INTRODUCTION: THE COMPANIONABLE FORMS OF ROMANTIC POETRY

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Only that film, which fluttered on the grate,
Still flutters there, the sole unquiet thing.
Methinks, its motion in this hush of nature
Gives it dim sympathies with me who live,
Making it a companionable form . . .
Coleridge, "Frost at Midnight"[1]

It was, most immediately, the work of his own contemporaries that prompted Percy Shelley to proclaim, at the close of his *Defence of Poetry* (1821), that "Poets are the unacknowledged legislators of the world." The authority of those poets in the age we have come to call "Romantic," Shelley explained, derived not from their opinions, with which he often disagreed, but from their capacity to tap into a certain spirit – what he called "the spirit of their age." Shelley figured this with a metaphor taken from recent developments in the natural sciences: it is impossible to read these contemporaries, he wrote, without being struck by "the electric life that burns in their words."[2] "Electricity," for Shelley, is at once a modern scientific discovery and a theme that hearkens back to the ancient myth of Prometheus, the thief of divine fire. The prototypical writer of his age – the "Romantic poet" – thus became on Shelley's account a kind of modern Prometheus, a poet of the electric life of words. This view would not go unchallenged. Indeed, even before it was written down in the *Defence of Poetry*, Mary Shelley had published *Frankenstein: Or, The Modern Prometheus* (1818), a fable of "electric life" and monstrous ambition with more than casual application to her husband's grand schemes. In spite of such challenges, or because of them, a sense of verbal electricity in Romantic poetry has persisted through generations of readers and assured these writings a special place in British literature ever since.

This special place suggests that a Companion to Romantic poetry must do more than simply fill a gap between the Companions to eighteenth-century and Victorian poetry. It is true that all three of these ages differ each from the other in the historical particulars to which their poets had to respond. The Augustan poets and their immediate successors might be said to have responded to the new urban world of newspapers and coffee houses, to a new polite commercial order in Britain in the wake of the founding of the Bank of

England in the 1690s, to strife in Scotland, conflict with Holland and France, enlightenment in Europe. The Victorian poets, a dozen decades later, had to be responsive to a time of unprecedented growth in London, to industrialization on the one hand and art for art's sake on the other, to challenges aimed at traditional beliefs in geology, biology, and economics; to famine in Ireland and to the 1848 Revolutions on the Continent. By this same logic, one could reasonably say that poets of the Romantic period were responding, well, to the sorts of things that they themselves identified in their own time: the loss of the American colonies, uprising in Ireland, the emergence of mass literacy, wholesale reconfigurations of discourses of knowledge (e.g. history, moral philosophy, political economy, chemistry, physiology, electromagnetism), the new constitutional theories and reform movements in politics, and of course to the French Revolution, which many of them considered the most momentous event in post-biblical history.

To take seriously the Shelleyan formulation about the spirit of the age, however, is to see that the poets of this period were not simply responding to events and situations different from those of their Augustan and Victorian counterparts. Instead, they were responding to a new kind of historical horizon and a new sense of the power of poetry to speak to it. The special place of poetry in the Romantic period, furthermore, has implications for the place of this period in the history of poetry. As evidence of the latter, one need only consult standard anthologies of British poetry or British literature over recent decades, where the quantity of pages given to Romantic poets is out of all proportion to its brevity in years. As evidence of the former, consider how elevated a position poetry had in the hierarchy of cultural practice for Britain in this period – much as painting did in seventeenth-century Holland or music in eighteenth-century German-speaking countries. In Britain poetry attracted great talents that seem initially to be destined for other fields. Poetry harnessed energies that might have flowed elsewhere had British culture developed differently: noting the relative impoverishment of English music in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, Theodor Adorno mordantly suggested that Keats and Shelley – with their lyric virtuosities and ostentatious musicality – might be seen as the "*locum tenentes* of nonexistent great English composers."[3] Among the group of six male Romantic poets who until recently tended to dominate the anthologies, all were initially meant to be pursuing other careers: Blake in the visual arts, Wordsworth in law, Coleridge in the ministry, Byron in politics, Shelley in science, Keats in medicine. All came to see poetry as where the action was, even as they disagreed about what counted as poetry and what counted as action.

Thus no Companion aiming to do justice to "Romantic poetry" can simply and unreflectively take its place in a series of "genre in period" Companions.

