

ROMANTIC POETS
AND THE
CULTURE OF POSTERITY

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Contents

<i>Acknowledgements</i>	page x
<i>List of abbreviations</i>	xii
Introduction	i
PART I	9
1 Writing for the future	11
2 The Romantic culture of posterity	38
3 Engendering posterity	65
PART II	93
4 Wordsworth's survival	95
5 Coleridge's conversation	116
6 Keats's prescience	139
7 Shelley's ghosts	158
8 Byron's success	179
Afterword	200
<i>Notes</i>	203
<i>Index</i>	261

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.¹ 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

everything that Samuel Beckett ever wrote. And death has its philosophical texts, a canon where the proliferation of recent studies – Ernest Becker’s *The Denial of Death* (1973), Antony Flew’s *The Logic of Mortality* (1987), Derrida’s *The Gift of Death* (1992) and *Aporias* (1993), Gillian Rose’s *Mourning Becomes the Law* (1996) – shouldn’t blind us to earlier works such as Freud’s *Beyond the Pleasure Principle* (1920), nor indeed to a tradition that goes back at least as far as Plato’s *Phaedo* (c.385 BC). Finally, death has its own texts of literary and cultural criticism, including, most recently, Garrett Stewart’s *Death Sentences* (1984), Michael Wheeler’s *Death and the Future Life in Victorian Literature and Theology* (1990), Elisabeth Bronfen’s *Over Her Dead Body: Death, Femininity and the Aesthetic* (1992), Michael Millgate’s *Testamentary Acts* (1992), Christopher Ricks’s *Beckett’s Dying Words* (1992), Jahan Ramazani’s *The Poetry of Mourning* (1994), Esther Schor’s *Bearing the Dead* (1994), Jonathan Dollimore’s *Death, Desire and Loss in Western Culture* (1998). The present book is intended as a contribution to this cacophony of voices talking, incessantly, about death. But it is also, as are many of these voices, about the other side of death, about forms of the afterlife – specifically that which I term ‘living on’, the textual life after death.

This book concerns just one aspect of the discourse of death, then: secular life-after-death. With the word ‘secular’ I seek to delimit my book to a particular tradition, one which is unable to find consolation or redemption in the thought of a non-human, non-physical, non-earthly future; and I seek to bring to the fore Leo Braudy’s suggestion that in secular society ‘fame and the approval of posterity replace belief in an afterlife’.² The word ‘secular’ comes from the Latin *saeculum*, meaning ‘generation, age, the world’. On the one hand, the word denotes that which pertains to the world (*OED* adjective 3a: ‘Of or belonging to the present or visible world as distinguished from the eternal or spiritual world’), while on the other hand it denotes that which will last ‘an age’ or a very long time (adjective 6: ‘Living or lasting for an age or ages’). I attempt to investigate this double sense of the secular: that which is concerned both with this world, now, for a lifetime, and that which is concerned with this world in the future, for lives after life. Robert Southey brings out the duplicity of the secular in one of his characteristically upbeat comments: ‘if I cannot be a great man in the way of the world this generation – why I will be a very great one after my own in the next, & all that are to come in *secula seculorum*’.³ In this sense, the present book is concerned with remains, with what is left on our leaving, what is left of us when we leave. It concerns the proleptic future-anterior sense that

we will have left something, that, in Wallace Stevens's words, 'with our bones / We left much more, left what still is / The look of things, left what we felt // At what we saw'.⁴ This stilled perception, this leaving, always spoken in the future, from the future, of the past, involves a dissolution or disturbance of the semantic force of both 'leave' and 'remain', their antithetical awkwardness. In particular, this book is about that particular form of leaving or remains that might be called 'literature after life', a specific mode of writing, or a specific recognition in writing of the nature of writing in general. Literature after life, or what I have elsewhere termed the 'posthumous life of writing', is writing which, in various ways, inscribes itself as a manual practice occurring, necessarily, in a time after its own, in after years, after the death of the writer.⁵ And this thanatological event of inscription concerns such questions as (auto-)biography, or more precisely, 'autobiothanatographical writing'⁶ as well as questions of posterity or living on.

Living on, life-after-death, posthumous life as a form of textual continuation of personal identity is not, of course, restricted to art or literature. Indeed, according to certain thinkers in the secular tradition, the projection of one's self, one's work or one's life into a future beyond death is, in fact, the very definition of the human. In his *Ethics* (1926), for example, Nicolai Hartmann comments on 'The great gift of foresight and pre-determination (teleology), which is peculiar to man' and argues that 'It inheres in the nature of all effort that looks to an objective value, to go on beyond the life and enterprise of the individual, into a future which he no longer can enjoy. It is not only the fate but is also the pride of a creative mind and is inseparable from his task, that his work survives him, and therefore passes from him to others, in whose life he has no part'.⁷ The difficulty or paradox contained within this argument – one which, I shall suggest, amounts to a founding problematic of Romantic discourse – involves the question of personal identity. Recent work in what might be called the 'ethics of the future' and, in particular, in that field of analytical philosophy concerned with environmental ethics, is illuminating in this regard. Ernest Partridge, for example, argues that 'a concern for future others' is part of the fundamental nature of being human as such, so that someone without such a concern is both lacking in (human) moral sense, and 'seriously impoverishing his life'. The need is, according to Partridge, part of a more general feature of humanity that he calls 'self transcendence', the 'basic need' to 'seek to further, the well-being, preservation, and endurance of communities, locations, causes, artifacts, institutions, ideals and so on, that are outside

