

Chapter 1

Introduction

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This is a book about Romantic poetry written in Britain from the 1780s to the 1830s. By the middle of this period many readers of poetry, and many poets themselves, felt that theirs was a time when poetry had grown great again, comparable to the age of Shakespeare and Spenser two centuries earlier. As Keats stated it in the opening line of one of his sonnets (1817), "Great spirits now on earth are sojourning." Today, after two more centuries, most of those who care about poetry would agree. The most often anthologized poem in English, William Blake's "The Tyger," comes from this time (1794), and so do many of the most often quoted poetic passages: "Water, water, every where, / Nor any drop to drink"; "I wandered lonely as a cloud"; "O my love's like a red, red rose"; "She walks in beauty, like the night / Of cloudless climes and starry skies"; "Hail to thee, blithe spirit"; "Beauty is truth, truth beauty." To some it feels as if poetry *is* Romantic poetry, while the prevalent caricature of "the poet" today is of someone impractical, bohemian, otherworldly, visionary, and young, that is, a "Romantic."

None of the poets we discuss in this book, however, called himself or herself "Romantic." None of them even denied being Romantic, as the word was unavailable until late in the period as a term for a literary school or movement. They would have been astonished to be lumped together under any label, for their differences from each other loomed larger in their minds than their similarities, which are easier for us to see at a distance. Various labels were pasted on various groups, sometimes by those who disliked them. Wordsworth, Coleridge, and Southey were called the "Lake School" because they were friends who lived in the Lake District of England. Keats, Hazlitt

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(an essayist), and Leigh Hunt were called the “Cockney School” because they were friends who lived in London. Byron and Shelley were called the “Satanic School” because they were friends who lived in hell, or would live there soon. (It was Southey who came up with this last term; for his part, Byron reduced the “Lake School” to the “Pond School.”) Apart from the labels themselves, some of those lumped together were displeased to be so lumped. Southey, for instance, when he learned in 1803 that an important reviewer had placed him in a “new school” (not yet dubbed “Lake School”), wrote that there is no “stronger proof of want of discernment or want of candour than in grouping together three men so different in style as Wordsworth, Coleridge and myself under one head.” Coleridge made a similar claim many years later.¹ There was no overall “Romantic School.”

“Romantic”

The word “romantic” had been in use in English for well over a century as an adjective based on “romance,” the literary genre descended from the chivalric stories of the Middle Ages, such as the tales of King Arthur and his knights. That word comes from Old French *romaunt* or *romaunz*, among other spellings, which meant a work written in a “Romance” language (French, Provençal, or the others), that is, in the spoken vernacular language as distinct from Latin, which had been more or less frozen and confined to the learned members of church, court, and university. That seems odd at first, since “romance” goes back to an adverb meaning “in the Roman manner,” and the Romans spoke Latin. In its earliest usage, however, “romance” referred to the daughter (or daughters) of Latin actually spoken in Gallia (Gaul), as opposed to Frankish, the Germanic language of its conquerors. The Franks gave their name to the land (Francia, now France) but gave up speaking Frankish and adopted the local Romance tongue, whereupon the latter took on the name “French.” But the literature written in it continued to be called “romances,” and they were typically filled with adventurous knights, distressed damsels, evil magicians, fiery dragons, and wild landscapes. So as the adjective “romantic” entered English it brought these associations with it. English, after all, had not been short of romances, and indeed the eighteenth century saw a revival of interest in them, notably in Spenser’s *The Faerie Queene* (1596). The poets we now call Romantic used the word in extended senses to refer both to romances themselves and to the sort of thing you find in them. Wordsworth considered devoting himself to writing “some old / Romantic tale, by Milton left unsung” (1805 *Prelude* 1.179–80). In Kubla Khan’s garden, as Coleridge imagined it,

was "a deep romantic chasm" (12). Several poets, including Byron, called Spain "romantic," as tourism ads still do.