Unlike "eighteenth-century," the adjective "Romantic" denotes not just a period, but a style, a movement, a way of thinking (an "ideology," some have said), even a way of being in the world. Some of this might be claimed for "Victorian," it is true. Yet, as a stylistic category, "Romantic" has sufficient conceptual force to be able to stand in ideational opposition to other concepts (e.g., "classical") in a way that not even "Victorian" can do. Poets writing long after the Battle of Waterloo might well think of themselves as "in the Romantic line." This too is a special feature of our subject, and one that we have attempted to address in the essays that follow.

There is yet another kind of indicator of the distinctive place of poetry in Romanticism and of Romanticism in poetry, made visible in the role that Romantic poetry has played in the development of modern criticism and of "English" as an academic discipline. The fate of Romantic poetry as a field of study has been closely tied to the fate of literary studies as a discipline and indeed has changed with shifting critical practices and altered paradigms. Certainly since the 1920s, soon after the English tripos was established at Cambridge and when I. A. Richards was conducting his famous experiments in "practical criticism," the writings of the Romantic poets have been central to debates over the way modern students of literature should go about their business. In 1934, Richards would align himself with a brand of Coleridgeanism in his *Coleridge on Imagination*, but the experiments in the interpretation of poetry that Richards undertook with students at Cambridge from 1925 to 1929 were already informed by fundamental poetic principles and cultural frameworks that he had avowedly drawn from Wordsworth, Shelley, and Coleridge himself. Over the course of the next decades, a surprising number of the scholars, critics, and theorists who followed Richards's ambitious shaping of practices and paradigms for literary study were also keen students of Romantic poetry. The names F. R. Leavis, Northrop Frye, M. H. Abrams, Harold Bloom, Geoffrey Hartman, and Paul de Man form only the beginning of a long litany of critics who drew far-reaching implications for the larger enterprise of literary studies from their engagements with Romantic poetry.

To recognize the interconnections between Romantic poetics and twentieth-century criticism, however, is to be in a position to see how the image of the former changes with the evolution of the latter. The poets we have mentioned thus far were part of the six-men-in-two-generations model of this field, and it is by no means irrelevant that all of the critics thus far invoked are men who dominated departments in a period when a scholar of poetry as talented and committed as Helen Vendler could not attend a research seminar at Harvard because of concern that her presence would disturb the sociality of the men who gathered at the home of the

professor-convener.[4] We have so far also been representing Romantic poetry through a somewhat Richards-like sense of the autonomy of texts as objects of interpretation. Indeed, we have been talking as if Romantic Poetry still held the same high place in the study of literature from 1780 to 1835 as it did when Frye, Abrams, and Bloom were setting the scene for the field. Many observers of work being done in our period since 1975, however, have said that the case is otherwise. They declare that those times are past, and all their dizzy raptures are no more.

Recent scholarship has moved us far, if perhaps not far enough, beyond the once standard account of the big six. Walter Scott, Anna Barbauld, Joanna Baillie, Robert Burns, Thomas Moore, Charlotte Smith, Mary Robinson, and on the later end, Felicia Hemans and John Clare – these and other poets have benefited from the historicist and feminist inquiries since the early 1980s, as have the more familiar and much anthologized poets, who look quite different to us now. The challenge to the previous picture of the age of Romanticism came from several (often overlapping) constituencies in the last quarter of the twentieth century: from feminist criticism, which called attention to the great wealth of women's writing in a period when, after all, female authorship genuinely began to thrive in Britain; from scholars interested in the history of the novel, who rejected the idea that the seven decades from the death of Sterne to the publication of Dickens's *Pickwick* was a wasteland between two fertile eras of British fiction; from cultural studies and new historicism, which attempted to situate writing of the period (including poetry) in relation to various sorts of discursive and social frames of reference; from postcolonial criticism, which turned attention to writing in Scotland, Ireland, and elsewhere in the former Empire in an effort to integrate it more fully into the study of "English." These developments are well enough known in the critical literature and need not be rehearsed here.

Suffice it to say that, if we have been accustomed to reading Romantic poetry in light of its formal and generic features, or through the biographies of particular Romantic poets, lines of inheritance, affiliated communities (e.g., the Lake School, the "Cult of the South"), and various ideologies, we can now see that cultural nationalism might offer equally productive contexts for reading, say, Robert Burns's *Songs*, or Walter Scott's *Minstrelsy of the Scottish Border*, or his *Lay of the Last Minstrel*, or Thomas Moore's *Irish Melodies*, or Felicia Hemans's *Welsh Airs*. This Companion hopes to raise, if it cannot fully answer, the question of what is "British" about "British Romantic Poetry" – or more accurately, to address how "Britishness" itself recurs as a problem and a concern for poets. Scholarship in four-nations historicism allows us to see how poetry both assisted in the imagining of

"Britain" but also resisted her hegemony, carving out poetic territories in "Scottish ballads," "Irish melodies," "Welsh airs."

