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Edited by Roy Porter and Mikulas Teich

Excerpt

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## *Introduction*

In the Anglo-Saxon world, Romanticism is a concept still most commonly and most comfortably handled within the fields of literary studies and aesthetics. In their schooldays, students first become familiar with the term as a label for the English 'Lake poets', and grow used to associating the movement with the 'truth of the imagination and the holiness of the heart's intentions', with a love of nature in the wild, and with the spiritual discovery of the self. The relation of such poets – Wordsworth, Coleridge, and their contemporaries – to their society is seen as simple: they rejected it. They are the heroic individuals who repudiated Mammon, and turned their backs on the philistine world of the bourgeoisie, the world that was 'too much with us'. They 'wandered lonely as a cloud', in quest for the eternal, the ideal, pure truth and beauty, or what Coleridge in his less reverential moments called 'inner goings-on'.

Within this perspective it is easy to regard Romanticism as essentially arising out of the life experiences and activities of isolated individuals – indeed, as the very forging of individualism – and to study it mainly biographically in terms of a series of spiritual odysseys. To prevent that approach from becoming too fragmented, however, certain essential intellectual and artistic continuities are then commonly postulated, linking Romantic art and thought across Europe. The goal of the Romantic quest, we are told (and quite plausibly) lay in repudiating the culture of perfection in favour of that of process, abandoning design for desire. The Romantics valued the infinite above the finite, rejected order in favour of chaos, discounted the general in preference for the particular, the material for the spiritual, the mechanical for the organic, and saw art not just as a product of 'taste', 'imitation', and craftsmanship ('a work of art') but as the spontaneous outpourings of transcendent genius. As Wordsworth was to poetry, so Turner was to painting, Schelling to philosophy, Berlioz to music, and Stendhal to the novel, we are often told.

The contributors to this volume believe that it is indeed valuable in

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suchlike ways to seek to identify and explain the overarching integrity of Romanticism. If we look around Europe, we see that Romantics from Uppsala to Madrid, and from Dublin to Moscow, shared a number of common *bêtes noires*. They revolted against shallow, narrow conventionality, the banal art of the academies, the prostitution of mind to the service of money, power, and polite taste. Prophetic visions of the overthrow of Babylon haunted the imagination of William Blake and his contemporaries, with their visions of future 'green and pleasant lands'. Even the more conservative amongst them despised at least those aspects of an *ancien régime* which had encouraged vulgar materialism and hypocritical mediocrity. These sympathies and antipathies reflect the attitudes to nature and society of some of the most influential artists, scientists, and philosophers alive between 1789 and 1848. That is, approximately the period which saw the sunrise and sunset of the Romantic movement in Europe. But do they represent the themes which gave Romanticism its unity?

Pondering this question, many eminent scholars have argued that the concept of Romanticism, seen as a unity, has degenerated into a Procrustean bed, until the very word means everything and nothing, being applied to quite disparate intellectual and cultural currents eddying in the late eighteenth century and the first half of the nineteenth. Amongst such doubters, Arthur Lovejoy celebratedly claimed that what had truly existed was not 'Romanticism' but a veritable 'plurality of Romanticisms'.

The point is well made. But it would be a mistake to push this nominalism too far, and to reduce Romanticism to nothing other than that most Romantic notion, the biographies of great heroes, typically wanderers, exiles, and outcasts. After all, the exile is himself a product of the society from which he is banished or banishes himself, and individualism is not asocial but an expression of a particular structure of feelings.

Critical of exclusively biographical, textual, or literary-historical approaches, this volume hopes to show that it is possible to establish some internal coherence to such expressions as 'German Romanticism', 'Spanish Romanticism', 'Polish Romanticism', and so forth. It further aims to explore how these different national Romanticisms coexisted in symbiotic relations to each other. Romanticism did not spread out from a single source, though some important growth points are identified here – the mid-eighteenth-century English bardic and gothic movements, Rousseauvian sentiment, German Sturm und Drang – and questions of media of transmission loom large, above all in Clarissa Campbell Orr's discussion of Switzerland. Overall, however, instead of concentrating on questions of *origins*, the essays here seek to elucidate how the diverse

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Romanticisms took shape under the influence of the epochal upheavals that were shaking the foundations of the whole of Europe, the French Revolution and the British Industrial Revolution.