It was in Germany around 1800, in the circle around the Schlegel brothers in Jena, that the distinction between "romantic" and "classic" literature was established. In lectures given in 1808 and 1809, August Wilhelm Schlegel described "romantic" literature, which included Shakespeare, as modern, Christian, and filled with infinite desire, as opposed to the more contained and "perfect" literature of the Greeks and Romans and their modern imitators. Coleridge, who kept abreast of German thinking, was soon drawing a similar contrast in his own lectures, though they were not published until 1836. A greater influence in Britain and throughout Europe was Madame Germaine de Staël's book *On Germany*, translated from French into English in 1813. In 1815 Wordsworth distinguished the "classic lyre" from the "romantic harp," while in every language of the Continent the classic-romantic distinction became the hot literary topic of the day. It was nonetheless not for another generation that some of the poets we now call Romantic were so named, and not till the end of the century that all of them (except Blake) were regularly grouped together. Blake was not fully admitted into the Romantic canon until the middle of the twentieth century. Scott had been among the central members of it, but has now receded to secondary status.

Even among specialists a confusion prevails between "Romantic" as a period term, referring, say, to the time between 1789 and 1832 (dates set by political events), or to a whole century between 1750 and 1850, and "Romantic" as a set of norms, styles, and themes that characterize certain writers of the time but not all. The titles of recent anthologies reveal the confusion: *Romanticism*, *Romantic Poetry*, *English Romantic Verse*, and *Romantic Women Poets* on the one hand; *The Age of Romanticism*, *Romantic Period Verse*, and *British Women Poets of the Romantic Era* on the other. It is made worse by the famously difficult problem of defining "Romanticism" as a norm or mode. Even though a consensus has been reached, from time to time, on who the Romantics are, there has been no agreed definition of the term that defines them: an illogical state of affairs, to be sure, but one we have been muddling along with for more than half a century. The problem can be reduced if not eliminated, I think, by dispensing with the tacit assumption that definitions must be brief. If we can do so, I would propose something like this:

Romanticism was a European cultural movement, or set of kindred movements, which found in a symbolic and internalized romance plot a vehicle for exploring one's self and its relationship to others and to nature, which gave privilege to the imagination as a faculty higher and more inclusive than reason, which sought solace in or reconciliation

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with the natural world, which “detranscendentalized” religion by taking God or the divine as inherent in nature or in the soul and replaced theological doctrine with metaphor and feeling, which honored poetry and all the arts as the highest human creations, and which rebelled against the established canons of neoclassical aesthetics and against both aristocratic and bourgeois social and political norms in favor of values more individual, inward, and emotional.²

That is a mouthful, and not every expert will chew it happily. The clauses about nature and the natural world leave out Blake, for whom the word “Nature” is always negative; the clause about imagination might exclude Byron, who made little ado about it. But it will do for a start, in order to have something in mind as we look at individual poets and poems. Its various clauses will find many illustrations in the chapters that follow. This book, in any case, is governed by the idea that Romanticism was a distinct movement or trend, and that during the period of its first flourishing (it has never disappeared) it was by no means dominant: there were quite a few readers and writers who were impervious or even hostile to it.

Sensibility

Some accounts of Romanticism, following the Schlegels’ early definitions, contrast it with “Classicism” (or “Neoclassicism”), the literary movement of about 1660 to 1770 that took Latin poets, notably Horace and Virgil, as their models and imitated the restraint, impersonality, formal balance, wit, and grace it found in classical culture. The two great English poets of this trend were John Dryden and Alexander Pope. Other accounts contrast Romanticism with “The Enlightenment” or “The Age of Reason,” more or less contemporary with Classicism and consonant with it, that saw in the achievements of Isaac Newton in physics a model for understanding almost everything in the natural world, and even the social world, and took the philosophy of John Locke as the basis of understanding the human mind. Between them these two intellectual movements encouraged reasonableness, detachment, prudence, tolerance of religious differences, civility, formal elegance, and an aristocratic breadth of view, though even the greatest writers of this persuasion were not always so serenely one-sided.

If these schools of thought serve as clarifying foils for the concept of Romanticism, another movement served as the matrix from which Romanticism arose. Literary historians identify a distinct trend they call “Sensibility” or “Pre-Romanticism” and date it from about 1730, though like

