporate parts of one another, and that all the identifiable “schools” reveal disagreements among their various proponents. In this process, I want to argue that any future study of Romanticism, whether it ultimately decides to accept or reject such a label, must be based on an informed understanding of all these differing positions and the theories behind them, as I know to be the case in the essays that follow. It is that understanding that can best help us grasp the full vitality and the lasting cultural importance of all that this revolutionary and multi-faceted period entails in its many instigations of, and its resistances to, what we have come to see as the modern world.

I The codifications of “old” historicism, “new” criticism, and their confluence

As it turns out, even the solidification of an “English Romantic school” in criticism at the end of the nineteenth century is enabled by a theoretical base with a Romantic ancestry, and that same criticism is ultimately bedeviled by problems inherent in this very base. Beginning in 1878, the British scholar Edward Dowden codifies “the Romantic movement” as the integration of two aging literary schemes: “romance” in need of being “saved and ennobled by the presence and power of truth” and “naturalism” in need of being “saved and ennobled by the presence and power of imagination” (Dowden, cited in Whalley, “England,” p. 251). Even so, in seeing the cause of this coalescence as a pervasive and collective way of thinking visible in the “kinship between the literature of [this] epoch and the various other manifestations of the mind of the time,” Dowden must finally acknowledge his debt to Hippolyte Taine’s influential French *History of English Literature* (1864–69; Dowden, cited in Whalley, “England,” pp. 252, 247). Taine employs the model of “mineralogy” tracing “diverse ... crystals” organically back to “simple physical forms” to claim that there “is a system in human sentiments and ideas” at any given period in a nation or region (“the mind of the time”) and that “this system has for its motive power” certain “simple spiritual forms ... common to men of one race, age, or country.”⁷ Harkening back especially to P. B. Shelley’s “the spirit of the age” in *A Defence of Poetry* (1821) – for Shelley an “energetic development” in his era’s “national will” of an “accumulation of the power of communicating and receiving intense and impassioned conceptions” (Adams, *Critical Theory*, p. 529) – Taine posits a “disposition” in “all the conceptions of a century” (Taine, cited in Adams, *Critical Theory*, p. 612) that would soon

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become the overriding *period mentality* in many twentieth-century histories of literary eras. It is this sense of a world view within a time frame that most led to what has more recently been called “old” historicism, and many arguments since Dowden’s for a basic “Romantic vision” common to Western writers and artists from about 1790 to 1830 have accepted this “large coherence of thought and practice” as a pervasive reality, though the ingredients of that coherence have differed from critic to critic.⁸ All this while, though, the late Victorian grounds of *those* grounds were and remain deeply troubled. Dowden himself questions whether Taine’s “mind of the time” helps critics “comprehend ... the individual genius of an artist” who may not conform to a dominant belief-system and whether any *Zeitgeist* (or “spirit of the time”) takes sufficient account of “the universal mind of humanity” and what it has produced with ongoing value “not bounded by an epoch nor contained by a race” (Dowden, cited in Whalley, “England,” p. 252).

The early twentieth century, while certainly furthering the *Zeitgeist* view of Romanticism, therefore found these questions rising to the surface even in some of its most historical approaches to literature. Faced with questionings of Romanticism’s moral and political implications in the wake of World War I and Russia’s communist revolution (see Gleckner, *Romanticism*, pp. 26–40), Arthur O. Lovejoy rises to champion Romantic writing in a landmark essay of 1924. But he does so by dividing the realm he defends and urging what his title does, a renewed “Discrimination of Romanticisms” instead of synoptic attempts to establish one “spirit of the age.” Lovejoy was then and remains the principal figure who enunciated a form of criticism called “The History of Ideas” that continues to attract interest, at least through its own ongoing journal. This scheme is “old historicist” in accepting the relatively unified effect of several cultural forces at a given time on how previous or rising ideas are redefined from period to period. But it also assumes, in line with the ongoing products of a “universal mind” and Dowden’s notion of artistic variants within period mentalities, that there are “unit-ideas,” such as the Judeo-Christian “Great Chain of Being” that, initially but not only in the Middle Ages, depicts the fundamental hierarchy of the cosmos that the structures of human civilization should duplicate. These “thought-complexes” usually retain their fundamental features as they pass from one era to the next, if they survive at all. They should thus be seen as clearly distinct from each other even if multiple “unit-ideas” all become modified by the *Zeitgeist* of later times or cultural groups (Lovejoy, cited in Gleckner, *Romanticism*, pp. 68–9). For Lovejoy in 1924, too many descriptions of Romanticism have taken “quite distinct thought-complexes” and forced them into one reputed mentality (*ibid.*). Instead Lovejoy advocates distinguishing, to start