At first glance, the more spectacular of these was the French Revolution and its aftermaths – both the Europe-wide Revolutionary and Napoleonic Wars down to 1815, but, no less significantly, the heritages of revolution and revolt which became integral to many nations thereafter. Faced with such revolutionary traumas, no profound thinker or artist of the era of Blake and Châteaubriand, Kleist and Hegel – whether radical or reactionary – could proceed on the basis of ‘business as usual’. Whether the generation of Revolution was just a ‘monster’ (as it was for Joseph de Maistre), or it was truly a matter of Wordsworth’s ‘Bliss it was in that dawn to be alive’, the universe of symbolic meanings needed to be recreated once more out of chaos. This fact applies not just to ardent revolutionaries but no less to those more conservative Romantics for whom the real priorities were the resurrection of the past and the ‘invention of tradition’. Myths of creation and recreation – Faust, Prometheus, Frankenstein, Christ – were central to the Romantic imagination.

Romanticism thus responded to, and created, the shock of the new. It was neither uniformly progressive nor reactionary, neither wholly liberal nor authoritarian, neither unequivocally republican nor monarchist. For one thing, it embraced diversity; it took many forms; it had its asynchronisms. Thus Romanticism blossomed quite late in France (after all, Romanticism itself elsewhere was in no small measure a protest against French cultural imperialism, both Classical and Revolutionary). In early nineteenth-century France, Romanticism was principally identified with a traditionalist nostalgia for the past, expressing the wish to expunge the memory of the irreligion of the Enlightenment and the primal Reign of Terror, that ‘despotism of liberty’. From the late 1820s onwards, however – the era of Victor Hugo – it came to be utterly fused with the hopes of liberalism. The same story applies equally to the Dutch experience. For another, many individual figures changed their allegiances. In England, the erstwhile Jacobins, Wordsworth, Coleridge and Southey, all ended up Burkean pillars of reaction.

And, at bottom, the multi-faceted nature of politics is so complex as to turn the attempt to attach crude party labellings into a fatuous exercise. It may be plausible enough to call that arch-Romantic Shelley (advocate of free love, of vegetarianism, of Irish emancipation, of colonial freedom, and so forth) an unambiguous radical. Similarly, in the case of Spain, it is reasonable (as Susan Kirkpatrick argues in her essay below) to see liberal and Romantic forces united together against the restoration monarchy. But what of Hungary or Poland, for instance? There the scions of Roman-

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ticism were typically discontented gentry who felt passionate disdain for the absolutism and foreign rule under which they lived, but they had little or no concern for the conditions of life of the peasants and serfs (though they were not against forging myths of the virtuous 'people').

Likewise in Ireland, where the chieftains of literary and political Romanticism (eventually to spawn the Young Ireland movement) came from the very same Anglo-Irish Protestant ruling class who formed the colonial oppressors; they protested against English overlordship in the English language rather than in Gaelic, using English verse-forms, largely for a mainland English readership, and shuddered with contempt at the bog-ridden indigenous Papist peasantry. Romantics could see that the old world was sickening unto death, and that new bodies politic, supported by new societies and cultures, had to be born. But just how to conceive national movements from the marriage of idealities and practicalities baffled even the most thoughtful amongst them.

There is thus something intrinsically and astonishingly complex about Romanticism. Here the contrast with earlier movements, combining thought and action, is revealing. For all its local differences, the Reformation had possessed a substantial unity, grounded upon a common core of beliefs (the truth of Scripture, the primacy of faith, etc.), and is readily enough identified with social forces which overall can be called historically 'progressive'. The same is true of the Enlightenment. The aspirations and programmes of *philosophes* in London and Paris, Turin and Berlin espoused common criticism of the ignorance, superstition, bigotry, and injustice of the *ancien régime*, and a shared confidence in the powers of reason to build a better world. In that cosmopolitan climate, it is not too difficult to think of Hume and Diderot changing places, or to imagine Joseph Priestley writing in Geneva (after all, Gibbon was scribbling away just down the road in Lausanne). When the *philosophes* migrated, they saw themselves more as cosmopolitans than as exiles. At least at some level, all the leading Protestant Reformers, and all the Aufklärer were clearly ranged on the same side, and they characteristically shared a profound belief in both the duty and the possibility of public activism.