themselves'.⁸ 'Self transcendence' as a primary motive for caring for as well as caring about the future, however, seems to presuppose an unproblematic dissolution of the self, of self-interest and of personal identity in relation to a posthumous life. Against this, Avner de-Shalit argues that in fact personal identity 'extends into the future, including those times subsequent to one's death'.⁹ De-Shalit redefines the 'unity of the self' in terms of a certain 'continuity' constituted by 'relations between my future selves and my present self, in that the future represents the implementation of present (or past) intentions'. In this case, de-Shalit continues, 'there is no reason why, when the body stops functioning, further future events should not count as implementations of present intentions'. In other words, 'part of one's personal identity during one's life is the expectation of the fate of one's acts and ideas after one's death'.¹⁰ This discussion in environmental ethics, then, suggests an idea of posterity as a mode which encompasses both self-perpetuation and self-annulment. In some ways such arguments echo those of a nineteenth-century writer such as William Hazlitt who, in his early philosophical work *An Essay on the Principles of Human Action* (1805), declares that 'It is only from the interest excited in him by future objects that man becomes a moral agent', but at the same time tries to argue for man's natural disinterestedness by suggesting that this future self is fundamentally different from the past or present self. Indeed, in a somewhat puzzling manoeuvre, Hazlitt argues that the future self is structurally similar to the selves of others: 'The imagination, by means of which alone I can anticipate future objects, or be interested in them, must carry me out of myself into the feelings of others by one and the same process by which I am thrown forward as it were into my future being' (*Works* 1.1–2). What Hazlitt adds to the discussion of Partridge, de-Shalit and other twentieth-century thinkers, is a sense of the dissolution of subjectivity inherent in this futuring of the self, the paradox, implicit in any attempt to retain the self after the dissolution of death, that any such survival can only be predicated on the loss of self.

Zygmunt Bauman explores the cultural importance of a futuring of personal identity to a time beyond death in *Mortality, Immortality and Other Life Strategies* (1992). Bauman argues that the fact of human mortality itself *produces* culture, that culture in general is a response to the possibility, or necessity, of dying. Culture, in this respect, fends off death, denies it: 'Since the discovery of death (and the state of having discovered death is the defining, and distinctive, feature of humanity) human societies have kept designing elaborate subterfuges, hoping that they would be

allowed to forget about the scandal'.¹¹ Culture is a direct result of the knowledge of death, a kind of distraction from that knowledge. Without death, or without knowledge of death, there would be no culture. Bauman appeals to Schopenhauer's dictum that all religious and philosophical systems are 'primarily an antidote to the certainty of death which reflecting reason produces from its own resources'.¹² Culture, then, as an antidote to death, as a redemptive form of amnesia: 'There would probably be no culture were humans unaware of their mortality', comments Bauman, 'culture is an elaborate counter-mnemotechnic device to forget what they are aware of. Culture would be useless if not for the devouring need of forgetting; there would be no transcending were there nothing to be transcended'.¹³ It no doubt supports Bauman's argument that, employing a rather different kind of vocabulary, Cicero presented much the same case as long ago as the first century AD in his defence of the poet Archias in *Pro Archia Poeta* (AD 62): 'If the soul were haunted by no presage of futurity', urges Cicero, 'if the scope of her imaginings were bounded by the limits set to human existence, surely never then would she break herself by bitter toil, rack herself by sleepless solicitude, or struggle so often for very life itself'. 'But', he continues, 'deep in every noble heart dwells a power which . . . bids us see to it that the remembrance of our names should not pass away with life, but should endure coeval with all the ages of the future'.¹⁴ A similar point is made by Francis Bacon in *The Advancement of Learning* (1605): 'Let us conclude with the dignity and excellency of knowledge and learning in that whereunto man's nature doth most aspire; which is immortality or continuance; for to this tendeth generation, and raising of houses and families; to this tend buildings, foundations, and monuments; to this tendeth the desire of memory, fame, and celebration; and in effect, the strength of all other human desires'.¹⁵ And in the early twentieth century the argument is produced in a relatively neglected work by the psychoanalyst Otto Rank, *Art and Artist* (1932), where this generalised human impulse becomes a specialised function of the aesthetic, of Art. Rank figures the urge towards immortality as the primary impulse of certain kinds of creativity: it is the 'individual *urge to eternalization* of the personality, which motivates artistic production', he declares.¹⁶ Indeed, for Rank, this 'urge' is '*inherent in the art-form itself*, in fact its essence', and 'the impulse to create productively is explicable only by the conception of immortality' (pp. 11, 47). The 'redeeming power of art' inheres in its ability to give 'concrete existence' to the idea of the soul (p. 13). For the 'modern' artist, the work is an attempt to escape the transience of

experience: 'the creative impulse' arises from the artist's 'tendency to immortalize himself' and, as such, is an escape from 'transient experience' which 'eats up his ego'. The artist gives 'shape' to experience and thereby turns 'ephemeral life into personal immortality' (pp. 38, 39). According to Rank, then, the artist has an ambivalent relationship with his own work – one which explains, for example, 'writer's block' – since the 'totality-tendency' of artistic creation involves the artist's 'sacrifices' of himself for his work. To 'eternalize' oneself in the work of art is also, paradoxically, to risk death, annihilation: 'Not only . . . has the completed work of art the value of an eternity symbol, but the particular creation process, if it involves an exhaustive output, is, by the same token, a symbol of death, so that the artist is both driven on by the impulse to eternalization and checked by the fear of death' (p. 386).

