

Introduction

MARSHALL BROWN

Many of the presuppositions and practices that prevail in contemporary aesthetics and literary criticism originate in writings from the Romantic decades.¹ So do several positions to which the contemporary climate is hostile. Hence Romanticism is often regarded as the root of contemporary attitudes – the beginning of Modernism which, conversely, is viewed as late Romanticism – and likewise, not infrequently, as the source of the troubles from which we are now at last freeing ourselves. Obviously, no period of the past has a monopolistic claim to be the origin of the modern (or the postmodern); nor do Modernism and postmodernism begin in and as anything other than themselves, whatever elements in the past may have inspired them. Still, it is generally agreed that the writing about literature from the period between 1780 and 1830 has a special bearing on the present.

Increasingly since the Romantic era literary criticism has been concerned not just with works but with writers and readers. When Wordsworth's Preface to *Lyrical ballads* defines the poet as 'a man speaking to men', he is, to be sure, making a point about the democratization of letters ('man'=common man) and missing one about the situation of women and women writers; both of these issues are discussed in this volume. But he is also making a novel statement about the communicative value of literature. The writer does not just provide moral exempla and frame a golden world; literature is there to be read and understood. One important new strand of Romantic criticism thus turns its attention to hermeneutics and interpretation: how do readers grasp what authors are saying? Criticism

¹ Our volume, entitled *Romanticism*, aims to represent the range of writing remaining of interest and influence from the years between about 1780 and 1830. In the German arena it remains common to label some of the writings Romantic and others (particularly in connection with Goethe, Schiller and Humboldt) Classic. In the Latin countries and in the United States the label Romantic often gets applied to writers contemporary with the British Victorians and the German Biedermeier; their Romanticisms will be covered chiefly in volume 6 of this series, while some early figures, especially Rousseau, primarily appear in volume 4. In *Romanticism and gender*, New York: Routledge, 1993, Anne Mellor has argued cogently against lumping all the writings of these decades under a single label. Names remain useful hooks, but our aim has been to represent in their variety the writings of a period, not a movement.

grows at once (though not always in the same writers) more psychological and more technical, two functions often joined in Romantic rhetorical theory and in its deconstructive avatars. And criticism also grows more sociological, as the need to define a readership is increasingly felt. Earlier genre criticism concerned the laws of composition of different types of writing; now it also considers their different purposes and audiences.

Wordsworth's poet, however, speaks *to* men, not *with* them. Alongside the reader's part, the situation of the poet is at issue in much Romantic criticism. No longer the inspired representatives of divine order, and not yet Arnoldian pedagogues, Romantic authors have their own, multiple versions of authority. One might glance back to the threshold of Romanticism, where ancient erudition had breathed a newly personal spirit in Laurence Sterne's whimsical invocation, 'Read, read, read, read, my unlearned reader! read' (*Tristram Shandy* III.36). At the same moment Samuel Johnson's Imlac had called the poet 'the interpreter of nature, and the legislator of mankind, and . . . a being superiour to time and place' (*Rasselas*, ch. 10). Imlac, of course, is a little loony, until brought down to earth by confronting the seriously disordered imagination of an astronomer who madly thinks he rules the heavens. Such are the figures who serve as equivocal models for Percy Shelley's paean to poets as 'hierophants' and 'legislators of the world' (conclusion of 'Defence of poetry'). But if Shelley's 'world' Romantically ups the ante from Imlac's social pretensions to the astronomer's universal ones, he simultaneously deflates them with the pathos of his negations: his poets are 'hierophants of an *unapprehended* vision' and '*unacknowledged* legislators' (my italics).² Ever since Plato, poetry was constitutionally on the defensive; in the Romantic period it became – to use what was then still a new sense of the word – nervous.

