

# ROMANTICISM AND POSTMODERNISM

EDITED BY

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## Contents

<i>List of illustrations</i>	vii
<i>Notes on contributors</i>	viii
<i>Acknowledgements</i>	xi
1 Introduction <i>Edward Larrissy</i>	1
2 From sublimity to indeterminacy: new world order or aftermath of Romantic ideology <i>Paul Hamilton</i>	13
3 Turnabouts in taste: the case of late Turner <i>William Vaughan</i>	29
4 ‘Conquered good and conquering ill’: femininity, power and Romanticism in Emily Brontë’s poetry <i>Emma Francis</i>	47
5 A sense of endings: some Romantic and postmodern comparisons <i>J. Drummond Bone</i>	73
6 A being all alike? Teleotropic syntax in Ashbery and Wordsworth <i>Geoff Ward</i>	86
7 Virtual Romanticism <i>Fred Botting</i>	98
8 The sins of the fathers: the persistence of Gothic <i>John Fletcher</i>	113

9	Romantic irony and the postmodern sublime: Geoffrey Hill and 'Sebastian Arrurrúz' <i>Andrew Michael Roberts</i>	141
10	'Uprooting the rancid stalk': transformations of Romanticism in Ashbery and Ash <i>Stephen Clark</i>	157
11	Postmodernism/ <i>fin de siècle</i> : defining 'difference' in late twentieth-century poetics <i>Marjorie Perloff</i>	179
	<i>Notes</i>	210
	<i>Index</i>	231

## *Illustrations*

- 3.1 Joseph Mallord William Turner, *Norham Castle*, c. 1840. By permission of the Tate Gallery.
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CHAPTER I

*Introduction*

*Edward Larrissy*

I

The title of this collection refers to two separable but closely related topics. One is a genetic thesis about the persistence of Romanticism in the present, both in thematic and stylistic tendencies: just as it has often been claimed that Modernism is essentially a remoulding of Romanticism, so this volume addresses the proposition that Postmodernism is also yet another mutation of the original stock. But the title also refers to the problem of interpreting the past: to the ineluctable capture of definitions of Romanticism in current interests and ideologies. It could thus be seen as referring specifically to the typically postmodern discovery of Postmodernism in Romanticism, or whatever is taken to be Romanticism. There might appear to be a dubiety here: is the tendency of this volume genetic, or is it about a hermeneutic problem? But the dubiety is only an apparent one. The questions of what influence the past may have on us, and how that influence may operate, must be closely bound up with the question how we decide what the past is, and whether the interpreter's view is altering the evidence.

The first matters to address are those about terms, and their definition. Patricia Waugh has written about how, by the early eighties, the term Postmodernism 'shifts from the description of a range of aesthetic practices involving playful irony, parody, parataxis, self-consciousness, fragmentation, to a use which encompasses a more general shift in thought and seems to register a pervasive cynicism about the progressivist ideals of modernity'.<sup>1</sup> Marjorie Perloff, below (pp. 180–4), identifies a similar shift, and links it with the work of Lyotard, who asserts that Postmodernism means the death of 'grand narratives';<sup>2</sup> which chiefly means, because of the epoch in which we live, the grand narratives of Enlightenment and

modernity. But whatever about the shift, it does seem likely that most could agree on a combination of self-consciousness, the tendency to parody and the tendency to cynicism as included in the contemporary reference of the word. But how widespread is the contemporary reference? Perloff also suggests a doubt about the ability of the postmodernist idea to generate new vitality in art, overwhelmed as it now is by theory and theorists. Yet despite the undoubted presence of a theory industry on the subject, the irony, parodic tendencies and cynicism appear to be persisting long after the first forecasts of the death of Postmodernism were made. The theory serves to answer a hunger to understand these undeniable features of the cultural production of the late twentieth century, both in popular and high art.