In this book I attempt to historicise the idea of poetic survival by showing how, during the Romantic period, those effects of amnesia, distortion or catachresis that we call culture themselves begin to articulate the possibility of death as the precondition for certain forms of writing known as 'literature'. I suggest that literature after life – in particular in the form of poetry – is formulated and articulated most intensively at a particular historical moment – the end of the eighteenth and the beginning of the nineteenth century. If Cicero, Bauman and Schopenhauer are right in saying that the recognition of death ultimately determines all culture, that culture is a distorting reflection on the certainty of our own death, an amnesic response to death, then the concern with immortality that we find in Romantic and post-Romantic poetry will not, in any decisive sense, be new or original. What *is* new, however, is the specific formulation and articulation of this desire in Romantic writing. To put it simply, if neoclassicism may be said to involve the invention of the (English, literary) canon as a category of dead writers, Romanticism involves the imaginative insertion of the *living* writer into that canonical cadre: for Romanticism, as defined in this book, the function of writing is to achieve – in the sublime and impossible moment of inscription – immortality, posthumous life, life after death. The distinctiveness of this formulation for Romantic writing, I will suggest, is evinced simply by the sheer weight of concentration on the topic in critical writing of the period, its centrality in theoretical accounts of poetry. But it is also possible to discern four necessary conditions in the formulation of Romantic posterity which allow us to conceive of its particular character and its distance from earlier articulations of the desire for immortality:

- (1) Romantic posterity involves the text-based survival of the self that writes;
- (2) contemporary neglect is the necessary but not sufficient condition for posthumous survival;
- (3) living on, survival in posterity, amounts to an adequate compensation for, or redemptive supplement of, life itself;
- (4) posterity is constitutive, in the sense that it not only redeems or functions as a substitute for the poet's life but is finally the condition of the possibility of the identity of the poet.

Earlier expressions of the desire for immortality often include a number of these features,¹⁷ and all four features are occasionally to be found in earlier writing, while, on the other hand, each of these features are contested from within Romanticism itself. In the Romantic period, however, a consensus develops regarding the nature of poetry centred around textual survival, contemporary neglect, and the redemptive possibilities of a posthumous life.

Since the early nineteenth century, then, poetics has been dominated by a concern with posthumous reception. The concern is both commonplace and international. 'To whom does the poet speak?', asks Osip Mandelstam in an essay from 1913, and answers by quoting a poem by Evgeny Abramovich Baratynsky: 'So will I find a reader in posterity'.¹⁸ 'Poetry as a whole', Mandelstam remarks, 'is always directed at a more or less distant, unknown addressee, in whose existence the poet may not doubt without doubting himself'.¹⁹ Similarly, Robinson Jeffers declares that 'great poetry is pointed at the future' and that the poet 'intends to be understood a thousand years from now . . . let him not be distracted by the present; his business is with the future'.²⁰ Known and unknown, present and absent, the poet's addressee, his or her reader, is both crucial to the modern poet and vitally displaced to an uncertain future. The Romantic culture of posterity, in this sense, is determined by what Antoine Compagnon has called a 'pathos of the future'.²¹ The kind of audience figured by Mandelstam, Jeffers and others is first fully theorised in the early nineteenth century: from now on the audience is displaced to an unknown future. This, to put it simply (and, for the Romantics, anachronistically), is the ideology of the *avant-garde*.²²

It is my argument, then, that when we talk about 'Romanticism' we are talking, not least, about a certain kind of belief in life after death. One way of meeting the challenge of death – the challenge to one's sense of identity and meaning – is to write for an endlessly deferred reception. Writing is, as such, a redemptive act. The present book is

concerned with the remarkable predominance of a theory of writing which involves the possibility that a future reception of poetry will atone not only for the poet's sense of neglect, but for his or her life itself. We are concerned with what Leo Bersani has called 'the culture of redemption'.²³ Bersani and Ulysse Dutoit use this phrase to indicate and indict art of the late nineteenth and the twentieth centuries which 'serve[s] the complacency of a culture that expects art to reinforce its moral and epistemological authority'.²⁴ As Bersani comments, a 'genealogy of the culture of redemption' would involve a study of 'the relation of modern ideas of art as redemptive to earlier notions of art as preserving otherwise perishable experience'.²⁵ My concern is with those forms of secular redemption produced by the idea that the poet and his or her poetry or experience might be preserved in writing.

Romantic poetic theory, then, figures poetry as enabling redemptive commemoration. The poet lives on by reading and by intertextual inscription in future texts. Just as she or he resuscitates the work of dead poets by allusion, reference, imitation, plagiarism, pastiche, parody, repetition or 'misreading', so his or her work will be inscribed in the work of future writers. Thus Wordsworth can declare in 'Michael' that his poem is for 'youthful Poets' who will constitute his 'second self when I am gone' (lines 38–9).²⁶ In this sense, the Romantic theory of posterity involves what Harold Bloom calls the 'anxiety of influence' and what W. Jackson Bate calls the 'burden of the past':²⁷ in as much as we accept such accounts of influence, the Romantic culture of posterity would involve a refining and an intensification of such desires and such anxieties. In this respect, my book might be seen as a complement to such work on the writer's relation to the past – a relation which is certainly enriched by his or her relation with the future. When Keats says that life for Milton would be death to him (*LJK* II.212), such a statement might be re-read, in the context of the Romantic culture of posterity, as indicating as much a *desire* as an anxiety of influence, the desire for the poetry of Milton to 'live' in his own work, for his writing to take on the properties of such a precursor – the desire, that is, for death. More generally, though, this culture figures the poet living on in the minds or thoughts of readers, literally inhabiting the minds of others, not as a memory of the dead in the survivor, but as the poet's own thoughts, his or her words reinscribed in the readerly mind, rethought. Hazlitt makes the point in an evocative sentence from *Spirit of the Age* (1825), which draws on Ben Jonson's sense of Shakespeare as a 'monument without a tomb': 'The poet's cemetery is the human mind, in which he sows the seeds of never-ending thought – his monument is to be found in his works' (*Works* XI.78).