any other trend it has earlier precedents, and it overlapped with Romanticism well into the nineteenth century. The word “sensibility,” the most frequent word for the faculty it honored, did not mean “sensible” but something closer to “sensitivity,” a tender responsiveness to the beauty and especially the suffering of the social and natural world. The philosophers, novelists, and poets of this movement believed that our moral and social being depends on feeling much more than on reason or obedience to religious codes, and the highest kind of feeling is “sympathy” or benevolent fellow feeling. Tears ran down the cheeks of many literary characters both male and female and of many of their readers as well. The epistolary novel, or novel in letters, gained new prominence: Samuel Richardson’s *Pamela; or, Virtue Rewarded* (1740–1) and *Clarissa; or, History of a Young Lady* (1747–8), were enormously popular; readers identified passionately with their beleaguered heroines and wallowed in their long and intimate examinations of their minds and hearts. The “Graveyard” poets, especially Gray with his “Elegy Written in a Country Churchyard” (1751), the most admired English poem of the time, promoted a cult of “melancholy,” where sympathy for suffering was refined by meditations among the dead. Thomas Warton, Jr., had already written “The Pleasures of Melancholy” (1747), the title of which suggests a kind of indulgence or deliberate cultivation of sad but kindly feelings. Poems of this kind are the ancestors of the meditative poems of the Romantics. The Ossian cult, too, as we shall see in Chapter 2, flourished in the fertile ground of Sensibility. A new appreciation for the imaginative and distinctive world of childhood, and a new concern for the mistreatment of children and animals, arose as natural extensions of the Sensibility domain.

As early as 1711 the Earl of Shaftesbury argued that we have an innate “moral sense” rather like taste, and that it has much more to do with our moral character than with reason or obedience to a code of laws. This faculty can be cultivated, and as it grows we reconcile conflicting passions and harmonize them with reason. After a century of investigation in philosophy and exploration in literature the idea of the “beautiful soul” emerged, especially in Germany with the writings of Friedrich Schiller. For Schiller *die schöne Seele* is a soul that achieves a harmony between duty and inclination, or reason and sensuality, and expresses it as grace.³

Sometimes the poets we call Romantic can sound “sensible” or sensitive in this spirit. Wordsworth’s meditations on rural tragedy and Byron’s among the ruins of castles and colosseums; the poems about children by Blake and Wordsworth; and poems about suffering poets by Coleridge, Shelley, and Keats – these continue Sensibility’s themes and attitudes. Wordsworth considered his mission to be the opening of the human heart or the cultivation of human feelings, though he also stressed the importance of deep

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thought and the goal of philosophic calm. Many if not all of the women poets of the Romantic period seem better described as poets of Sensibility than as Romantics, though there is room for debate. Romanticism has even been defined as an episode within the larger and longer movement of Sensibility. Yet the Romantics also reacted against the cult of Sensibility. Some felt it pictured the soul as too passive and helpless before external experience, and could not serve as the basis for a moral life. Coleridge in 1796 wrote, "Sensibility is not Benevolence. Nay, by making us tremblingly alive to trifling misfortunes, it frequently prevents it and induces effeminate and cowardly selfishness." The imagination, the faculty most praised and discussed by the Romantics, is not a passive receptor of images or a trigger of emotions, but an active, creative force. All of the major British Romantics, too, were politically aware and engaged in ways untypical of Sensibility. They understood that melting with sympathy could be no more than a moment in one's path of commitment to social change. This is not to say that the Romantics were always effective agents of such change – far from it – but at least they thought and sometimes acted in a sphere larger than their own hearts, the point where the earlier movement had usually stalled. They hoped, at least between bouts of despair, that they could bring about a new social order, and that poetry and the arts could be a means to doing so. In this ambition they transcend the terms of Sensibility.

The canon

Today most anthologies and university courses dwell largely on the "Big Six" male Romantic poets – Blake, Wordsworth, Coleridge, Byron, Shelley, and Keats – and this book will do the same. It is important to remember, however, that this canon does not correspond to any list that a contemporary reader or reviewer would have come up with. It was not established until about 1950, and it has been under assault ever since. In the last forty years feminist scholars, for instance, have brought to light from nearly total neglect a number of women poets, many of whom were well known and much admired in their time, such as Felicia Hemans (who remained popular throughout the nineteenth century), Charlotte Smith, Letitia Landon, and Mary Robinson. There has been a recent effort to bring John Clare into the circle, largely because of his charming and well-observed nature poems, as well as Robert Burns, always cherished among the Scots but only loosely linked to the "major" Romantics; Walter Scott, whose poetry once seemed central and is now somewhat neglected, may be due for a revival.