At once drawing upon and opposing the Enlightenment, Romanticism presents a much more confused and contradictory picture. The degree to which the Romantics were political animals must not of course be underestimated. Shelley quite explicitly spoke of poets as the unacknowledged legislators of the world. The 'solitary' Wordsworth who 'wandered lonely as a cloud' was the man who just a few years earlier had rushed off to revolutionary Paris, and then, in disillusionment, had changed colours, and wrote counter-revolutionary propaganda. As Dietrich von Engelhardt emphasizes in his essay below, the metaphysical transcendentalism of

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Schelling or Schlegel was not apolitical or above politics, but essentially expressed political preferences in a different tongue. The crucial point, however, is that in the maelstrom of the Revolution and its aftermath, there were no longer the easy targets and ready solutions which had united the *philosophes* – indeed, the Revolution itself had proved the nemesis of such optimism. What was to be done appeared ambiguously different to European Romantics operating from within diverse national, social, and cultural climates.

While not a few of this *avant garde* could repudiate the dynasticism of the *ancien régime*, they had no stomach for the shady realities of the bourgeois present. Bourgeois society was by no means living up to its aims, expressed clearly and concisely within the slogans of ‘liberty, equality and fraternity’. In line with this, as Nietzsche pointed out, the Romantics (very much thanks to a religious upbringing) found the atheism of the *philosophes* inadequate and their mechanical materialism one-sided.

One by-product of the concern with these bourgeois social and philosophical propositions was the Romantic passion for the pre-bourgeois past. It turned into a rich as well as a barren soil for the growth of the arts, sciences, and politics. For this the Romantics naturally looked within their own nations, seeking to put down new roots in history, in folklore and folksong, in pure, indigenous traditions of language, speech, and expression, in bards and ballads. Throughout a Europe recoiling from a French domination which could pretend to advance *universal* progress and rationality, Romantics aimed to uncover a national character and even ‘racial’ continuities through which the past, embodied in living memory, could speak to, guide, and nurture the present. Sometimes, as with the extraordinarily influential Ossianic writings or the Welsh epics ‘edited’ by Iolo Morganwg, the boundary between ‘discovering’ and ‘inventing’ became utterly blurred. In all such matters, national distinctions remain crucial. Take the burning topic of language reform. In newly independent Greece, for instance, the mother tongue being recovered and advocated by one group of enthusiasts was not any old folk dialect, but the very speech of Classical Antiquity itself! Even so, it may overall be said that one common thread to Romanticism across Europe was the forging of historical myths to bolster indigenous national cultures. (It was, of course, a ‘uniting’ feature destined itself to produce disunity.)

But no longer did there seem any unique rational blueprint for action applicable simultaneously to the Greeks, rebelling against the rule of the infidel, the Poles oppressed by Czarist Russia, the Dutch or the Spaniards so recently occupied by revolutionary France, or indeed the Welsh, irremediably enveloped within the overwhelmingly larger culture of England. Romanticism spurred patriotism and nationalism, but that in

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itself proved double-edged, creating across Europe a chaos of rival and competing Romanticisms; everywhere the oppressed were battling against oppressors who themselves were oppressed by larger empires. Did Swiss Romantics ever think of themselves as *Swiss*, or solely as Genevans, Vaudois, Bernese, or whatever?

Let us now move our eyes forward very briefly to the Congress of Vienna (1815). There are various viewpoints about its place in history which, obviously, cannot be discussed here. But whatever the viewpoint, the pursuit of individualism and liberty that animated the Romantics was emphatically not the concern of the rulers and statesmen who worked out the settlement of Europe after the defeat of Napoleon. There were amongst the Romantics those who responded by expressing detachment, irony, and nihilistic despair that signalled a growing conviction of the impossibility, irrelevance, or futility of direct social involvement. It was that hopeless sense of alienation from purposeful action produced by what Goya termed the 'desastres de la guerra' which encouraged the retreat of men such as Châteaubriand and Stendhal into a wistful solipsism and Hölderlin into *Weltschmerz*. Many saw themselves as strangers in their own society. Not by initial choice, but by necessity and anguished experience, Romantic thinkers and artists found the divide between the world of action and the world of thought, the real and the ideal, ever widening. Some hoped to transcend this dilemma, by making 'destiny their choice' – indeed, often national destiny (Pushkin, Mickiewicz); or by creating an intellectual and artistic *moi romantique* which celebrated the quest for a grail within, or which chronicled man at war with himself (Lermontov). Such Romantic experiences of 'polarity' – self and other – connect with the key concepts of the developing knowledge of electricity – attraction and repulsion. They clearly find widespread usage in the Naturphilosophie movement which proved such an influence on science and metaphysics in Germany and in other parts of Northern Europe.

