

## *Introduction*

For the future is the time in which we may not be, and yet we must imagine we will have been.

(Gillian Rose, *Mourning Becomes the Law*)

I cannot imagine being dead: therefore I don't believe that I will ever die. Since reason, hearsay and everything that I see and hear present irrefutable evidence that it is the ultimate destiny of all living beings to cease to exist, I must construct a story of survival which will compensate for the fact that I will finally and without question die and which will negotiate the disparity between the impossibility of imagining my own death on the one hand and its inevitable occurrence on the other. It is for this reason that I resort to one or more of a number of strategies for survival. If I am able to produce children I can be genetically encoded into my offspring; if I am loved I will have a temporary afterlife in the memories of those who survive me; if I am a politician or military leader, programmed into the future of my nation will be an ineradicable trace of my existence, I will survive as history; if I believe in God, then I can imagine for myself an afterlife of the soul; given sufficient cash, cryogenics will enable my body to be preserved after my death for future restoration; any attainment of fame or infamy, even that which brings me to public notice for a mere fifteen minutes, can provide me with a sense that I have made an indelible mark on the world; if I write books, then the paper, this paper, will preserve that part of myself which I identify in writing: inscribed in text, now, I will survive in a bookish afterlife.

During the eighteenth century, the textual afterlife becomes increasingly important as an impulse for the production of poetry and increasingly prominent in the theory of literature. Writers, artists and other manufacturers of cultural artefacts have a perennial fascination with the immortality effect, the ability of a poem, novel, statue, painting, photograph, symphony to survive beyond the death of the artist. But during

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the eighteenth century this quality begins to be figured as a determining force in cultural production. The poet (who, in this story of literary production, is gendered as, primarily, male) no longer writes simply for money, contemporary reputation, status, or pleasure. Instead he writes so that his identity, transformed and transliterated, disseminated in the endless act of reading, will survive. It is with Romanticism that this impulse is most clearly and most thoroughly theorised and practised. Indeed, Romanticism itself might be described in terms of a certain value accorded the theory and practice of writing for posterity.

A number of interlocking factors to be explored from different perspectives in the course of this book provide the context and structure for the Romantic culture of posterity. In the first place, the question of the role and identity of the author becomes increasingly important in literary and aesthetic thinking during the eighteenth century. By the early nineteenth century, authorial identity has become crucial to the shape of the more advanced modern poetry. Indeed, poetry begins to be understood as not only recording the life of the poet but actually constructing that life: poetry appears to *produce* the writer's identity. But, as the Keatsian phrase 'negative capability' and Hazlitt's idea of the 'disinterested' nature of action both suggest, Romantic writing also tends to inscribe the dissolution of personal identity into its ideal of the writer. In this sense, the poet is taken out of 'himself' in writing. Writing is seen to both construct and evacuate the subjectivity of the author: authorial identity is both produced and dispersed in a 'crisis of subjectivity' which conditions the Romantic and post-Romantic act of composition.<sup>1</sup> It is in this way that the poet is able to conceive of himself as living on in his work and as being inscribed in that work as what Nietzsche calls the 'monogram' of the genius's 'most essential being'.<sup>2</sup> The author in the text is both present and absent, self-identical and anonymous. Posterity validates the poet, but does so in the future perfect tense ('we must imagine we will have been' – it is in this grammatical glitch that Romantic posterity intersects with the postmodern) whereby it is constituted as a proleptic reversion.

It is my suggestion that the particular predicament of early nineteenth-century poetry publication not only allowed for but, for certain writers and for a certain culture of writing, demanded deferred reception. Once the conditions of publication and the market for books have given poetry audiences a certain anonymity, and once the democratisation of the readership has allowed a certain degradation and, by association, a *feminisation* of reading to become credible as a narrative of