The last epigone of the platonic poet with his divine frenzy was the preromantic figure of the genius. In early Herder and other writers of the German *Sturm-und-Drang* movement we frequently find poets credited

² Earl Wasserman's unashamedly high-toned, neoplatonic reading of Shelley's 'Defence' bypasses the 'unacknowledged' and even contrives to neutralize it, claiming that 'the poetic transaction involves only the poet and his poem, not an audience' (*Shelley: a critical reading*, Baltimore, MD: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1971, p. 220). Yet earlier, in a paragraph buttressed by a hefty quotation from the 'Defence', Wasserman says that the 'end' of *The Cenci* 'is a creative moral insight by the audience, an insight to which the play can only provoke and guide the audience by a true representation of human nature' (p. 102). For a more cautious, more explicitly proto-Arnoldian reading along similar lines, arguing that the 'actual and constantly operative power of poetry . . . is unacknowledged because it is unnoticed by everyone, including the poets themselves', see Paul H. Fry, *The reach of criticism: method and perception in literary theory*, New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1983, p. 161. Of course, the stature of 'the poets themselves', on this account, remains in question.

with liberated genius, sometimes even in the untranslatable compound form of the *Kraftgenie*. Kant codified Imlac-like yearnings and proto-Shelleyan nostalgia when he influentially defined genius as ‘the talent (gift of nature) which gives the rule to art’ (*Critique of judgment*, § 46). But he balanced praise with disparagement of *Sturm-und-Drang* excesses by insisting on taste and craft as other essentials: when out of place or out of line, genius is ‘totally laughable’ (‘vollends lächerlich’, § 47). As poets started going mad for real, the evidence began to come in, and the reports on Collins, Cowper and Clare, Sade, Hölderlin and even Blake were far from encouraging. Nor did the suicidal fraud of Chatterton or the obstinate one of Macpherson help the neoplatonic cause. In ‘Resolution and independence’ Wordsworth moralizes ‘Chatterton, the marvellous Boy’, and the tipsy Robert Burns with the famous lines, ‘We Poets in our youth begin in gladness; / But thereof come in the end despondency and madness’. And while Keats dedicated *Endymion* to Chatterton’s memory, the mood is far from exalted when his Epistle ‘To George Felton Mathew’ sequentially evokes Chatterton, ‘that warm-hearted Shakespeare’, ‘Milton’s blindness’, and ‘those who strove with the bright golden wing / Of genius, to flap away each sting / Thrown by the pitiless world’. Increasingly, it was the psychology of poetic genius and not its authority that came up for discussion. Generally, of course, if not in Keats’s list, Shakespeare stood out from all competitors; the Romantic encounters with Shakespeare therefore became a crucial final reckoning with doctrines of legitimizing inspiration, preceding the Icarian swoops and swoons of Baudelaire and Tennyson and the obsessive ivory-tower perfectionism of the symbolists.

Often in Romantic criticism the struggles of readers to understand and of writers to be understood and the anxiety of creators to measure up were counterbalanced by an increasing emancipation and exaltation of art. The old moral imperatives had faded into the social graces of eighteenth-century taste and had been degraded even further in attacks such as Rousseau’s on the frivolousness of aesthetic spectacle. The latest defence of poesy, particularly associated with Kant and Schiller, was to value play itself as a humanizing and elevating moral value. Art becomes not the representative of religion but its propaedeutic (Hegel) or even its substitute (Schelling and his followers). High and low come together in the more dizzying tributes to Romantic irony. From the varieties of Romantic-era criticism can be derived both the elitist formalism of the modernists and the anti-elitist high jinx of postmodernists, though both tend to strip Romantic motifs of their sublime, metaphysical or transcendental dimensions.

Finally, critics in the Romantic era became self-conscious about their position in time and space. Even in its turn to antiquity, the Renaissance

had present ends in mind.³ With Herder's historicism as both symptom and cause, Romantics worried about their historical role and studied poetry in its historical unfolding. They also used poetics to project destinies: utopia becomes an aesthetic realm lodged in the distant future. Nor – though the connections are often overlooked – was Romantic situational thinking limited to temporality. It becomes geographical in the increasing nationalism of European culture of the period, leading to a growing divergence among the various European literary traditions. It becomes sociological in the burgeoning interest in folksong and, more generally, in writing for and by the lower classes (in verse chiefly) and the middle classes (in the novel). Situational thinking likewise motivates the growing, if still incipient and uneven attention to women as writers and readers of literature. It renders discussions of literature and the other arts richer and less judgemental than in earlier periods. And, finally, it regulates the complex use of nature as model, goal and nostalgic absence in so much Romantic criticism.