And further, the discovery of a long and deep history of "English" verse in the mid-eighteenth century (thanks to the efforts of Thomas Percy and Thomas Warton, among others) had enormous implications for the diversifying of Romantic versification; so too the excavation of other national poetic pasts (e.g., Macpherson's Ossian, Jones's Welsh bards, Irish antiquarians' even more vexed efforts) complicates our sense of what a *British* Romanticism in verse might be (as in the vexed case of Burns, or "dialect" poetry as a category). In addition to, or entwined with, a poetry-of-consciousness, of reflexive subjectivity, Romantic poetry emerges as a project of cultural inquiry, national fantasy, and sociopolitical critique as much as a poetry of self and nature: ethnopoetics meets psychology in this period in ways that still shape our own.

It is fair to say that, had this Companion been published a decade ago, in the late 1990s, the claims for the distinctiveness of a Companion on "Romantic Poetry" (much less a "British Romantic Poetry") would perhaps have been less evident. But over the course of the last decade – after the challenges from various quarters, after the expansion of the canon for this period, after efforts to displace "poetry" from its long-standing centrality to Romanticism, after some renewed questioning of the very concept of Romanticism itself – there have been a number of efforts to return to poetry and poetics in the period. These efforts have gone by various names: the new formalism, Adorno, the Frankfurt School, the new poetics. And they are still in some cases incipient gestures. Nonetheless, they suggest something on the horizon that, though not yet quite distinct, may move us in a new direction over the coming decades. What that direction might be is not easy to say, but, as a very rough stab at the problem, we speculate that poetry may reassert itself within Romanticism in either of two ways: either as a principle of indeterminate form or in multiple relation to other domains. We may think of this as the difference between "poetry as . . ." and "poetry and . . ."

Such a distinction perhaps informs Wordsworth's twofold wish in the sestet of the famous sonnet that celebrated its bicentennial in 2007: "The World is Too Much With Us":

> Great God! I'd rather be
> A Pagan suckled in a creed outworn;
> So might I, standing on this pleasant lea,
> Have glimpses that would make me less forlorn;
> Have sight of Proteus rising from the sea;
> Or hear old Triton blow his wreathed horn.

This is Wordsworth in what might be described as a quintessentially Romantic moment, catching himself in the act of wishing himself out of enlightenment, into re-enchantment, but just by virtue of having to wish it so, he acknowledges that the customary creed of the ancients cannot simply be put on again as if nothing had happened since. The creed is acknowledged as "outworn." But how interesting that he frames his wish to reinhabit this creed in terms of alternative siblings. These are two of the sons of Poseidon, god of the sea that, in this poem, seems to the poet standing on the lea to "bare . . . her bosom to the moon." Proteus, or "first born," is Poseidon's eldest son, but he is illegitimate. Triton is Poseidon's only legitimate son. Proteus responds to the world by assuming innumerable forms, thus remaining elusive to capture. He is the principle of poetry that Keats enshrined in the idea of the "camelion poet," the artist who enacts in his person the mimesis by which his art is constituted. Triton, by contrast, plays the world on his famous instrument.

The two sons of Poseidon suggest the double-sidedness of *poiesis*, a duality the Romantics compulsively explored. Able to inhabit any form, Proteus, we might say, embodies Shelley's polemically elastic conception of poetry as any great imaginative achievement, any triumph of *poiesis* as *making* (see his invocation of Plato's philosophy, the Roman Senate, the doctrines of Jesus, Bacon's science, and Dante's *Commedia*, all "poetry" in his 1821 *Defence*); whereas Triton, committed to his one powerful instrument, figures what Shelley called (in that same essay) "poetry in a more restricted sense," that is, metrical language.[5]

Poetry, in other words, retains its central role in the Romantic era because, in that age as perhaps in no other before or since, poetry came to mean (potentially) many different things and because it established itself in relation to so many different things. Poetry As (for example) Knowledge, Imagination, Truth, the Esemplastic Power; Poetry And (for example) Science, Philosophy, Religion, The Novel, Politics. The essays in this volume explore what we are provisionally calling the "Protean" and the "Tritonian" aspects of poetry. Many essays here follow the Romantics themselves by troubling the border between "poetry as" and "poetry and." Our contributors situate Romantic poetry in various matrices, contexts, and relations: *viz*. Nick Groom's exploration of poetry and antiquity; Susan Stewart on poetry and meter and form; Andrew Elfenbein on poetry and the standardization of English; Ann Rowland on poetry and the novel; Adriana Craciun on poetry and gender and sexuality; Tim Fulford on poetry and empire; Kevis Goodman on poetry and the science of nostalgia. Contributors also offer inquiries into poetry *as* a transformative and transformable power: poetry as a pantheon, in Jeffrey Cox's essay; as cognition, in Simon Jarvis's; as lyric inquiry into progress, in