In this sense, individual identity is transferred or metamorphosed into language, becomes language, which is then dispersed or disseminated in the minds of others. Paradoxically, this thought leads to the possibility that the poet's individual identity *while alive* is more a matter of writing, of language, than of living: Keats figures the poet as a 'camelion' and argues that the poet is the most 'unpoetical' of creatures since he has no identity (*LJK* 1.387); Wordsworth writes his life into poetry, composes himself, in *The Prelude*, as a prelude to writing his great but never written epic *The Recluse*; Shelley figures the effect of poetry as a kind of haunting power and proceeds to ghost-write his own life, to ghost himself, in poems like *Alastor*, *Adonais* and *The Triumph of Life*; Byron makes of his life an image or series of images for public consumption.²⁸ Life itself is constituted as autobiography – what we might call autoscription – in its widest sense. Autoscription does not need to be 'about' the poet's life in the way that an autobiography is, because the life of the poet is inscribed in poetry, the life in the writing. At the end of his essay 'On the Feeling of Immortality in Youth' (1827), Hazlitt poignantly describes those dead who must rely on an ever-dwindling stock of survivors' memories (*Works* xvii.189–99). By contrast, the Romantic and post-Romantic poet is able, forever, to live on, autoscriptively, inhabiting the minds of others. Rather than autobiographical in any conventional sense, however, this autoscriptive afterlife is, finally, anonymous, impersonal. The notorious Romantic emphasis on the self is a fiction of autoscription, a fiction of personhood constructed for public consumption, for life after death. If, as Harold Bloom has proposed, English Romantic Poetry amounts in some respects to footnotes to Milton, Romantic poetics may be said to amount to a belated transformation of Milton's argument in *Areopagitica*, that 'books . . . contain a potency of life in them to be as active as that soul whose progeny they are', that they 'preserve as in a vial the purest efficacy and extraction of that living intellect that bred them', and that 'a good book is the precious life blood of a master spirit, imbalm'd and treasur'd up on purpose to a life beyond life'.²⁹ It was for the Romantics to adopt this suggestive figuration of the effect of books and to transform the very institution of literature under its rubric – to *invent* literature, we might say – such that literature becomes a paradoxical strategy of self-preservation and, at the same time, self-dissolution – the very being of the poet inscribed in text, inscribed *as* text, in a life beyond life.

In recent years, critics and historians have explored a general shift in the relationship between poets and their readers and audiences in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries. A number of factors provide

the context for a rethinking of the nature of poetry audiences at this time: technological developments in the print industry allowed for a remarkable expansion in the market for books while the spread in literacy resulting from widening opportunities for education produced a thirst for cheap and widely disseminated printed texts. More generally, historians have recognised that the commodification of social and cultural production during the eighteenth century amounts to what Neil McKendrick has called a 'consumer revolution'.³⁰ Controversies concerning literary property centring on debates over copyright law also indicate crucial changes in author–publisher and author–public relations.³¹ As a response to these forces and to changing conditions of patronage and an increasing professionalisation and commercialisation of writing, the role of the poet may be understood to have been transformed.³² The revolutionary conditions of poetic production at the beginning of the nineteenth century were most ably exploited by Byron and his publisher, who managed to dispose of 10,000 copies of *The Corsair* on the day of publication on 1 February 1814, and more than a million copies of *Don Juan* overall.³³ As Jerome Christensen argues in his study of the extended media-event which was 'Byronism', 'The Wordsworthian aspiration to create the taste by which one is to be appreciated had become the practical effect of the publishing machine'.³⁴ But what Christensen refers to as the period's 'tremendous elasticity of demand' for poetry,³⁵ also results, by contrast, in disappointing sales for poets such as Shelley, who estimated the total readership for *Prometheus Unbound* to be only five or six, and Wordsworth who, at least until about 1820 and arguably throughout his life, failed to reach a wide audience.³⁶ The case of Keats is exemplary. His 1817 volume was a failure to the extent that his publishers declared that 'We regret that [Keats] ever requested us to publish his book'.³⁷ *Endymion* (1818) was remaindered and in February 1821 Taylor and Hessey, his second publishing firm, reported having lost £110 on it.³⁸ Despite the fact that 160 copies of Keats's 1820 volume were bought by subscription prior to publication (so that, as Richard Woodhouse can comment wryly, 'the bard's works begin to get in request'), his publishers also report that it made a loss of £100,³⁹ and Taylor commented to John Clare in August 1820 that 'We have had some trouble to get through 500 copies of [Keats's] work', while still in March 1822, he tells Clare that 'Of Keats's poems there have never yet been 500 sold'.⁴⁰ Even in 1835 Taylor writes to Clare that he 'should like to print a complete Edition of Keats's Poems' but that 'the world cares nothing for him – I fear that even 250 copies would not sell'.⁴¹ For such poets, developments in readership,

print-technology and the commodification of culture result in what was seen as the disintegration of a coherent and sympathetic audience. The ramifications of this disintegration during the eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries are such that Bertrand Bronson can comment that it is 'one of the most far-reaching influences of modern times in our Western civilization' – by contrast with an earlier age in which the 'reading public of Milton, Cowley, Waller, Dryden, Prior – and even, to a degree . . . of Pope himself – was probably roughly commensurate with their social world as a whole'.⁴² In the 1802 Preface to the *Lyrical Ballads*, Wordsworth asks of the poet 'To whom does he address himself?' (*Prose* 1.138), a question to which he gives no proper answer. This is the predicament of what Lyotard calls 'modernity', a situation in which the writer 'no longer knows for whom he writes'.⁴³ The biographies, letters, poems, essays and other records of Wordsworth, Coleridge, Keats, Shelley and, of course, Byron suggest ways in which they all attempted to cash in on the vast opportunities offered by the market for poetry: indeed, the democratisation of poetry reading becomes a pivotal concern in their poetics. At the same time, however, what Freud would call the 'reaction formation' to their neglect in an appeal to a future reception, and the possibility that a true understanding of these poets' work would only occur after their death – once the taste has been created by which they might be appreciated – becomes an increasingly important strategy in Romantic poetry and poetics. These are the contexts within which the cult and culture of Romantic posterity, and its theory of the contemporary neglect and posthumous recognition of the poet, are generated.