Of course, more complex factors were at work in the growing ambivalence – alienation even – which men of letters felt towards their milieu. Heroic and anti-heroic Romantics ceaselessly lambasted the philistine petty-mindedness of their age. But they did so as a newly fledged intelligentsia, flexing its muscles, well aware that though they might be biting the hand that fed them, that hand would nevertheless not be withdrawn. For that age of chaos looked to writers and thinkers for guidance and example as never before. Poets and playwrights, critics, intellectuals, and journalists were themselves conspicuous beneficiaries of an increasingly literate culture, hungry for opinions, and clamouring to worship the Napoleons of the novel, of epic poetry, of the symphony or opera. The Enlightenment had proved the critical power of the pen. But it was during

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the Romantic age that living writers – Sir Walter Scott, Byron, Victor Hugo, Goethe, and so forth – became a new priesthood (Coleridge's 'clerisy'), the paramount shapers of contemporary culture and the creators of the allusions by which peoples lived, and the reflections of the realities in which they lived. Their own not seldom restless lives – *la vie Bohème* – mirrored and modelled their times. Writers and artists attained a cultural influence hitherto unthinkable.

But the consequences were deeply ambiguous. Romanticism offered avenues a-plenty to make sense of or mask the often distasteful realities of oligarchic societies undergoing traumatic capitalist development, industrialization, urbanization, and proletarianization. They conjured up myths of the glories of the past, the drama of the inner self as hero, spiritual voyages into the religious and the transcendental, and a communion with the mountains. Especially in Protestant nations such as Holland and Sweden, but also in Catholic Poland, Romanticism could ally with faith to generate the last great religious 'new awakening' of Western Christendom. Frequently the result was mere escapism. When fleshed out into nationalist and racial fantasies, it might not be so innocent. The Romantics liked to forge solacing ideologies for the developing bourgeois societies they so profoundly despised.

As will be perfectly obvious, this book has no pretensions to completeness. The inevitable limitations of space have meant that consideration of some nations has had to be excluded in order to make way for others. The reasonably familiar cases of Italy and Scotland, for example, are absent, as is North America; but the relatively little-known experiences of (say) Wales, Hungary, or Spain do receive extensive coverage. The written word receives most attention, but broader cultural considerations such as debates over language have been given considerable prominence, and some contributors have chosen to emphasize other cultural forms such as painting. The balance of subject matter has of course been dictated by national cultural differences. In Greece, for instance, Romanticism primarily took literary forms; in Sweden, by contrast, science, philosophy, and scholarship were the media through which Romantic outlooks were largely expressed. Where the actual literary or philosophical works of particular nations may well be relatively unfamiliar to most English readers – as, say, in the case of Poland or Hungary – our contributors have chosen to devote greater space to exegesis of the leading writings involved, or, as in the case of Holland, to the careers of the key individuals. Overall, the project has aimed, however, to bring out those most Romantic themes, diversity in unity, and unity in diversity.

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## READING SUGGESTIONS

Each chapter in this book is extensively footnoted or contains a substantial bibliography of works pertaining both to the nation in question and to the general problems of Romanticism. Any attempt to present a substantial general bibliography here would thus be otiose, particularly as recent general books, dealing with the conceptual problems of Romanticism, already discuss the critical, scholarly, and historiographical issues. For example Jerome J. McGann's *The Romantic Ideology. A Critical Investigation* (Chicago and London, 1983) offers a wide-ranging evaluation of current meanings of Romanticism. Earlier assessments are contained in A. O. Lovejoy's 'On the discrimination of Romanticisms', *Publications of the Modern Language Association*, 39 (1924), 229–53, and René Wellek, 'The concept of Romanticism in literary scholarship', *Comparative Literature*, 1 (1949), 1–23 and 147–72. On the history of the word, consult Hans Eichner (ed.), *'Romantic' and Its Cognates: The European History of a Word* (Toronto, 1972), and also Northrop Frye (ed.), *Romanticism Reconsidered* (New York, 1963).

For lucid, broad-ranging histories of the Romantic movement in the arts and literature, see Anthony Thorlby, *The Romantic Movement* (London, 1955); H. G. Schenk, *The Mind of the European Romantics* (London, 1966); L. R. Furst, *Romanticism in Perspective* (London, 1969); Jacques Barzun, *Classic, Romantic and Modern* (New York, 1961); Ugo Cardinale (ed.), *Problemi del Romanticismo* (Milan 1983); and Howard Mumford Jones, *Revolution and Romanticism* (Cambridge, Mass., 1974).