James Chandler's; as a mode of resistance, in William Keach's account; as media, in Celeste Langan and Maureen McLane's; as an inheritance and a spur, in Andrew Bennett's essay.

Such lists, organized under an unstable opposition, cannot but grossly simplify the terms of the essays that follow, all of which are alive to the peculiar, multiple claims of poetries in this period. Wordsworth's Immortality Ode (as Chandler suggests) offers a movement unto itself that also gestures beyond itself. This doubleness – poetry-in-itself *v.* poetry-for-itself and -beyond-itself – is written into Romantic aspiration and into the essays here gathered. As Rowland observes, poetry and its ascendant lyric logic penetrated the novel so deeply that certain passages in fiction might be seen as poetry by other means (which in turn suggests to us one way to define all of Walter Scott's novels: balladry by other means); and certainly *Don Juan* has long been read as poetry's novelistic riposte to the novel. So too Nick Groom's discussion of poetry and antiquities reminds us that this period spawned all manner of poetic antiquities – works created to be or recovered as antiquities. Poetry *as* a vernacular antiquity: Scott's *Minstrelsy of the Scottish Border* (1802–3) as well as Chatterton's Rowley poems or Macpherson's Ossian poems. Indeed, the latter work reminds us that poetry could appear in this period *as prose*: a truly Protean transformation.

That the power of Romantic poetry is far from being "outworn" is evident in the electrified lines of influence we continue to find animating twenty-first-century poetry, politics, and media. It is no accident that one of the most lucid poets associated with Language Writing in the USA, Bob Perelman, opens his *Selected Poems* with a sly, witty "Fake Dream" starring Wordsworth:

> January 28: We were going to
> have sex in the stacks. We
>
> were in the 800s, standing eagerly
> amid the old copies of the
>
> Romantics. Looking at the dark blue
> spines of Wordsworth's *Collected*, I thought
>
> how the intensity of his need
> to express his unplaced social being
>
> in sentences had produced publicly verifiable
> beauty so that his subsequent civic
>
> aspirations seemed to have importance enough
> for him to become Poet Laureate . . .[6]

Poetry and critique, poetry as critique: Perelman revives Wordsworth in his full *avant-garde* and regressive dimensions, in a language and line as virtually transparent as the "real language of men." This complex critical engagement with Wordsworth (and with other Romantics) surfaces elsewhere in Perelman's volume, including a poem whose title takes wing from that famous phrase in Wordsworth's 1800 *Preface* to *Lyrical Ballads*: "The Real Language of Men." In the library, in dreams, in life, one discovers not only "the old copies of / the Romantics" but also that one might in fact *be* another copy of those old Romantics. Perelman reminds us, moreover, that any poet, however experimental, may end up filed in obsolete cataloguing systems – the Dewey Decimal system, for example – or slotted within those contingent taxonomic orders that produce pantheons and canons and indeed companions.

We believe, with many other readers, that the Romantics, their poems, and their diverse projects continue to be companionable: as Allen Ginsberg found inspiration in Blake's sunflower; as Seamus Heaney and Lisa Robertson differently plow Wordsworthian fields; as John Ashbery finds in John Clare an "other tradition"; as Geoffrey Hill finds Wordsworth's "Immortality Ode" an ongoing resource; as Paul Muldoon sends "90 Instant Messages to Tom Moore"; as Brian Kim Stefans reworks Blake's proverbs in *The Marriage of Heaven and Hell* into a species of digital-poetic "fashionable noise"; as Walter Scott moves to the multiplex.[7] It is no accident that Tom Leonard turned to Shelley when musing on "100 Differences Between Poetry and Prose": "poets are the unacknowledged thingwaybobs."[8] Leonard's poem illuminates the persistence of Romantic vexations as part of its social critique of the status of poetry (poetry *v.* prose, Shelley's "unacknowledged legislators" degraded). When Adrienne Rich gave a speech accepting the 2006 National Book Foundation Medal for Distinguished Contribution to American Letters, she launched her impassioned defense of poetry by quoting Shelley's *Defence of Poetry* as well as his *Philosophical View of Reform* and the "Ode to the West Wind." "Poetries are no more pure and simple than human histories are pure and simple," Rich observed. "And there are colonised poetics and resilient poetics, transmissions across frontiers not easily traced."[9] The essays here assembled hope to suggest the impure, complex riches of British Romantic poetry, and to offer usable maps and signposts as readers venture into territories and across frontiers both familiar and lesser known: for Romantic poetry, however deeply rooted in its historical and cultural moment, also remains "ever more about to be," in Wordsworth's phrase – ever ready to be reactivated and reimagined by the latest reader.