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with, what Dowden sees as flowing together: the “naturalism,” including an idealized “primitivism,” that descends to Wordsworth and others from articulations of it around 1740 (“nature” as superior to “art”) from the use of local symbols as primarily metonyms for suggesting “the entire reach of the human imagination” (“art” as superior to “nature”) just as Friedrich Schlegel suggested in Germany and the later Coleridge would argue in his *Biographia Literaria* (1817; Lovejoy, cited in Gleckner, *Romanticism*, pp. 70–7). In fact, Lovejoy’s whole approach resembles Coleridge’s 1808 thinking about the differences between the “predetermined ... mechanic form” that artists can “impress” on any “material” and the “organic form” that “shapes, as it develops itself, from within” the interpenetration of material perception and imagination (Coleridge, cited in Adams, *Critical Theory*, p. 471). “Mechanic” and “organic” are “thought-complexes,” as well as devices, that retain their fundamental natures between the times of, say, Shakespeare and Wordsworth, like Lovejoy’s unit-ideas. Yet Coleridge also believes that different times and nations have produced their own distinct manifestations of each, sometimes to the point of obscuring their differences, which now, as with Lovejoy’s “units,” need to be emphasized anew.

Lovejoy’s provocative claims, however, which (as we shall see) some critics have recently echoed, did not expose the fissures in “old” historicism for long, considering how much acceptance there has been, until recently, of the strongest reactions to him. The defense of Romanticism’s period unity has been joined after 1924 many times, often in *comparative* literary histories in which unit-ideas carry not just across eras but across national boundaries over the same period of time. Still, the most influential retort to Lovejoy was surely the comparativist, “old” historicist, and history-of-ideas argument of the Austrian philologist-critic Rene Wellek in 1949. Wellek is unequivocal: “the major romantic movements” for him in Britain, Germany, and France “form a unity of theories, philosophy, and style, and ... these, in turn, form a coherent group of ideas each of which implicates the other” (Wellek, cited in Gleckner, *Romanticism*, p. 182). In substantial quoted evidence from poets and theorists of all three nations, Wellek finds that, even though individual poets vary in construing the key concepts conservatively or progressively, there is a shared linkage of writing to the “workings and nature of poetic imagination,” now more organically defined; essentially “the same conception of nature and its relation to man,” who can now “read nature as a symbol of something behind or within [it] not ordinarily perceived”; and “basically the same poetic style, with a use of imagery, symbol, and myth which is clearly distinct from that of eighteenth-century neo-classicism,” much as the Schlegels, Coleridge, and Hazlitt claimed (pp. 193–4). Yes, this overall “conception occurs ... only

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fitfully” in Byron as Wellek reads him (p. 200), and several other writers of this era are even more outside that “dominance of a system of ideas and poetic practices” (p. 205). Wellek’s key move, though, is to half agree and half disagree with Lovejoy about ideas themselves. On the one hand, Wellek concurs that shapes of ideas “have their anticipations and survivals” from age to age (p. 205), like a floating “signifier” or mere image as defined by Ferdinand de Saussure.⁹ Yet, on the other hand, Wellek maintains that the “system of norms,” including “themes” and “philosophies,” that fill these vessels, as in Saussurean “signifieds” (or concepts) to which signifiers may point (*ibid.*), can be fundamentally changed, like styles of expression, as one period mentality replaces another (Wellek, cited in Gleckner, *Romanticism*, pp. 182–3). Wellek even intensifies this argument by drifting beyond “old” historicism and the history of ideas, while still affirming both, and invoking his knowledge of Russian formalism and Prague School linguistics from the earlier twentieth century. He concretizes his Romantic “system of norms” in a verbal objectification of the new “themes” and “philosophies” as these fuse in Romantic poems with a distinctive reworking of “conventions” and “styles” (p. 182), so much so that Romantic “content” cannot finally be distinguished from Romantic “form.”

