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Edited by Marshall Brown

Excerpt

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## Introduction

MARSHALL BROWN

Many of the presuppositions and practices that prevail in contemporary aesthetics and literary criticism originate in writings from the Romantic decades.<sup>1</sup> 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

<sup>1</sup> 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.

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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).<sup>2</sup> 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

<sup>2</sup> 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

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had present ends in mind.<sup>3</sup> 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

<sup>3</sup> 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.

## Introduction

5

Wordsworth.<sup>4</sup> 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

<sup>4</sup> 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.

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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.

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## I

## Classical standards in the period

PAUL H. FRY

If this topic should seem either too piecemeal or too self-evident to include in a general volume on romantic criticism, it may help to recall that for René Wellek the status of neoclassical criticism among the Romantics is the crucial issue that makes the second volume of his *History of modern criticism* possible: 'I think we must recognize that we can speak of a general European Romantic movement only if we take a wide over-all view and consider simply the general rejection of the neoclassical creed as a common denominator.'<sup>1</sup> But possibly this claim only deepens suspicion. Arthur Lovejoy had famously argued that no criterion of any kind was common to all Romanticisms, and Wellek, who wrote his equally famous rebuttal of Lovejoy while at work on volume two, would have been especially eager at that time to uphold the legitimacy of broad period definitions.<sup>2</sup> Can the exceptions, we may ask – Byron and Chateaubriand, for example – ever be acceptably rationalized from any standpoint, not just Lovejoy's?

Nevertheless, whatever one might feel moved to say on other occasions, this is clearly not the place for the postmodern insistence that only an atomism vastly exceeding even Lovejoy's can do justice to the complexity of literary history (and in any case, Musset had already said that about 'Romanticism' in 1824!<sup>3</sup>). One must do what one can, aided in this case by the easily overlooked precision of Wellek's claim: we can try at first to agree, tentatively, that what the spirit of the Romantic age rejects is the neoclassical, not necessarily the Classical or the texts of antiquity, and proceed from there. It may finally be possible to show, however, that there is something even more telling, more truly characteristic and self-defining, albeit more varied, about the Romantic reception of Classical antiquity itself.

<sup>1</sup> René Wellek, *A history of modern criticism: 1750–1950*, vol. II: *The Romantic age*, New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1955, p. 2.

<sup>2</sup> See Arthur Lovejoy, 'On the discrimination of Romanticisms' (1924), and René Wellek, 'The concept of "Romanticism" in literary history: the term "Romantic" and its derivatives', 1949, conveniently anthologized in *Romanticism: points of view*, Robert F. Gleckner and Gerald E. Enscoe (eds.), Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice-Hall, 1970.

<sup>3</sup> Lovejoy approvingly cites Alfred de Musset's *Lettres de Dupuis et Cotonet* as the '*reductio ad absurdum* of efforts to define romanticism' (*Romanticism*, Gleckner and Enscoe (eds.), p. 66n.).

By ‘Neoclassical’ in this contrastive context we conventionally understand the domination of taste by Opitz and Gottsched in Germany, Boileau in France and Pope together with other verse essayists on criticism like Roscommon in England (it has been wittily observed that the neoclassical is the moment when poetry and criticism are one). The difference between the neoclassical and the Classical is for the most part self-explanatory (as between Pope and Homer, or even between Pope and Virgil), but much harder to maintain, as we shall see, when one considers the reception of the Classical texts of criticism – Horace obviously, but also Longinus, who was popularized by Boileau, and Aristotle most problematically of all. When Wordsworth so disturbingly says, ‘Aristotle, I have been told . . .’, then misunderstands what he has been ‘told’<sup>4</sup> while purporting to agree with it, even though the Preface to *Lyrical ballads* taken as a whole is the most radically anti-Aristotelian piece of critical speculation one could imagine, our perplexity is not just focussed on the sociohistorical interest that attaches to Wordsworth’s alleged ignorance (and cheerful willingness to confess it) against the backdrop of earlier literary institutions, but also on the simple question what is meant by ‘Aristotle’: is this the neoclassical Stagyrite or is it the ancient sage who upholds the honour of poetry against the attack of Plato? And how significant can it be that Wordsworth seems in this place to have the latter figure in mind, since elsewhere he seems certainly to anticipate the modern consensus that Plato is proto-romantic while Aristotle is proto-neoclassical?<sup>5</sup>