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reception, then poets begin to figure reception in terms of an ideal audience – masculine, generalised and anonymous – deferred to an unspecified future. Romanticism develops a theory of writing and reception which stresses the importance of the poet's originating subjectivity, and of the work of art as an expression of self uncontaminated by market forces, undiluted by appeals to the corrupt prejudices and desires of (bourgeois, contaminating, fallible, feminine, temporal, mortal) readers. This Romantic theory of artistic autonomy requires a new theory of audience. The autonomy of the work of art allows no direct appeal to readers: the act of writing poetry becomes a self-governing and self-expressive practice. The poet is a nightingale singing, as Shelley puts it, to please himself: poetry is overheard while 'eloquence' is heard, according to John Stuart Mill.<sup>3</sup> Nevertheless, the Romantic theory of posterity still requires that the work finally be judged and discriminated from other, lesser work. Indeed, with the invention of the modern concept of the (English, literary) canon in the mid-eighteenth century, the possibility of such discriminations becomes crucial to reading and to the new discipline of literary criticism. In order to discriminate the poet from the scribbler or hack, the poem from common, everyday verse, Romantic theories of poetry produce an absolute and non-negotiable opposition between writing which is original, new, revolutionary, writing which breaks with the past and appeals to the future, and writing which is conventional, derivative, a copy or simulation of earlier work, writing which has an immediate appeal and an in-built redundancy. The sign of the great poem, then, is originality. Originality, in turn, generates deferred reception since the original poem is defined as one which cannot (immediately) be read. The original poem is both new and before its time. Indeed, it is before its time precisely *because* it is new. The fallible, shallow, fashion-conscious, morally vicious contemporary audience cannot be trusted to make judgements of aesthetic value. Since what Coleridge calls the 'absolute Genius' (*BL* 1.31) is, by definition, set apart from the mass of people and by virtue of this difference conceived as 'original', it is not possible for him to be fully understood until the future, preferably until after his death. Only after he has created the taste by which he may be judged will he be appreciated. And since the original and autonomous poem is *only* one which has been produced by the genius, the guarantee of true poetry inheres, finally, in the identity of the poet himself, his signature leaving its indelible trace throughout the work. We can only know that we are reading a 'great' poem because of the signature of the genius, that ineffable but theoretically unmistakable

identification of the work by and with the poet himself, an identity which will live on in the future, will, indeed, come to life in posterity.

The effect of originality is, then, that the poem and therefore the poet, inscribed in language, will survive, and our highest praise for any poem, still, is to say that it will last, that it will live on, in the future, beyond the particular contingent circumstances of its author's life and beyond its contemporary reception. It is the project of writers of genius to write for the future: 'In the inward assurance of permanent fame' declares Coleridge, writers of genius 'seem to have been either indifferent or resigned, with regard to immediate reputation' (*BL* 1.33). The case is put most strongly and most clearly by Hazlitt at the beginning of his lecture 'On the Living Poets' (1818):

Those minds, then, which are the most entitled to expect it, can best put up with the postponement of their claims to lasting fame. They can afford to wait. They are not afraid that truth and nature will ever wear out; will lose their gloss with novelty, or their effect with fashion. If their works have the seeds of immortality in them, they will live; if they have not, they care little about them as theirs. They do not complain of the start which others have got of them in the race of everlasting renown, or of the impossibility of attaining the honours which time alone can give, during the term of their natural lives. They know that no applause, however loud and violent, can anticipate or over-rule the judgment of posterity; that the opinion of no one individual, nor of any one generation, can have the weight, the authority (to say nothing of the force of sympathy and prejudice), which must belong to that of successive generations. (*Works* v.145)

For the Romantics, as this suggests, posterity is not so much what comes after poetry as its necessary *prerequisite* – the judgement of future generations becomes the necessary condition of the act of writing itself. While the poetry of the Renaissance may be said to be obsessed with the question of immortality and while Enlightenment poetics figure the test of time as the necessary arbiter of poetic value, Romanticism reinvents posterity as the very condition of the possibility of poetry itself: to be neglected in one's lifetime, and *not to care*, is the necessary (though not of course sufficient) condition of genius.

As will become clear, however, this model of the Romantic culture of posterity is never less than a site of conflict and subversion, never amounting to a stable and coherent foundation for poetic production. Inherently and necessarily paradoxical, the appeal to posterity continues to constitute one of Western culture's most cherished claims to artistic significance while, at the same time, continuing to constitute a repeatedly challenged and ironised topos. So it is that while on the one

hand I shall argue that the appeal to a posthumous reception is central to the project of Romantic poetics, on the other hand I shall attempt to trace the ways in which that claim is ironised and subverted. If the Romantic culture of posterity is what Leo Bersani calls a 'culture of redemption',<sup>4</sup> it is one which effects its own dissolution or deconstruction. And it is my suggestion that it is in the collapse of this theory in its working through, in multiple, conflicted ways, of an impossible figuration of audience, that we may look to understand the survival of those poets who so forcefully argue for a deferral of reception. My final claim, then, is that what has helped the Romantic culture of posterity to endure is precisely the articulation of the idea of posthumous recognition and the disturbances and dislocations it produces in poetry written under its auspices.