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It is a commonplace among literary historians today that the Romantic canon – the approved or received list of major poets – is (like every other canon) an arbitrary construction, motivated by changeable and subjective tastes, by moral, religious, and political beliefs, by conspiracies of men to exclude women, by the convenience of publishers and universities, or by sheer habit and laziness, and that it is not a set of the objectively best or most important poets. In my view this widespread opinion badly overstates the matter. While it is true that these motives can sometimes be found, and rightly assailed, and true, too, that the notion of “objective” literary value runs into great philosophical difficulties, it does not follow that the Big Six have not earned their way into the top echelon. By almost any standards that poetry lovers still invariably invoke – originality, wit, depth and complexity of thought, density of metaphor, memorability of phrasing, musicality of sound, intensity of effect, warmth of feeling – the occupants of seats in the current canon still seem preeminent. These standards may be “arbitrary” in that they cannot be grounded in some ultimate and universal set of values, but they have been widely held among many generations of readers, even among those who like to shoot down the received canon. To most readers of poetry outside the academy, as well as to most professors who teach it, these poets still seem the most rewarding, the ones most patient of frequent revisitings, the ones who “speak to our condition,” as the Quakers put it, most poignantly. All six wrote some poor poems, even embarrassing ones, and many of the others jostling for attention wrote some fine ones, but all in all it is not arbitrary to dwell on the Six more than the others. Life is short, and, except for English professors, people who still love poetry do not have time to read everything. There is no avoiding a canon of some sort. This book is also short, and must exclude much more than it includes.

That said, it is better to err on the side of generosity, and some of the not quite or not yet canonical poets deserve a place in an introduction, not only because of the intrinsic interest of their poems but also because they help us see the major poets in new lights. So I will try to pay some attention to them, inadequate to be sure, but perhaps no more inadequate than my discussions of all but a few poems of the Six.

This book is titled *British Romantic Poetry* rather than *English Romantic Poetry*. Most of the poets in it were English, including five of the Six. Byron, however, had Scottish roots on his mother’s side, and spent much of his childhood in Scotland. Scott and Burns, of course, were Scottish, and Burns even wrote in Scots English. Byron’s friend Thomas Moore was Irish; he was much admired in England while emerging as the beloved bard of Ireland. Even among entirely English writers, moreover, there was a growing interest in the

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ancient Scottish, Irish, and Welsh poetic traditions. Scotland and Wales, at least, were often called “romantic” for their mountainous scenery and mysterious legends. A key instigation of early Romanticism, as will be discussed in Chapter 2, was the “discovery” by James Macpherson of the epics of the ancient Gaelic poet Ossian still sung in the Scottish Highlands; his publication in 1760 of prose translations of “fragments” of this “Northern Homer” caused a sensation across Europe. Even after they were shown to be largely the inventions of Macpherson, they continued to fascinate; Coleridge and Byron both made verse versions of Ossianic passages, and Blake not only sounds like Ossian in his diction and cadences but adapted at least one of his plots.

Reading the Romantics

The best introduction to Romantic poetry is simply to plunge in and read some Romantic poems. There is no great mystery about most of them; they yield readily to attentive reading without special preparation. William Blake’s longer poems bristle with outlandish names that play parts in obscure allegories, and a few of Shelley’s poems are intricate in syntax. Some of the targets of the satirical poems, though at the time they were on everyone’s lips, now require footnotes. Footnotes, too, as found in most anthologies today, will give new readers the help they need with allusions to events, quotations of previous literature, and words whose meanings have changed during the last two hundred years. But, with the partial exception of Blake, virtually all the poetry of the era of Romanticism is still readily accessible. In its day, after all, it was meant to be understood by a large reading public.

And a large reading public it was, larger even in absolute terms than it is today in Britain or anywhere else, I think, in the anglophone world. More volumes of verse were published than novels, quite the opposite of today’s figures. Newspapers and journals regularly carried poems, often on public themes, such as a speech by a Member of Parliament or a battle in Europe. Wordsworth, whom we think of as the timeless poet of nature and human suffering, regularly launched verse missiles to the papers on such current topics as Toussaint L’Ouverture’s revolt in St. Domingo or the Tyrolese resistance to the French. Verse satires were snapped up and relished, or angrily replied to in new satires, in great numbers. Bookshop sales of poetry by the most popular poets exceeded the wildest dreams of poets now: Scott’s *Marmion* (1808) sold out its first (and very expensive) edition of 2,000 copies in two months, Byron’s *The Corsair* (1814) sold out its entire first printing of 10,000 copies in a single day, while the satirist “Peter Pindar” (John Wolcot), now almost forgotten, doubled

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even that. In any one year during the Romantic period perhaps three thousand poets were active, of whom about one-fourth were women, in a British population of about ten million.⁴