NOTES

1 Samuel Taylor Coleridge, *Complete Poetical Works*, ed. E. H. Coleridge, 2 vols. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1963), vol. 1, p. 240.
2 Percy Bysshe Shelley, "A Defence of Poetry," in *Shelley's Poetry and Prose*, ed. Donald H. Reiman and Neil Fraistat (New York: W. W. Norton, 2002), p. 508.
3 See Theodor W. Adorno, "Nations," in *Introduction to the Sociology of Music*, trans. E. B. Ashton (New York: Continuum, 1989), pp. 159–60.
4 See Rachel Donadio, "Profile: The Closest Reader," *The New York Times Sunday Book Review* (December 10, 2006), http://query.nytimes.com/gst/fullpage.html?res=9505E0D6113EF933A25751C1A9609C8B63, accessed June 27, 2007.
5 Shelley, *A Defence of Poetry*, p. 483.
6 Bob Perelman, "Fake Dream: The Library," in *Ten to One: Selected Poems* (Hanover, NH, and London: Wesleyan University Press, 1999), p. xiv.
7 See, e.g., Lisa Robertson's debt to *The Prelude* in *The Weather* (Vancouver: New Star Books, 2001); John Ashbery, *Other Traditions* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2000); Paul Muldoon, "Ninety Instant Messages to Tom Moore," in *Horse Latitudes* (New York: Farrar Straus, 2006); Brian Kim Stefans, *Fashionable Noise on Digital Poetics* (Berkeley, CA: Atelos, 2003).
8 In *Other: British and Irish Poetry since 1970*, ed. Richard Caddel and Peter Quartermain (Wesleyan University Press, 1999), 129.
9 Adrienne Rich, "Legislators of the World," *Guardian*, Saturday, 18 November 2006, file:///articles%20of%20interest%20poetry/Adrienne%20Rich%20on%20Poetry.html, accessed June 27, 2007.

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JEFFREY N. COX

The living pantheon of poets in 1820: pantheon or canon?

As recently as the early 1980s, the definition of Romantic poetry would have been fairly clear and mostly non-controversial. Students explored Romanticism through the work of six major poets – Blake, Wordsworth, Coleridge, Byron, Shelley, and Keats – with primary attention being given to their lyric poetry or to the lyric qualities of their attempts at, say, epic. Yet a Romanticism defined by the "Big Six" male writers is very much a mid-twentieth-century creation contrasted with, for example, Thomas Humphry Ward's *English Poets* of 1880, which included the favored six (Blake, largely invisible during the Romantic period, had been recovered by his Victorian admirers) alongside "secondary" Romantic poets such as Thomas Love Peacock, "Barry Cornwall," and Leigh Hunt, popular writers of the period such as Sir Walter Scott, Thomas Moore, and Samuel Rogers, and women poets such as Anna Laetitia Barbauld, Joanna Baillie, and Felicia Hemans; George Benjamin Woods's 1916 *English Poetry and Prose of the Romantic Period* (still being reprinted in 1950) has a similar gathering of poets. Ernest Bernbaum's 1949 edition of his *Guide Through the Romantic Movement* continued to recognize sixteen major Romantic writers, though they are all male; but the path being taken by scholarship on Romanticism was signaled in the 1950 MLA publication *The English Romantic Poets: A Review of Research*, which included only five male poets, with Blake's absence corrected in later versions of this work. The most important anthology of the 1970s and 1980s, David Perkins's *English Romantic Writers* (1967), gives almost all of its pages to the core group, though it does sample other male poets.

Almost as soon as this consensus was achieved, it was challenged by developments within literary theory and by an expanded sense of the literary itself that has arisen through the reintroduction of the writing of women, people of color, the "lower" orders, and others who had seemed to vanish from literary history. As such writers have entered the classroom, as perhaps best seen in Anne K. Mellor and Richard E. Matlak's *British Literature*