There are also questions to be answered about the use of the term Romanticism. A relevant point to make is that the tendency nowadays is to think in terms of Romanticisms in the plural, as Stephen Clark points out below (p. 158). That tendency, it might be argued, is itself an example of a typically postmodern piece of de-essentialising. Yet it has long been recognised that Romanticism is a dubious essence. Arthur O. Lovejoy's paper, 'On the discrimination of Romanticisms', first appeared in *PMLA* in 1924, but its thesis is more radical even than its title implies, for it claims that Romanticism resists all categorisation; and many authors have alluded to the conflicting definitions offered by so-called Romantics themselves of a word which, in the English language, did not even refer to the notion of an artistic movement until 1844. Although few would now subscribe to the view of a unified Romantic discourse expounded by Wellek in his response to Lovejoy,<sup>3</sup> there is, nevertheless, a marked propensity to recognise (and deconstruct) a 'Romantic ideology', in Jerome McGann's celebrated usage, which comprises a series of related tendencies, and which has bequeathed its prejudices and misprisions even to our own belated generation. McGann sees this bequeathal as founding a dangerous collusion of latter-day critics with their Romantic objects, though his point can be seen as a refinement of the theoretical Marxist attack already mounted by Macherey and Eagleton on critical collusion in general.<sup>4</sup>

But one might see the latter-day Romantic ideologist not only as colluding with the objects of enquiry, but as constituting them as Romantic. And in that case a question arises: which comes first in the hermeneutic moment: the inheritance that makes the critic a

latter-day Romantic, or the latter-day criticism that decides what constitutes 'Romanticism'? Such are the circles to which discussion of interpretation are prone in a postmodern universe. And of course this is the same circle with which we began.

There are further ironies attending this question. Contemporary historicist, feminist and post-colonial criticisms seek to explode the Romantic canon, partly under the pressure to de-essentialise, though admittedly for other, political motives as well. But the canon they explode is itself very far from comprising those writers who were celebrated in the 'Romantic period'. Few today read, for instance, the poetry of Scott, Rogers, Moore or Campbell, yet it is they who, in the early nineteenth century, dominated the poetic scene in the estimation of their contemporaries, as Byron recorded in his journal.<sup>5</sup> If we are to speak of canons, it is only fair to conceive this rough grouping as a major component in an initial Romantic poetic canon which has subsequently ceased to exist. Can it then, in any simple way, be a Romantic ideology which has ended up by relegating them and giving us, instead, Blake, Wordsworth and Coleridge as canonical figures? In fact, the canonisation of this group can be seen as part of a complex process involving also the development of late nineteenth-century tendencies that were to issue in Modernism. So the current impetus to go *Beyond Romanticism* (the title of a widely disseminated collection of recent essays, edited by Stephen Copley and John Whale) can be seen as part of a post-modern swerve away from the Modernist constitution of Romanticism. On this reading, Modernist images and immediacies are not so much descendants of Romantic organicism and symbolism as developed in tandem with a particular reading of Romanticism which emphasised these aspects. This phenomenon is something that may itself be subject to study and criticism: William Vaughan's essay in this volume shows how contemporary accounts of Turner, based on a thorough historical scholarship, are questioning the notion of a 'late Turner', a conception seized on by earlier modern critics as anticipating Modernism. To be very explicit: this is an example of the creation of a Romanticism which is fit to act as a precursor for Modernism. One would be inclined to expect that contemporary readings of Romanticism would emphasise types of writing that do not accord with the idea of Romantic lyricism or sublimity, even while recognising and questioning the continued influence of those modes. Indeed, questioning in the present is bound up with



reconstituting the past. That reconstitution includes the poetry, prose fiction and journals of women writers, and the finding has tended to be that women's writing of the period does not participate in the fashion for the sublime (which is seen as a male preserve), as in the case of Dorothy Wordsworth: the particulars in her writing, not constantly under pressure to fold themselves into a scheme of sublimity, can be seen in partial but strong contrast to the poetry of her brother, even though it is also true, as Paul Hamilton subtly points out, that the particulars in the literature of the Romantic sublime are both more evident to postmodern critics, and are seen by them as palpably failing to support the sublime framework proposed for them by the Romantic writer. Hamilton himself refers to Dorothy Wordsworth, and so does Anne Mellor in *Romanticism and Gender* (1993).<sup>6</sup> A pointed example of the conscious way in which female writers might question the pretensions of the male sublime is provided by the work of Anna Laetitia Barbauld, who questions Coleridge's immersion in 'metaphysic lore' in a poem addressed to him. The 'feminine tradition', as Margaret Homans calls it, in work discussed here by Emma Francis (pp. 56–8), thus piquantly undermines one of the key categories mooted as providing a continuity, or at least a parallel, between Romanticism and Postmodernism – namely, the sublime – and does so as early as the Romantic period itself.<sup>7</sup> This is not to say that women poets did not essay sublimity: Charlotte Smith's *Beachy Head* and portions of her *The Emigrants* provide good contrary examples. But there is an abundance of concentration on the poetry of sensibility. Indeed, one of the revisionist points made by contemporary criticism is the extent to which women poets pioneered new modes in that kind: both Wordsworth and Coleridge acknowledged their indebtedness to Smith's *Elegiac Sonnets* (first edition 1784), though not perhaps with sufficient emphasis: I would claim, though, that the facts are eloquent enough, when properly read. Smith's title, with its avowal of mixed modes – elegy and sonnet – predates by some years a work with a similar title: *Lyrical Ballads*, by Wordsworth and Coleridge.