By 1949, we should remind ourselves, partly because of Wellek’s transmission of his East European influences to America and Britain, literary historicism had come under assault from what was now being called “the new criticism.” This “school” of interpretation does not deny the reference of literary signs to other writings or to historical circumstances, but it resists the historicist’s dissolving of texts into period (and even authorial) mentalities in favor of affirming the unique mode of any art-object’s existence, the internal structure or form, and the aesthetic functions of literary works that all make literature a distinct kind of discourse and literary criticism a discipline focused on an object with its own special nature. Such an orientation, most immediately indebted to the earlier modernist criticism of T. S. Eliot and I. A. Richards, thus insists, indeed, that “in a successful work, form and content cannot be separated” and that “the primary concern of criticism” is “the relation of the various parts to each other in building up” the “whole” of a verbal “object,” to quote the Yale new critic Cleanth Brooks in 1951.¹⁰ With these assumptions, new criticism looks back to Coleridge’s sense of the achievement of “organic” form by the “symbol,” especially as his theory imports from Germany the arguments of F. W. von Schelling and especially Immanuel Kant. For Coleridge in 1816, “a symbol” as opposed to “allegory” (for him “a [mechanic] translation of abstract notions into a picture language”) is “characterized ... by the translucence of the eternal [from Kant’s ‘Ideas’ in the mind to mental intimations of God] through and

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in the temporal [concrete signifiers]" in a way that "partakes of the [greater] reality which it renders intelligible," yet in which the symbol "abides itself as a living part in that unity of which it is the representative" (Coleridge, cited in Adams, *Critical Theory*, p. 476).

In new critical thinking, achieving such a "multaity in unity" (Coleridge's phrase) must especially involve the focusing of abstract or emotive elements on what T. S. Eliot in 1919 called an "*objective correlative*," a materially verbalized "formula" whereby a complex "emotion" is coalesced in a scheme of concrete words so that the "sensory experience" of the latter can generate the full "emotion" in the reader's psyche (Eliot, cited in Adams, *Critical Theory*, p. 766). By this standard, the new criticism feared at times that much Romantic poetry should not qualify as really fine art. Brooks himself in 1939 sees the major Romanticists, because some apparently want imagination to leap beyond concrete symbols, as frequently unable to achieve "a fusion of image and idea," the key to the "serious irony" of forcing contradictions into an equipoise – in this view the special affect achieved by literature at its best (Brooks, cited in Gleckner, *Romanticism*, p. 144). But another re-defense of Romantic writing came to the rescue again in the 1940s, this one very much in the terms of the new criticism: the "synaesthesia" of sensory and imaginative elements in numerous Romantic poems came to be seen as producing the "irony" of different but "complementary impulses" being activated simultaneously in sensitive readers (R. H. Fogle, cited in Gleckner, *Romanticism*, p. 154). By 1949 Brooks's Yale colleague W. K. Wimsatt affirms that the best "Romantic nature poetry" shows a "solidity of symbol and ... sensory verbal qualities" not "washed out by" any "abstraction," which makes the "imaginative structure" of much Romantic writing a form of the "concrete universal" unique to great art (Wimsatt, cited in Gleckner, *Romanticism*, pp. 219–30). Wellek's argument for content as form the same year, it turns out, makes his claim for a well-codified "Concept of Romanticism" an outcome of the new criticism just as much as a product of period historicism and the history of ideas.

Indeed, the most influential schematization in theory and criticism about the Romantic era through the 1950s and 1960s extended this attempt to synthesize new-critical, old-historical, and history-of-ideas assumptions into one overriding unity. Given its emphasis on literature as a discipline, new criticism readily joined with the history of ideas by the early 1950s to establish the thoroughgoing study of literary theory itself and how its assumptions have changed since ancient times. M. H. Abrams makes Romanticism central to this effort by using *The Mirror and the Lamp* (1953)¹¹ to show how Romantic theory and poetry, within the *Zeitgeist* of Britain and Germany