In part I of this book I present an account of the configuration of posterity in Romantic poetics, the importance and significance of this figure, and the distinction between the Romantic culture of posterity and other forms of poetic immortality. In chapter 1, I attempt to clarify my sense of this 'culture' by briefly contrasting it with Renaissance concerns with immortality on the one hand and by tracing its development from eighteenth-century neoclassical arguments concerning aesthetic evaluation and the 'test of time' on the other. In chapter 2, I seek to develop this analysis by elaborating in more detail the discourse of posterity in the work of such writers as Hazlitt, Isaac D'Israeli, William Henry Ireland, Coleridge and Wordsworth in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries. As I seek to show, even in its most canonical moment, however, this cultural production of a necessary deferral of judgement is compromised by the resurgence of complexity and paradox. In chapter 3, I attempt to trace the alignments of the Romantic culture of posterity with a masculine poetics. I discuss ways in which poetry written by women during the period is coded as feminine in part by virtue of its resistance to or ironisation of the Romantic culture of posterity and by its celebration of the ephemeral. Women writers of the period responded to this culture by the construction of feminine poetic identity as distanced from its imperatives.

In addition to this gendering of the appeal to posterity, I suggest that within the poetry and poetics of the five canonical male poets studied in part II there are troubling discontinuities and displacements.<sup>5</sup> This accounts for the concentrations and displacements of my five author-centred chapters: while I attempt to account for central, indeed foundational, aspects of these poets' work, I refrain from simply rehearsing

their various engagements with the topic of posterity. In each case, I attempt to trace a specific and, I believe, exemplary aspect of the after-life in the work of the poet at the expense of what would be a more generalised but perhaps more repetitive, even monolithic account of how posterity is framed by each writer. My intention in these chapters has been to move away from the *fact* of the centrality of posterity for Romanticism towards an examination of the *consequences* of that fact for a reading of these poets' work – consequences which are complicated by the curious tautology of the fact that we are talking, in posterity, about the figures of posterity in their poetry. In each case, the culture of posterity finds its own particular forms and modes pertaining to what might be seen as an individual poetic career. And yet, in each case, these forms are traversed by a crisis in representation determined not least by the impossible demands of a cultural imperative of prescience and endless deferral. My suggestion is that the complexities and stubborn difficulties which constitute these poets' articulations of the culture of posterity are themselves sites of desire and fascination for future readers. Above all, my readings seek to convey some of that fascination by tracing the strange effects of posterity theory in these writers' work.

In chapter 4, I argue that Wordsworth's sense of posterity is above all a family affair. While Wordsworth is one of the central theorists of Romantic posterity, he is also intimately concerned with an alternative figuration of the trope: for Wordsworth, posterity, in its ideal form, also involves more conventional intergenerational survival. I seek to explore ways in which Wordsworth's sense of familial reproduction complicates his fascination with literary survival, and the way in which, finally, it produces a certain 'trembling' in and of that project. In the case of Coleridge (chapter 5), I have focused on the key element in the poet's reputation during the latter half of his life. I trace his concern with conversation, with that which cannot be maintained or retained in writing, and specifically with the phonetics, the *noise*, of talk. Hazlitt argues that Coleridge bartered posthumous recognition for the more immediate but necessarily ephemeral gratifications of direct conversational response, and in this chapter I try to see what happens when we take this judgement at face value. To this end, I examine the tensions involved in poetry which celebrates the momentary noise of talk within the terms of an overarching poetics of survival. It is with the second generation of Romantic poets, however, that we might hope to discern a more fully developed, more central and centred articulation of the culture of posterity. And yet here again there are particular divergencies and

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inflections to be registered. While we cannot ignore Keats's well-known proclamations about his desire to be 'among the English Poets' after his death, his true significance in the culture of posterity involves his self-production and subsequent reception as corpus and corpse, as a fetishised figure of neglect and posthumous life: after Chatterton, it is Keats's body, his *corpus*, that is to say, which most fully plays out the myth of the neglected poet recognised after his death, and in discussing Keats (chapter 6) I seek to suggest that the retrospective celebration of his poetic *prescience* in this regard is a necessary and indeed constitutive aspect of his afterlife. In the case of Shelley (chapter 7), I explore ways in which the poet's engagement with a future life, with life after death, is bound up with his convulsive or hysterical reaction to or vision of ghosts: for Shelley, living on involves a haunting of the future inextricable from the uncanny and from a theory of ghosts. Shelley's cult of posterity, that is to say, is also a ghost: his faith in the efficacy of a poetic afterlife cannot be disengaged from a belief in and fear of the spectral. In chapter 8, I suggest that Byron deconstructs the Romantic culture of posterity both by appealing to this construction of the 'self' of the poet and by ironising it in himself and others: for Byron, posterity both offers and withholds the redemption to which the poet appeals. I suggest that there is in Byron a crucial disturbance of representation which may be elaborated around a certain conception of rendering – a problematic of the gift and of future reception but one defined by or subject to a mimetic instability, a troubling of the relation of the literal to the figurative.