Accessible though most of it was, it was still poetry, and most poetry in English until the twentieth century was written in a poetic language that differed in many little ways from the language spoken by its readers. Even today, as the American poet Kenneth Koch has claimed, there is a special language of poetry, “a language within a language,” where, for instance, the sounds of the language are very important and metaphor is routine.⁵ On the other hand, the diction of poems today, the set of words found in them, usually differs little from our everyday spoken vocabulary, or what the mid-twentieth-century English poet John Wain has called “stumbling anyday speech,” whereas in 1800 it often differed a great deal.⁶ Wordsworth, it is true, in his “Preface” to the 1800 edition of *Lyrical Ballads*, made a case for using “the very language of men” in poetry, as against the elaborate and archaic poetic diction and abnormal phrase structures that were the peculiar inheritance of poets at that time; poetry and prose, he wrote, should have “the same human blood” circulating through them. In his own poems in this collection, especially the ballads, he by and large practiced what he preached, and he had a great influence on poetry after him. Nor was he alone, nor even the first, to move poetry toward a more current and homely diction. Yet the revolution was far from complete, and even Wordsworth relapsed at times into more ornate styles. Many readers still appreciated the traditional formalities of poetry, even as they welcomed more “prosaic” words and syntax.

Not only was there a poetic “language within a language,” which the Romantics could deploy as they saw fit, but the outer language, the spoken English of the day, was not the language we speak now, though we call them both English. Nor was there a single dialect of English spoken throughout the United Kingdom. To this day there are dialects of English almost incomprehensible to my American ears; in 1800, when a Cornishman met a Yorkshireman they must each have thought the other was speaking Dutch or something. There was a standard written form, centered on London and Oxford–Cambridge, with certain conventions of spelling, punctuation, and diction, but for nearly all Britons even in London it was a second language, not a mother tongue. (Even in his ballads, Wordsworth made little effort to respell the words of the local Cumberland dialect to reveal their real pronunciation; they are assimilated into the national literary conventions.) In any case, much has changed during the last two centuries and more. To choose a word almost at random, “awful” did not mean “very bad,” as it does today, but “awe-inspiring,” “terrifying,” “majestic,” or “sublime.” The modern sense, which seems to

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have been an Americanism, was noted in the 1830s. Indeed “awful” and “awesome” were synonyms in 1800; now, ever since the Valley Girls’ slang swept across America in the 1980s, they are antonyms. Most editions of Romantic poems will annotate “awful” and other such words, but students should get in the habit of consulting the full-sized *Oxford English Dictionary*, in paper or on line, for any word that strikes them as unusual or interesting.

These problems are not great, and it does not take long to learn the language, and the language within the language, of 1800. There are a few obstacles, however, that my students have often stumbled over. The chief of these is the use of “thou” and “thee” and “ye” and “you” as apparently random variants for the second-person pronoun. But of course that is not what they are. “Thou” and “thee” are singular, “ye” and “you” are plural; “thou” and “ye” are subjects, “thee” and “you” are objects. Dislocated word order provides other puzzles, especially when the verb is postponed to the end of a clause (and usually a line). And poetry tended to make greater use of the subjunctive mood than we do today, sometimes with ambiguous forms. Readers who want to refresh their knowledge of these matters may have a look at the Appendix in the back of this book.

Texts and contexts

The Romantic movement gave us some of the greatest poems in English (as it did in German, French, Italian, Spanish, Polish, Russian, and other European languages), but even if all its poems were mediocre the era of Romanticism would still be fascinating. The two great revolutions that define the modern world began then, and have not ended yet: the French Revolution of 1789, temporarily defeated in 1815, and the industrial revolution, which began in Britain around 1775 with the invention of the steam engine. The war that resulted from the French Revolution lasted twenty-four years, with Britain a belligerent for nearly all of it; it truly deserves the name World War I for its global scope and enormous battles. The British Empire, set back in 1781, was expanding again almost everywhere. Capitalism, now empowered by steam and a raft of new inventions, was steadily eliminating or marginalizing the remnants of feudalism. Science was on the march, especially in chemistry, electricity, and geology. The population was growing; London reached a million residents by about 1800. The two leading occupations for centuries – agriculture and domestic service – were beginning to yield to factory work. Demands for political reform rose to a near revolutionary pitch in the 1790s, and then again in the 1830s. Women still lacked most rights, but their subservience to men