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around 1800, recombine parts of several theories of the European past to replace the neoclassic view of poetry as the “mirror of nature” revealing the *highest* nature concealed from human awareness outside us with the Romantic notion of the “poem as heterocosm,” given its life by the “lamp” of imagination, through which the poet organically unites inner associations with concrete perceptions and words in an “act analogous to God’s creation of the world,” whether any particular poet believes in that deity or not (Abrams, *Mirror*, p. 272). Reinforcements of this coalescence soon followed in abundance, though some steered towards emphasizing the period’s mentality and others towards Romantic transformations of previous ideas and aesthetic forms. For Morse Peckham, all Romantic writing comes out of “a shift from conceiving the cosmos as a static mechanism to conceiving it as a dynamic organism,” even though there are varying articulations of this paradigm-shift ranging from “radical” (Coleridge’s) to “positive” (Wordsworth’s) to “negative” (Byron’s; Peckham, cited in Gleckner, *Romanticism*, pp. 231–57). For Northrop Frye in 1963, fascinated by age-old myth-patterns as both ideas and sheer forms in part because of C. G. Jung’s “collective unconscious” of enduring archetypes, Romanticism is a “historical center of gravity,” enabling a relative “uniformity of tone and mood” in texts, in which previous mythic efforts to identify the “human with the non-human” are reworked by and relocated to a “center” of imagination “where inward and outward manifestations of a common motion and spirit are unified” (Frye, cited in Gleckner, pp. 298–313). It is into this period-based yet form-oriented apotheosis of the “Romantic” that Bloom’s “internalization of quest-romance” arrives in 1969 to so define the peculiar psychology and journey of the striving speaker in many actual texts of this Romantic revival of myth. Concurrently, though, Abrams reenters the conversation, most impressively with *Natural Supernaturalism* (1971),¹² to make sure that historicist and formalist analyses are entirely balanced and integrated with each other. He completes the drive towards coalescence visible in Wellek by defining the Romantic “spirit of the age” as a direct engagement with the “political, intellectual, and moral circumstances of a period of revolutionary upheaval” whereby a dominant “politics of vision” (“old” historicism) takes verbal shape in a “distinctive complex,” like an objective correlative, common to many poems (new criticism) in which “philosophical empiricism,” including Kant’s reaction to it, is fused with “great poetic forms” rooted in biblical prophecies of salvation (history of ideas). The result is a Romantic literature of “infinite longings ... inherent in the human spirit” whereby “militant external action” is transmuted into “an imaginative act” of either unfulfilled desire or potential transcendence well suited to the new-critical equipoise of vibrant and vibrating contraries (Abrams, cited in Gleckner, pp. 314–30).

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II The disruptions of psychoanalysis, deconstruction, and Marxism

Yet even while these orientations developed and combined, there were adjacent ones, with their own Romantic ancestries, rising to prominence in the same decades with the effect at times of helping to reinforce the above conceptions of Romanticism but more often of unsettling their codifications at the level of their most basic assumptions. In arguing for an internalized quest-romance in the late 1960s, for example, Bloom is drawing partly on psychoanalysis in the tradition of Sigmund Freud by focusing on a striving subject who “rises from the id” and struggles to fulfill such pre-conscious drives in the “nightmare world of the reality-principle” (Bloom, *Romanticism*, pp. 16–19). Bloom, in fact, goes on to extend these assumptions, beginning in *The Anxiety of Influence* (1973),¹³ by analyzing how “strong,” mainly Romantic poets can achieve a “reaction-formation” and “sublation” (or raising-up from beneath) that allows their deepest questing drives to speak in their verse through and past the limits of precursor-texts written by their “father” figures. However, Bloom is actually a latecomer in finding Freudian psychoanalysis both prefigured in Romantic writing and suited to the interpretation of many Romantic texts as though such works are like dreams as Freud understood them by 1900, sublimations of unconscious “dream-content” half appearing in the more readable “dream-thoughts” learned from education and social interaction (Freud, cited in Rivkin and Ryan, *Literary Theory*, p. 400). Among the responses to Lovejoy proclaiming a deep unity in Romanticism is Mario Praz’s 1931 view of the “Romantic agony” that results from the rising and repression of the “*homo sensualis*” foregrounded by the Marquis de Sade during the Romantic period, the “impulse mysterious” of which there are surface symptoms pointing to irrational and pre-conscious depths, as in Coleridge’s “Kubla Khan” (written 1797) – “oh that deep romantic chasm” (line 12) – and Mary Shelley’s original *Frankenstein* (published 1818) with its gestation of the hero’s artificial creature out of the pre-conscious dreams of both the author and Frankenstein himself (see Praz, cited in Gleckner, *Romanticism*, pp. 82–5). In 1936, on another plane, Herbert Read regards the surrealist art of his own time as replaying the “opposition and interaction” in European Romanticism over a century earlier “between the world of objective fact – the sensational and social world of active and economic existence – and the world of subjective fantasy” emerging largely out of the personal and collective unconscious (Read, cited in Gleckner, *Romanticism*, p. 103).

Given so much encouragement from Romantic writing itself, which Michel Foucault has seen as helping to begin the modern sense of the human being as a depth of self-obscurating layers unable to consciously represent its