The culture of posterity is not only a crucial dimension in the production and reception of Romantic poetry, then; it is also a central concern in Romantic literary theory. In the most well-known texts of English Romantic poetics, the traditional distinction is repeatedly emphasised between two different kinds of poetic reception: an immediate and popular applause on the one hand and an initial rejection of the artwork followed by more lasting and more worthwhile appreciation on the other.⁴⁴ William Hazlitt begins his lecture 'On the Living Poets', for example, by establishing the distinction between fame and popularity, whereby fame is 'the recompense not of the living, but of the dead' (*Works* v. 143); by his account, the writings of genius can only be recognised as such after life. Such a distinction is both an echo of, and is echoed by, many similar pronouncements. As we shall see in chapter 2, Coleridge insists on the distinction between eternal 'fame' and contemporary 'reputation'; in his letters, Keats talks about being 'among the

English Poets' after his death and comments on the fact that England produces many great writers *because* it unfailingly neglects them during their lifetime (*LJK* 1.394, 115); Shelley formulates a theory of the poet as 'unacknowledged legislator' and argues in his *Defence of Poetry* that 'no living poet ever arrived at the fulness of his fame' (*SPP* 486); J.H. Reynolds comments that 'fame and popularity are as different as night and day';⁴⁵ and in his *Specimens of the Later English Poets* (1807) Southey comments that 'good' poets write 'for posterity' and that fame 'is of slow growth' and 'like the Hebrew language' has 'no present tense', while popularity 'has no future one'.⁴⁶ Such formulations of contemporary neglect followed by posthumous recognition can be found in countless less well-known works such as Isaac D'Israeli's *The Literary Character* (1818), William Henry Ireland's *Neglected Genius: A Poem* (1812), T.N. Talfourd's *An Attempt to Estimate the Poetical Talent of the Present Age* (1815), Arthur Hallam's 1831 review of Tennyson's poems, Richard Henry Horne's *Exposition of the False Medium and Barriers Excluding Men of Genius from the Public* (1833), as well as in common responses to such figures as Otway, Chatterton, Burns, Henry Kirke White, and others – writers who come to be respected during the period just in so much as they are figured as having been unjustly neglected during their lifetime, 'mute inglorious Miltons', as that crucial central eighteenth-century celebration of neglect, Gray's 'Elegy', puts it. It is no coincidence that Byron opens his attack on contemporary poetry and poetics in *Don Juan* with a 'Dedication' which homes in on what he sees as poets' self-serving claims on future recognition: 'He that reserves his laurels for posterity / (Who does not often claim the bright reversion?) / Has generally no great crop to spare it, he / Being only injured by his own assertion' (*CW* v. 5–6).⁴⁷ The most concentrated and influential account of the inescapable obscurity of the living genius is perhaps that of Wordsworth in his 1815 'Essay, Supplementary to the Preface', where, in order to explain his own disappointing reception over the previous twenty years, he presents a brief reception history of English Poetry showing that neglect during their lifetime has always been the fate of poets of genius. Every original writer, Wordsworth famously declares, 'has had the task of *creating* the taste by which he is to be enjoyed' (*Prose* III.80).⁴⁸

The technological and cultural transformations of the book trade at the beginning of the nineteenth century, then, may be understood to provide the context for the reinvention of posterity as the crucial determinant in Romantic conceptions of audience. But this is not to deny that the appeal to posterity is a conventional poetic topos, since there is evi-

dence to suggest that the tradition of Western poetry has always been bound up with a certain survivalism. In his ‘Epilogue’ to *Metamorphoses*, for example, Ovid declares that ‘not the wrath of Jove, nor fire nor sword / Nor the devouring ages can destroy’ his work; and that after his death he will ‘be borne, / The finer part of me, above the stars, / Immortal, and my name shall never die’; and in the *Amores* he declares ‘so I, / When the last flame devouring me has gone, / Shall still survive and all that’s best live on’.⁴⁹ Similarly, Horace famously asserts poetic immortality in the last of his odes – ‘*non omnis moriar*’⁵⁰ – and Heraclitus tells us that ‘The best choose one thing in exchange for all, everflowing fame among mortals’.⁵¹ ‘Writing so as not to die’, comments Foucault, glossing Blanchot, ‘is a task undoubtedly as old as the word’.⁵² In *The Western Canon*, Harold Bloom makes clear the connection between canonicity and textual immortality: ‘A poem, novel, or play acquires all of humanity’s disorders, including the fear of mortality, which in the art of literature is transmuted into the quest to be canonical, to join communal or societal memory’.⁵³ Such a fiction of future response receives extensive elaboration in the Renaissance: as Raymond Himelick comments, ‘the literary fame convention was in the Elizabethan air’.⁵⁴ While the Romantic figure of posterity owes much to these traditions, and while such historical developments are necessarily mobile and their limits often transgressed, at the same time it is possible to discern a cultural shift by the beginning of the nineteenth century. One aspect of this shift in emphasis involves the way that the fiction or figure of immortality for the hero or the subject of the poem is at some point transferred to or infects the celebration – indeed the celebrator – itself. Harold Bloom points to the mid-eighteenth century, in particular to the odes of William Collins, as inaugurating in English a secular (literary) canon and, in consequence, a revolutionary theory of posterity.⁵⁵ In other words, despite its obsessive focus on the immortality of both the young man and his own writing, it is possible to conceive of such texts as Shakespeare’s sonnets as producing a significantly different sense of posterity from that of writers in the Romantic period for whom the literary convention that the subject of the verse will survive develops into the convention that the subject who writes will. But I want to suggest that the refiguration of posterity at the end of the eighteenth century is more general than this and concerns the very idea of Literature itself – its social function, its compositional impulse and its institutional status. While Socrates and Cicero produce arguments for the importance of certain kinds of personal survival, and while writers from Horace to Shakespeare elaborate the trope