This book is particularly concerned with poets and poetry. The predicament of the early nineteenth-century novelist, dramatist or essayist requires a very different kind of analysis from that which is proposed here. Poetry, figured within the culture of literary, 'high' Romanticism as the primary vehicle for artistic survival, involves a particular kind of engagement with its audience, both actual and imagined, and I have attempted to trace certain configurations of this engagement in what follows. While a concern with posterity is certainly not limited to that part of written culture that we call poetry, I want to suggest that it is in poetry that this project is most clearly promulgated and sustained. To this end, much of this book engages in detailed readings of a limited number of poems. On the one hand, I focus on some of the most well-known, most canonical poems of the Romantic period – Wordsworth's 'Tintern Abbey' and Book Five of *The Prelude*, Coleridge's 'Conversation Poems' and 'The Ancient Mariner', Keats's Odes, Shelley's 'Ode to the West Wind', Byron's *Don Juan*. On the other hand, I have spent what

might look like an inordinate amount of time considering somewhat more marginal poems, or at least poems which have been more resistant to the critical machine in the posthumous lives of their authors – Wordsworth’s ‘Surprised by Joy’, Keats’s ‘This Mortal Body of a Thousand Days’, Byron’s ‘Churchill’s Grave’, as well as a series of poems by poets such as Helen Maria Williams, Felicia Hemans, Letitia Landon, who have only recently begun to receive sustained critical attention. Part of the impulse behind such a strategy is the desire not only to present new readings of canonical poems but also to refocus attention on poems which otherwise might look marginal to the concerns of Romantic poetry and poetics. This book, then, is also about Romanticism’s production of its own oppositional discourse. If, as I am suggesting, permanence or survival are crucial to that discourse, one of the ways in which poets engage with those topoi is through a consideration of the ephemeral. ‘Surprised by Joy’, ‘This Mortal Body of a Thousand Days’ and ‘Churchill’s Grave’ all, in their different ways, celebrate or commemorate the momentary, the ephemeral – a moment of ‘joy’ and its dissolution into the equally momentary ‘pang’ in Wordsworth’s poem; the ephemeral physicality, the impermanent somatic *presence* of the poet’s impermanent body in Keats’s poem; a moment of impossible reciprocation, an enactment of the impossible payment or gift of remembrance in Byron’s. This counter-discourse of the Romantic culture of poetry – articulated in the texts of the major, canonical poets and, rather differently, in the poetics of the ‘feminine’ which I explore in chapter 3 – has a crucial place in my argument, since it is in the space of internal conflict produced by the culture of posterity that we, posterity, find our proper place.



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PART I

## CHAPTER I

*Writing for the future*

It is a lamentable case that no Author's fame gets warm till his body gets cold.

(J.H. Reynolds to John Dovaston)

For something which cannot be known nor spoken of nor represented, death is the subject of an enormous amount of talk. Death has its own literary, artistic and musical forms – the elegy, dirge, threnody, monody and epitaph, the death march and the requiem, the death mask, the photograph; its own psychic states – mourning and melancholia, introjection and internalisation; its own celebration – funeral, wake, memorial service; its own clichés – *ars longer, vita brevis, memento mori*, ‘you only live once’, ‘life’s too short . . .’; its own euphemisms – some of them listed by Coleridge in a translation of the German ‘Sterben’: ‘to die, de cease, depart, depart this life, starve, breathe your last, expire, give up the ghost, kick up your heels, tip off, tip over the Perch’ (CN I. 350); its own social rituals – the burial service, letters of condolence, visits, mourning customs; its own wardrobe – shroud, armband, black tie, widow’s weeds; its own furniture and architecture – the urn, casket, coffin, the tomb, monument, grave and cenotaph; its own places – the hospital, hospice, funeral garden, cemetery, graveyard, crypt; its own crafts – the wreath, tombstone, funerary sculpture; its own legal forms – inquest, death certificate, post mortem or autopsy; its own experts – the coroner, pathologist, thanatologist, theosophist, medium, poet, undertaker, embalmer, priest, theologian.<sup>1</sup> Death has its own literary canon: Jeremy Taylor’s *Holy Dying* (1651), Sir Thomas Browne’s *Hydriotaphia* (1658), John Donne’s *Biathanatos* (c.1609), Edward Young’s *Night Thoughts* (1742–45), William Wordsworth’s three *Essays on Epitaphs* (1809–10), Thomas Lovell Beddoes’s *Death’s Jest Book* (1825–28), Tennyson’s *In Memoriam* (1850), Hardy’s poems of 1912–13, Joyce’s ‘The Dead’ (1914), the ‘Hades’ episode from *Ulysses* (1922) and *Finnegans Wake* (1939), and more or less