## I

*Romanticism in Wales*

GWYN A. WILLIAMS

Romanticism in a ‘Country in the World’s back-side, where every Man is born a Gentleman and a Genealogist’<sup>1</sup> has come under the scrutiny of the recently published *Oxford Companion to Welsh Literature* (Oxford 1986). It detects some ‘pre-romantic nostalgia’ in the eighteenth-century verse of Evan Evans (Ieuan Fardd) who in terms of a genuine Welsh poetic tradition was a ‘Classicist’, and in that of the great Methodist hymnist William Williams Pantycelyn who virtually invented what has become a characteristically Welsh genre. It can scarcely fail to take cognisance of the literally epoch-making achievements of Iolo Morganwg (Edward Williams) who invented a history of the Welsh and bestowed on Wales a novel cultural institution which has since become virtually a symbol of its nationhood.

The *Companion’s* tone, however, is magisterial: ‘It was not until much later, in the nineteenth century, that the Romantic sensibility could be clearly identified.’

Yet, in the late eighteenth century, Wales produced a Romantic hero second to none and produced him, moreover, in the context of an intellectual ferment which cries aloud for orchestration by Hector Berlioz – and which was, in truth, orchestrated in part by Franz Joseph Haydn and the Czech composer Koželuh with some assistance from Walter Scott and the Mrs Hemans who wrote ‘The boy stood on the burning deck . . .’.

The hero emerged in the unlikely person of John Evans, a Methodist of Waun-Fawr near Caernarfon.<sup>2</sup> At the age of 22, John Evans threw up family and career in 1792 to embark on an epic journey of discovery and self-discovery in quest of an elusive Welsh grail and to suffer sorrows worthy of Werther. Moved by a sense of historic mission which had possessed him, he drove himself to London to seek the support of the vivacious Welsh society of the Gwyneddigion, then in the throes of rescuing a Welsh past and building a Welsh future upon it. Losing patience, Evans borrowed his passage money and crossed in the steerage to

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Baltimore in the American Republic. After a spell among the American Welsh, he set off, alone, to cross the wilderness of Kentucky and Ohio, where Indian war was raging, to stumble into the Spanish territory of Louisiana in 1793 and find a home with a Welsh family in New Madrid. In the summer, losing patience again, he set out with a companion to make his way up the largely unexplored Missouri through hostile Indians. Lost, sun-baked and broken, he reeled back to the American side of the Mississippi, but after a stint with a Canadian fur company, he tried his luck again and around Christmas 1794 crossed into Spanish St Louis, to be jailed as a British spy.

Rescued by friends, he at last found an instrument for his mission in Spain's Missouri Company, launched by a Welsh West Indian. The Scotsman James McKay took on Evans as his second-in-command in the last, great Spanish imperial enterprise in North America. It was John Evans who became the first white man to make his way up the Missouri to its great bend, to find the Mandan Indians, the legendary 'white' and 'civilised' Indians whose ghost haunted the minds of white America. He lived with them through a Dakota winter, fought off the Canadians to hold them for Spain (and hence a few years later, for the USA). Forced to pull out, he returned to Louisiana, to be taken into the home of the Governor and to collapse into disillusionment, drink and destruction. Don Juan Evans, Sieur Evans of the Western Sea, aged 29, died in New Orleans in 1799.

What was the historic mission which turned this young Welsh Methodist (who, as a Jacobin democrat, duly defected to the Baptists and the Freemasons) into the last of the Spanish conquistadors and a pioneer of American exploration? His mission was to re-establish contact with the Lost Brothers of the Welsh Nation, those Welsh Indians who were descended from a colony planted on the Gulf of Mexico by the Welsh Prince Madoc who had discovered America in 1170, 300 years before Columbus.

The epic myth of Madoc had emerged in the sixteenth century from sketchy origins in medieval Welsh romance.<sup>3</sup> It was born together with the new 'Britain' invented by the Tudors, a dynasty regarded as 'Welsh' west of Offa's Dyke. This first Britain was built upon the elimination of Welsh distinctiveness. Hitherto a patchwork of jurisdictions derived from Marcher lordships and a principality which the Crown had acquired by conquest from Welsh princes, Wales was entirely absorbed into the shire, legal and political system of England, with English as its sole official language; local power passed to its emerging gentry who rode the tide of a new merchant capitalism. The native language was dismissed from official life, the native culture expelled to an unregarded margin, the Welsh