The salience of discussion about the sublime in debates about Romanticism and about the relationship of Romanticism and Postmodernism, evident in this very collection, is itself worthy of comment – as is its natural concomitant: the renewed interest in German Romantic philosophy in advanced theoretical discussion in the English-speaking world. That salience also derives from Lyo-

tard's work, the key connection being the notion of attempting to 'present the unrepresentable'. Once the matter is put in that way, it is not difficult to sketch in another related topic: the heroic, experimental artist who makes the attempt. The artist as hero, and as male hero, is not a nineteenth-century conception only; and there is work enough on the gender-preconceptions of Modernist writers to suggest that the 'masculine tradition' continues into the twentieth century, despite notable innovators such as Woolf. But does it continue into the Postmodern? That seems a more problematic thought. An empirical survey would hardly demonstrate that women artists tend on the whole to exclude themselves from ambitious experiment and innovation. But at the same time, it often seems to matter less: what is left of the sublime is ironic, self-conscious, lacking in metaphysical confidence, and thus more easily prone to enter into dialogue with the popular and accessible.

But this dialogue is also reflected in the way the Romantic period is now constructed. To see the recently fashionable array of texts from the Romantic period as another canon, recognised in the Postmodern, must seem like a joke in a period so cynical about canon-formation and all social consensus. So to put it no more strongly: this array not only broadens the range of reading, but also supports a study of the interaction in the period between the more and the less 'Romantic'.

## II

What does the new array of texts represent? Nothing that would have seemed like an acceptable anthology to readers of the period, nor to Victorian or early twentieth-century readers. A compilation such as McGann's *New Oxford Book of Romantic Period Verse*, which contains, for instance, ample selections of Blake alongside anonymous ballads and small but judicious selections of Rogers and Campbell, represents a view of the period which never was on sea or land, but one which conscientiously seeks to offer something nearer to the 'truth' of the period than could have been offered before, while at the same time connecting the effect of 'truth' to the operation of twentieth-century interests. In order to go beyond the postmodernist cynicism which runs parallel to such beliefs, McGann – or a writer such as Alan Liu – has to believe that the values informing current emancipatory political interests should be

approved, and that the broadly Marxian analytic tools employed in criticism by those interests have real scientific validity. What one often finds is a strange combination of postmodern, post-deconstructionist scepticism with the culturally approved leftism which provides the last, if substantial, tatters of value and veridicality. This amalgam, 'deconstructive materialism' as Marjorie Levinson has called it,<sup>8</sup> is by no means risible in what it has offered in terms of new analyses conscious of the aporias and supplemental logic governing the political texts and sub-texts of 'Romanticism'. But in confronting the fundamental questions raised by its own method it frequently offers a kind of bleak hand-wringing. Alan Liu, who identifies himself as a deconstructive materialist, sets down these thoughts in the 'Epilogue' to his book on Wordsworth: 'No one can know the differential relation between history and literature, or any other register of mind, with full certainty. This is why, after all, I say "I believe." I treat not of certainty but of credibility.'<sup>9</sup> One has to be far more confidently Marxist than this to be able to place postmodernist scepticism, however sympathetically, as part of 'the cultural logic of Late Capitalism', as Fredric Jameson does. But the postmodern sceptic may reply by questioning not only the veridical claims of Marxist dialectics, but also the humanist, Judaeo-Christian values which provide (it may plausibly be maintained) a matrix for orthodox Marxist thought. The question whether one either can or should invoke such a core of value is, perhaps surprisingly, very much on the agenda again. Eagleton, for instance, in patently invoking the concept of species-being, is unapologetic about the basis of Marxism in human nature, even if he is wary about some of the implications of that phrase.<sup>10</sup> Stjepan Mestrovic, picturing the despair entailed by the absence of value, finds the answer in a new *fin de siècle* of unabashed and confident subjectivism.<sup>11</sup> A conference at Cambridge on Postmodernism and Religion, evokes the persistence of the 'Shadow of Spirit', which is to suggest a continued efficacy for Spirit even if one believes in the unlikely proposition that a shadow can exist without something to cast it.<sup>12</sup> The extent to which Spirit can continue to have an effect when it is thought to have died is raised, in specific relation to Romanticism, by Lyotard's famous essay, 'What is Postmodernism?', appended by his translators to *The Postmodern Condition*. Here, both modern and postmodern (he does distinguish) are seen as operating under the sign of the sublime, in that the sublime is what attempts to represent the unrepresentable.