of literary survival in their poems, the Romantic period put a crucial spin on the idea of textual immortality by linking it fundamentally to the very structure of writing, of literary composition, itself. The theory of poetic production in the Romantic period evolves into a theory of posthumous survival.

In order to suggest the specificity of Romantic posterity it is worth spending a little time contemplating the nature of the Renaissance concern with immortality in poetry. Robert Herrick wittily sums up the Renaissance sense of posterity in his laconic six-line 'Poetry Perpetuates the Poet' (1648):

Here I my selfe might likewise die,
And utterly forgotten lye,
But that eternall Poetrie
Repullulation gives me here
Unto the thirtieth thousand yeere,
When all now dead shall re-appear.⁵⁶

What the poet is given is a 'repullulation', a kind of eternal re-budding, something less than a life, perhaps, but more than death. Not only does the poet welcome such a fate with a certain lack of enthusiasm, but writing as an Anglican priest within the tradition of Christian theology, he also suggests that the 'immortality' of poetry will eventually be superseded by resurrection.⁵⁷ Another, rather more extended seventeenth-century consideration of posterity appears in William Davenant's *Gondibert* (1650). In his 'Author's Preface', Davenant asks 'why I have taken so much paines to become an Author', and answers the question by declaring that 'Men are chiefly provok'd to the toyle of compiling Bookes, by love of Fame, and often by officiousnesse of Conscience'.⁵⁸ Aligning himself with those who write for fame, Davenant then defines fame: 'Fame being (when belonging to the Living) that which is more gravely call'd, a steady and necessary reputation', while 'Tis of the Dead a musicall glory, in which God, the author of excellent goodnesse, vouchsafes to take a continuall share'.⁵⁹ In addition to this double importance of fame, Davenant also argues for its moral effect on future generations, as at least as significant as its redemptive function for the living: 'Fame is to our Sonnes a solid Inheritance, and not unusefull to remote Posterity; and to our Reason, tis the first, though but a little taste of Eternity'.⁶⁰ For Davenant, then, contemporary fame and posthumous reputation go hand in hand: one is the consequence of the other. While it is not necessary to be dead to achieve proper recognition, posthumous fame is a subdivision of a religious afterlife. In *Gondibert* itself, Davenant

opens canto three, book three with an apostrophe to the reader 'who dost live, when I have long been dead' and imagines, rather than glory to himself, the morally beneficial effects of his 'Story':

Thus when by knowing me, thou know'st to whom
Love owes his Eies, who has too long been blinde;
Then in the Temple leave my Bodies Tomb,
To seeke this Book, the Mon'ment of my Mind. (Stanza 11)

While there is a self-aggrandising sense of the monumentalisation of the writer here, it is also self-abnegating ('leave my Bodies Tomb') and clearly subordinated to the ethical effects of the poet's work. Davenant is expressing what may be the universal desire to survive, but his survival is conventionally conceived as a memorialisation of the 'Mon'ment' of his 'mind', his thoughts and ideas, in a future in which *he* is absent. And the significance of any such survival inheres in what that mind can do for a future age, rather than what that future age can do for the mind. Similarly, in a 'Postscript to the Reader', written in prison awaiting trial for treason and possible execution, Davenant justifies his poem written 'in an unseasonable time' by arguing that 'he who writes an *Heroick Poem*, leaves an Estate entayl'd; and he gives a greater Gift to Posterity, then to the Present Age'.⁶¹ again, the value of writing is as a 'gift' that is given to future generations as much as the 'honour' that it imposes on the writer. Davenant's insistence on the significance of posterity, then, is also an insistence both on the continuity of contemporary and future response and on the radical absence of the poet in this future.

Another, somewhat earlier, instance of an explicit engagement with posterity is Samuel Daniel's *Musophilus* (1599). In this poem, Philocosmos quizzes Musophilus on his attempt to 'attain that idle smoake of Praise' by writing at a time when 'this busie world cannot attend / Th'untimely Musicke of neglected layes' (lines 9–11). Replying that if his 'unseasonable Song' comes 'out of time, that fault is of the Time' (lines 21–2), Musophilus begins his defence by pointing to the posthumous life of writing:

And give our labours yet this poore delight,
That when our daies doe end, they are not done:
And though we die, we shall not perish quite,
But live two lives, where others have but one. (lines 39–42)

In many ways, such a declaration would seem to prefigure the Romantic culture of posterity. And yet even here, such concerns can be discriminated from those of the early nineteenth century. It is clear to