Such, in a quick conspectus, are the motifs that the following chapters pursue. We chose to request substantial essays investigating large areas of Romantic period writing. Other surveys focus more than ours does on digesting facts including, particularly, the tenets of individual authors. We preferred to let our chapters model how Romantics thought through and debated larger issues. The chapters are real essays, informational in their base, but ultimately more concerned with showing how Romantic ideas work and how contemporary critics may investigate and use them. A particular challenge for all our authors was to pursue their topics on an international basis and to show the coherence remaining as national traditions diverge. German abstraction can seem airless to British Romanticists, British empiricism can seem pedestrian to philosophical minds, and the French, in this period, can seem parochial or insubstantial to both; one aim of our volume has been to show how each tradition can animate and illuminate the others.

Because we wanted a volume that would be useful today and to an Anglophone readership, we have not tried to represent all facets of literary criticism from our period equally. Survivals from earlier eras are vital to a balanced view of our decades. It should be remembered that Hugh Blair's *Lectures on rhetoric and belles lettres* were far more often printed and more widely read than the Preface to *Lyrical ballads*. But choices had to be made, and in a book designed for contemporary readers we preferred

³ See Daniel Javitch's fine recent demonstration that even the Aristotle revival envisioned using Ancient means for Modern ends: 'The emergence of poetic genre theory in the sixteenth century', *Modern language quarterly* 59 (1998), pp. 139–69.

Wordsworth.⁴ Similarly, topics that seemed of more local importance have been left for specialized works, where discussions can readily be found. Thus, in connection with stylistics, the extensive German discussions about the proper use of classical metres, Kleist's fascinating hints about prose, and even Wordsworth's dissection of poetic diction and metre were set aside in favour of less technical, more overtly conceptual and ideological issues of rhetoric that have been much debated in criticism of recent decades. A number of issues and figures straddle the eighteenth-century and Romantic volumes: more systematic synopses of Kant and Schiller and of the sublime, the beautiful and the picturesque will be found in volume 4, where they synthesize earlier lines of thinking, whereas in our volume they appear in connection with distinctive sallies of innovation. Conversely, Fielding's theory of the novel was, in its day, eccentric in both form and substance, and it is treated more fully here in connection with the German theories of the novel that take up where Fielding leaves off.

*

The 'we' I have used in this introduction is a real but not a happy one. The original plan for the volume was Ernst Behler's, to which I contributed only a few refinements, and it was to have been his and my responsibility jointly. As editor, essayist, teacher, administrator, colleague and human being, Ernst was a force of nature. He died, suddenly and at the pinnacle of his career, before he could write his chapter or introduction, let alone see the volume through. It is in sadness, not joy, that I have dedicated it to his memory.

After Ernst, my largest gratitude is to the contributors. Those who finished early and waited patiently and those who persisted long with tough assignments are equally in the debt of all of us. Special thanks are due to two who coped splendidly with speedy fulfilments of late commissions: Theresa Kelley for her chapter on women in Romantic criticism, and David Simpson for the chapter on philosophy, replacing the one it was not given to Ernst to write. Eric Schaad laboured countless hours checking quotes and citations and supplementing bibliographies; one could not wish for a more meticulous and responsive co-worker. A Cambridge University Press sandwich, Josie Dixon between two slices of Kevin Taylor, waited when waiting was necessary, responded immediately when

⁴ For an impressively thorough and informative study of a slice of what was actually written and read in the Romantic period, see Friedrich Sengle, *Biedermeierzeit: deutsche Literatur im Spannungsfeld zwischen Restauration und Revolution 1815–48*, 3 vols., Stuttgart: Metzler, 1971–80, vol. 1. I am not aware of comparable studies for other decades and countries.

questions arose and generally kept me in line. A sabbatical from the University of Washington and a fellowship from the Woodrow Wilson International Center for Scholars, while targeted for another project, helped a lot with this one. For once, Jane did not help much, but she was always there when wanted and constantly in my thoughts.