The distinction between modern and postmodern is supposed to turn on the notion that Modernism remains nostalgic for the transcendence that underlay the notion of sublimity, while Postmodernism does not. The thesis of 'What is Postmodernism?' is in fact related to the rather differently conceived treatise on *The Postmodern Condition*. The language games in which, *Just Gaming*, we are supposed to delight are conceived in terms recognisable from other attempts to define Postmodernism: the emphasis is on the difference of specific formal features of types of discourse and communication. But the absence of a transparent discourse is a notion here relegated in favour of a formulation of deeper resonance: the 'absence of a grand narrative': that is, of a narrative accepted as grand because founded in transcendence. But even if one is disposed to accept this, the question how far one can completely cut such a Postmodernism adrift from the transcendent persists, if its techniques and impulses have in fact emerged from a Romantic matrix. Even if we feel difficulty in believing in a grand narrative founded in the transcendent, we are perhaps inclined to believe in – or at least have nightmares about – one that is controlled by a shadowy sector of multinational capital, or by a conspiracy of Mafia and corrupt state agents. And it is the persistence of Gothic which most obviously points to the paranoid fear that, having expunged the transcendent, the inheritors of the Enlightenment may find that they are acting in an obscure Satanic narrative, though possibly one that is very much of this world. From a psychoanalytic perspective, John Fletcher considers below not only the significance of the persistence of Gothic, but also its uncanny power:

Preoccupied always with the question of limit, of residues and archaisms, with what resists the modern and remains both active and unsurpassable within it, perhaps it is only with the proposed obsolescence of modernity itself, that the traditional vocation of Gothic will converge with the dystopian fantasies of a science fiction concerned with the unsurpassability of a Dark Future rather than a Dark Past. (pp. 139–40)

In Fletcher's account the return of the repressed is figured as the return of the fascist in a world where the enlightened project of modernity is itself seen as naive, uneducated in the persistence of the dark dreams of power. Yet it could be said that the spectre of this return matters less in the flattened perspective and sceptical point of view of Postmodernism: popular culture offers an increasing number

of examples of the apocalyptic becoming a matter of mundane and heavily stylised entertainment, *The X-Files* being the rather too obvious example. One of the uncanny effects of reading Fletcher's essay is to find the fascist more likely to appear because it matters less. Another is to find it understandable that the Gothic erosion of enlightened value should be the most enduring and inexorable progeny of Romanticism. Yet this darkness may be only one side of the story, for the contemporary cybernetic fantasy also continues the Romantic tale of endless human potential, and links back to the more radiant versions of the sublime. As Fred Botting points out, the wavering between dark and light versions of the fantasy is itself a Romantic inheritance.