Taking it as given, however, that in most cases we know what is meant by the Neoclassical, all will agree that the clearest instance of the ‘Romantic’ rejection of this ‘creed’, uttered in the name of the classical Apollo, can be found in Keats’s ‘Sleep and poetry’ (1817), where a diatribe against poets who ‘sway’d about upon a rocking horse, / And thought it Pegasus’ concludes as follows:

A thousand handicraftsmen wore the mask  
Of Poesy. Ill-fated, impious race!  
That blasphemed the bright Lyrist to his face,  
And did not know it, – no, they went about,  
Holding a poor, decrepid standard out

<sup>4</sup> William Wordsworth, ‘Preface to *Lyrical ballads*’, in *Wordsworth: poetical works*, Thomas Hutchinson (ed.), Ernest de Selincourt (rev. edn), London: Oxford University Press, 1974, p. 737.

<sup>5</sup> ‘The English’, Wordsworth is said to have remarked in conversation, ‘with their devotion to Aristotle, have but half the truth; a sound philosophy must contain both Plato and Aristotle.’ Cited from *Old friends: memories of old friends, being extracts from the journals and letters of Caroline Fox*, Horace N. Pym (ed.) (1884) in *The critical opinions of William Wordsworth*, Markham L. Peacock, Jr (ed.), Baltimore, MD: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1950, p. 76.

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[More information](#)

## Classical standards

9

Mark'd with most flimsy mottos, and in large  
The name of one Boileau!<sup>6</sup>

Even here qualifications are in order. By 1819 Keats himself was reading (and imitating here and there in *Lamia*) the poetry of Dryden. Hence even though there was a widespread tendency to follow Johnson in considering Dryden a more dynamic poet than Pope (just as Homer and Shakespeare were thought more dynamic than Virgil and Jonson), it must be granted nonetheless that within the space of two years Keats's taste had become more catholic. Also, this is the very passage which more than anything else earned Keats the scorn of the 'Romantic' Byron.

Still and all, the passage remains exemplary: the contempt for rules presumed – *qua* rules – to be mechanical and arbitrarily superimposed is after all an undeniable hallmark of Romanticism. Many Romantic texts could be cited in which the decline from the Classical to the neoclassical is seen precisely as the transformation of the normative from internal necessity to external constraint. And undoubtedly among the English Romantics, always with the loud exception of Byron and likewise excluding such contemporaries as the verse essayist on criticism William Gifford, the poetry of Pope was considered competent at best and even subject to the question – first raised in a more defensive spirit by Johnson – whether indeed it was poetry at all.<sup>7</sup> The arch-villain was Pope's Homer. It must come as a shock to any reader of Keats's sonnet on Chapman's Homer that he had already read Pope's Homer, which 'made no impression on him'<sup>8</sup>; and we have also Wordsworth's belief (appearing in an 1808 letter to Scott encouraging Scott's edition of Dryden and therefore saying whatever could be said *in favour* of Dryden and his period) that '[I]t will require yet half a century completely to carry off the poison of Pope's Homer'.<sup>9</sup>

In the English tradition it is hard to point to a time when the Neoclassical, or 'pseudo-classical',<sup>10</sup> was not already under attack. Sir William Temple's *Essay of poetry* (1690) is a case in point, with its indictment of the 'Moderns' for being too lapidary in matters of style and diction; and the increasingly Longinian element I have elsewhere identified in Dryden's

<sup>6</sup> John Keats, *The poems of John Keats*, ed. Jack Stillinger, Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1978, p. 74.