Musophilus that his 'Arte' can 'never stand my life in steede' (line 17) and, as Raymond Himelick comments, Daniel's sense of immortality involves the desire to 'salvage something out of mutability and transience, not to disregard the world they are part of'.⁶² Such an interest in poetic immortality is similarly important in, for example, the poetry of John Donne – which, as Robert Watson has recently shown, 'makes extensive and ingenious use of . . . the idea that the author will survive through his writings'⁶³ – and in Milton's declaration in 'Lycidas' that 'Fame is the spur' and that 'Fame is no plant that grows on mortal soil' (lines 70, 78). But such examples are bound up with a religious conception of the afterlife which would necessarily rebuke secular concerns with fame, reputation and earthly survival. Milton's 'Lycidas' is exemplary in this respect. Its most famous lines present an influential expression of the Renaissance sense of posthumous fame:

Fame is the spur that the clear spirit doth raise
 (That last infirmity of noble mind)
 To scorn delights, and live laborious days;
 But the fair guerdon when we hope to find,
 And think to burst out into sudden blaze,
 Comes the blind Fury with th'abhorred shears,
 And slits the thin-spun life. But not the praise,
 Phoebus replied, and touched my trembling ears;
 Fame is no plant that grows on mortal soil,
 Nor in the glistening foil
 Set off to the world, nor in broad rumour lies,
 But lives and spreads aloft by those pure eyes,
 And perfect witness of all-judging Jove;
 As he pronounces lastly on each deed,
 Of so much fame in heaven expect thy meed.⁶⁴

With the 'guerdon' of fame, the 'sudden blaze' of public acceptance, comes death, the 'abhorred shears' which 'slits the thin-spun life': the poet cannot hope to achieve true fame except in the grave. But this crucial refiguration of the Romantic culture of posterity is also bound up with a religious conception of the afterlife – articulated in references to the paganism of the 'all-judging Jove' and the Christian mythology of 'heaven'. While the residual religiosity of a Wordsworth or Coleridge and, rather differently, a Shelley or Keats, might lead us to expect that Romanticism is often similarly bound up with a metaphysical afterlife of the soul, the Romantic culture of posterity that I explore in the present book is, on the whole, quite separate from any such belief-system. Moreover, Milton's seminal expression of the 'last infirmity of noble

mind' fails to figure this afterlife as constitutive of the compositional act: composition for Milton does not, as I am suggesting it does for the Romantics, allow for the writer's production of authorial identity through his engagement with a future audience. The limitations of the seventeenth-century engagement with posterity are clearly expressed in a provocative formulation of textual immortality in Bacon's *The Advancement of Learning*: 'The images of men's wits and knowledges remains in books', he comments, 'exempted from the wrong of time and capable of perpetual renovation. Neither are they fitly to be called images, because they generate still, and cast their seeds in the minds of others, provoking and causing infinite actions and opinions in succeeding ages'.⁶⁵ While they are more than images, these remains of authors are less than what will be expected from writers in the nineteenth century.

Milton's celebrated – and, in the Romantic period, often quoted – declaration that he writes for a 'fit audience . . . though few'⁶⁶ offers another perspective on such matters. The claim is not, as it would be 150 years later, accompanied by arguments for the necessary contemporary neglect of the poet nor for the deferral of reception. In fact, it is nineteenth-century (mis)readings of Milton's declaration which romanticise the poet as neglected: Isaac D'Israeli, for example, elaborating the Biblical adage concerning the prophet's neglect in his own country, asserts in *Quarrels of Authors* (1814), that 'while in his own day, Foreigners, who usually anticipate posterity, enquired after MILTON, it is known how utterly disregarded he was'.⁶⁷ Milton's sense of the limitations of his own audience, however, may be conceived rather differently: his claim may be understood to be *celebrating* the exclusivity of his audience, an audience made up of what J.W. Saunders calls the 'intellectual *élites* of Europe'.⁶⁸ Interestingly, as John Lyon argues in an essay on the test of time in the Renaissance, elegies written in commemoration of Donne imply that the poet's *non*-survival is a 'condition of his greatness': Donne, a poet who had 'no concern for literary posterity' and whose contemporaries 'expressly denied such a possibility' is, Lyon suggests, 'misrepresented by our persistence in thinking in such terms'.⁶⁹ Such misrepresentations, I suggest, and more generally the imposition of the culture of posterity back onto the seventeenth century, are a function, not least, of the Romantic rewriting of literary history. It is from the Romantics that we learn to value as a mark of our own modernity our appreciation of poets from earlier times for what those earlier times cannot appreciate.

Perhaps the only writer from this period to come close to a later, Romantic sense of posterity is Ben Jonson, obsessed as he is both by the vicissitudes of his own reception and by the possibility of the immortality bestowed by poetry. Ian Donaldson comments that Jonson ‘placed great faith in the judgement of posterity’, and that ‘however spurned or neglected his works might be in his own age, he never ceased to believe that their true value would be recognised in the years to come’.⁷⁰ (One of the ironies of this desire, Donaldson suggests, is that while posterity eternalised and universalised Shakespeare, a century or two after his death Jonson was seen as transitory, ephemeral – a poet of his age but *not* for all time.) But as Donaldson and other critics argue, Jonson’s relation with his audience was highly idiosyncratic and unrepresentative of the early seventeenth century: what is remarkable about Jonson, as it is *not* remarkable in the same way in the Romantic poets, is his antagonism towards contemporary degraded audiences and his faith in the vindication of posterity.⁷¹ Jonson’s appeal to posterity was highly individual and notable precisely for its apparent perversity: it was anything but a part of a general and generalised theorising of the nature of poetry and its relation to audiences.