<sup>7</sup> For argument that this was a received idea, imposed merely by the hegemony of Wartonian literary history and not fully consistent with the actual continuity of certain romantic and neoclassical tenets, see Robert Griffin, *Wordsworth's Pope: a study in literary historiography*, Cambridge University Press, 1995, *passim*.

<sup>8</sup> Gilbert Highet, *The Classical tradition: Greek and Roman influences on Western literature*, New York: Oxford University Press, 1957, p. 416.

<sup>9</sup> *The letters of William and Dorothy Wordsworth: the middle years, Part 1: 1806–1811*, Ernest de Selincourt (ed.), Mary Moorman (rev.), Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1969, p. 191.

<sup>10</sup> The expression, referring to Opitz, is L. A. Willoughby's: *The Romantic movement in Germany*, New York: Russell & Russell, 1966, p. 7.

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[More information](#)

late prefaces<sup>11</sup> is an advance critique of any dogged adherence to regularity – the sort of thing expressed most woodenly, for example, by the ‘Modern’ Charles Gildon among Dryden’s near contemporaries. As Walter Jackson Bate put it, ‘the Moderns in general felt, not that the Ancients were too bound by rules, but that they were not correct enough in their observance of them’.<sup>12</sup> But the Moderns never got the better of any exchange of opinion even in their own time, and it remains the case that the strictly neoclassical in England is to a large extent a straw man. This is not to say that the Restoration and Queen Anne ethos was always already preromantic. Certain invariants can be pointed to, such as the fact that throughout this period – as it was commonplace to complain by the time of Mme de Staël, for example – critical analysis and even textual emendation was always aimed at ‘faults’ rather than ‘beauties’, suggesting a completely unshaken faith in the juridical power of standards, if not perhaps always exactly the same ones. By the same token it is telling, I think, that Bishop Thomas Warburton’s treatise on the origin of language, *The divine legation of Moses* (1741), shies away from the idea (typified in Herder and Rousseau a generation later and still current in Shelley) that the language directly emergent from prelinguistic rude noises was chiefly poetic metaphor. Any extravagance of figure in primitive language was owing rather, Warburton argued, to ‘rusticity of conception’,<sup>13</sup> and speakers advanced towards a civilized indulgence in metaphor only through a succession of stages. And again, it is unwise to assume that Pope’s brave disorder producing a grace beyond the reach of art is an endorsement of anything approaching what was later considered sublime, although the nod to Longinus is clear enough. ‘Grace’ evokes ‘*gratia*’, the ‘*je ne sais quoi*’, a safety-valve for latitude invoked throughout the seventeenth century, rather than the sublime, which plays an equivalent role in the eighteenth.<sup>14</sup>

But if even these exceptions serve in some measure to demonstrate that the neoclassical was never more than a tendency in the history of English taste, that is after all what has long been thought. If Pope’s Longinus

<sup>11</sup> Paul H. Fry, *The reach of criticism: method and perception in literary theory*, New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1983, pp. 87–124; Fry, ‘Dryden’s earliest allusion to Longinus’, *ELN* 19 (1981), 22–4.

<sup>12</sup> Bate, *From Classic to Romantic: premises of taste in eighteenth-century England*, New York: Harper, 1946, p. 32.

<sup>13</sup> Quoted by René Wellek, *The rise of English literary history*, Chapel Hill, NC: University of North Carolina Press, 1941, p. 88. The striking verbal anticipation serves precisely to show that no doctrine could invert the values of Wordsworth more completely.

<sup>14</sup> See Samuel Holt Monk, ‘“A Grace beyond the reach of Art”’, *Journal of the history of ideas* 5 (1944), pp. 131–50. I think I was wrong to suggest in *The reach of criticism* (p. 83) that this concept looks forward to Hazlitt’s *gusto*. Hazlitt looks back rather to the Renaissance emphasis on *enargeia*, I now feel – a doctrine which has relatively little to do with *sprezzatura*, etc.