Shakespeare’s sonnets constitute, amongst other things, exemplary Renaissance expressions of the importance of posterity – indeed, they constitute what must be the most sustained meditation on immortality and survival to reach us from the early modern period⁷² – but in this respect they can nevertheless be distinguished quite clearly from the culture of Romantic posterity. The central concern of the first 126 of the sonnets is the possibility of the young man’s survival: as is conventional in Renaissance and classical epideictic poetry, this survival is made possible by the recording of the young man in language.⁷³ When Shakespeare claims that ‘Not marble nor the gilded monuments / Of princes shall outlive this pow’rful rhyme’ in sonnet 55, the statement is preliminary to the claim that the young man – rather than the poet – will live on in the verse.⁷⁴ Indeed, the sonnet sequence begins with seventeen poems urging the young man to reproduce in order to preserve his beauty. In other words, while recognising that a substantial proportion of Shakespeare’s sonnets contemplate immortality, we should also remember that the major fiction which the sonnets promulgate concerns the survival of the subject recorded by the verse rather than the subject who records. The sonnets work through and work around the convention that the survival of the poet’s writing is subservient to the survival of the young man. I suggest that just as they misread Milton as

neglected, the Romantics misread Shakespeare's sonnets as appeals to posterity over the heads of a neglectful contemporary audience. Coleridge, for example, maintains that the sonnets implicitly articulate Shakespeare's 'confidence of his own equality with those whom he deem'd most worthy of his praise' (*BL* 1.35, citing sonnets 81 and 86). The 'implicit' nature of this claim, however, makes the point more or less unfalsifiable, and Coleridge certainly offers no evidence to support his claim. In fact, the idea of the survival of the subject of the verse – rather than the subject who writes – is a conventional *topos* in both classical and Renaissance writing, and Jonathan Swift's exposure of the convention as patently self-serving in his 'Thoughts on Various Subjects' (1711) ('Whatever the Poets pretend, it is plain they give Immortality to none but themselves: It is *Homer* and *Virgil* we reverence and admire, not *Achilles* or *Aeneas*'⁷⁵), does not detract from its importance before the late eighteenth century.

The proposition that a writer can only be properly judged in the future is by no means original for the early nineteenth century, indeed it is central to Enlightenment poetics, and develops out of discussions of the 'test of time' which go back at least as far as Horace.⁷⁶ In the fourteenth century, Petrarch explored the significance of the test of time, arguing that 'The writings or deeds of anyone who is still alive are hardly ever pleasing; death lays the foundations for the praises of men'. The reason for this, according to Petrarch, is simple: jealousy. 'With the body dies envy, just as it lives with the body', he declares, and he tells his reader that if he or she should want his or her work to be praised 'Then you must die', for then 'you cease being an obstacle to yourself'.⁷⁷ Three hundred years later, Samuel Johnson's 'Preface to the *Plays of William Shakespeare*' (1765) opens with a similar discussion. Johnson begins with a consideration of the assertion that 'what has been longest known has been most considered, and what is most considered is best understood'. Shakespeare, Johnson asserts, 'has long outlived his century, the term commonly fixed as the test of literary merit'.⁷⁸ Having outlived 'personal allusions, local customs, or temporary opinions', the 'effects of favour and competition', his 'friendships and his enmities', 'opinion' and 'faction', Shakespeare's work can now be read 'without any other reason than the desire of pleasure . . . unassisted by interest or passion'.⁷⁹ It is this ability to survive into a time when disinterested reading has become possible which guarantees the excellence of Shakespeare's work. But it is also, for Johnson, this delay which makes such a judgement possible.

For Johnson, as for other critics, posthumous survival involves the abstraction of the artwork from the warping perspective of the poet's contemporaries. Johnson returns to this point in a passage from *Rasselas* (1759), which even more strongly prefigures Romantic and particularly Shelleyan accounts of posterity: the poet, Imlac declares, 'must divest himself of the prejudices of his age or country' in order to 'rise to general and transcendental truths' and, for this reason, he must 'content himself with the slow progress of his name; contemn the applause of his own time, and commit his claims to the justice of posterity. He must write as the interpreter of nature, and the legislator of mankind, and consider himself as presiding over the thoughts and manners of future generations'.⁸⁰ Writing only two years before this, David Hume also argues for endurance as the guarantor of genius in 'On the Standard of Taste' (1757): 'a real genius, the longer his works endure . . . the more sincere is the admiration which he meets with'.⁸¹ Thirty years later in *The Lounger* for 1786, Henry Mackenzie begins an essay on Burns by arguing that the 'divinity of genius' is 'not easily acknowledged in the present time' due to envy and jealousy, but also due to a 'familiarity' which is 'not very consistent with the lofty ideas' which we desire to form of the genius. But Mackenzie then goes on to make a crucial point which marks a subtle but decisive shift into the dominant Romantic conception of posterity when he remarks that 'our posterity may find names which they will dignify, though we neglected, and pay to their memory those honors which their contemporaries had denied them'.⁸² Building on the idea that the judgement of posterity is the final arbiter of poetic worth, posterity as the fit judge of the value of poetry, Mackenzie articulates what will become the crucial Romantic sense that the living poet is, necessarily, *always* neglected.

Posterity is a site of debate and conflict in eighteenth-century poetics since, on the one hand, it was understood to provide the necessary distance between author and the assessment of his or her work while, on the other hand, it was seen to provide a refuge from criticism for weaker poets. Thus Johnson begins his 'Preface' to Shakespeare by analysing the motive for an appeal to posterity in those who 'being forced by disappointment upon consolatory expedients, are willing to hope from posterity what the present age refuses, and flatter themselves that the regard which is yet denied by envy, will be at last bestowed by time'.⁸³ Similarly, in his satirical appeal to posterity in *A Tale of a Tub* (1704), 'Epistle Dedicatory, to His Royal Highness Prince Posterity', Jonathan Swift makes ironical play with such an appeal. The work of Edward Young