### III

Of course, sceptical and ludic Postmodernism in its various forms can itself be given a plausible Romantic ancestry, and a number of essays in this volume make that point. Drummond Bone is able to find analogies between the Romantic and the postmodern attitude to endings and what they imply. His title, 'A Sense of Endings', pays homage (with a significantly postmodernist transformation) to Frank Kermode's book. It seems worth recalling that in *Practising Postmodernism* Patricia Waugh also feels impelled to refer to this work several times, noting Kermode's perception that 'people with no clear sense of ending will always fabricate one'.<sup>13</sup> Bone makes the necessary point that the fabrication – or, better, fabrications – will bear the ironic imprint of the lack of faith, the lack of a grand narrative. An antecedent for such irony can be found in the work of Byron. Yet, as he observes, critics of Romanticism remain mesmerised by Wordsworth and Shelley; and he ventures the thought that the tradition of deconstruction and the Levinson-Liu type of New Historicism, far from eschewing transcendence, is a late descendant of Romantic tradition. This is a view which detects, in the realm of criticism, a remote echo of Lyotard's findings.

If an ending is the embodiment of an ordered view, modelled on some idea of how narratives, grand or petty, should end, then syntax may, at least in a poem, embody the way a narrative should go. It is, so to speak, another kind of upholstery button in the undisciplined fabric of experience. Geoff Ward, paying particular attention to Wordsworth and Ashbery, examines the way in which the syntax of

Wordsworth's *Prelude*, though gesturing at control, meanders and qualifies its course away from confident assertion, and thus reveals its own attempt to 'suture over trauma' (p. 90). Ashbery's endless qualifications are seen as exacerbating the sense of trauma, but Ward also makes a useful distinction between the earlier Ashbery and the Ashbery of the 1990s, who has become far more markedly a particular kind of poet of syntax.

On the important topic of Romantic irony, Andrew Roberts's essay is a good example of a piece of the rewards that can derive from the kind of self-consciousness with which we began this introduction. He shows how Geoffrey Hill is both aware of his Romantic antecedents and of the need to encompass that awareness in his irony. Yet certain kinds of postmodernist irony can seem profoundly frivolous. Stephen Clark, in his unexpected essay on John Ash and Ashbery (an undoubted postmodernist, if ever there was one) sees the latter's Romanticism as an ironic private lyricism which colludes with the American imperium. This essay has the effect of finding a significant value in the work of Ash, but that value is seen as residing in a deliberate recuperation of elements of Ashbery's style, originally moulded along with his vertiginous scepticism, to a view which can accommodate a degree of realism and political critique. This could be seen as another example of the way in which generic boundaries are everywhere becoming insecure. There is another way of being indebted to Romanticism, and that is by continuing to be indebted to Romantic ideology. Marjorie Perloff (pp. 198–20) offers a principled reminder of the seriousness of Modernist experiments, and a warning against the adoption, in a complacently relativist universe, of some of the more tired and belated forms of Romantic discourse, which are still very much in circulation in our culture.

## IV

The Romantic irony of a Friedrich Schlegel is often found to have its correlates in the attacks on system in Byron's *Don Juan*, but less playful authors such as Blake and Wordsworth, inhabit the same universe: Wordsworth's 'something ever more about to be' may have a German ancestry, but least of all can one deny it the title of Romantic for that reason. As for Blake, he can now be seen as an ironic parodist in no frivolous sense, for whom the chief question is:

how avoid the limitations of influence as imposed and thus redeem influence as creative. This is the true sense of his self-injunction: 'I must create a System or be enslaved by another Man's.' There is no escaping system, and to escape enslavement is not to escape influence but to harness it. But seeing premonitions of postmodernism in canonical texts may merge with constituting a new postmodernist's Romanticism. We are back in another circle, which is arguably where Diane Elam is in her *Romancing the Postmodern*. The radical claim of this book goes beyond definitions of Romanticism by identifying an atemporal Postmodernism, though an unstable one that always 'differs from itself'.<sup>14</sup> She does not, however, feel impelled to look at pre-Romantic writing, though Chrétien de Troyes is mentioned. On the other hand, Scott, George Eliot and Kathy Acker are considered at length in this work, though not, of course, in chronological order. 'For, Postmodernism is not a perspectival view on history; it is the rethinking of history as an ironic coexistence of temporalities, which is why this book cannot be structured as a chronological survey.'<sup>15</sup> According to Elam we can now see that Romance is postmodern and that Postmodernism is Romance. This mode, so to call it, defies 'historical boundaries' and 'also makes impossible the taking hold of what Lyotard calls the "now" or "the present from which we can claim to have a right view over the successive periods of our history"'.<sup>16</sup> Indeed the idea of an identifiable historical present is also likely to be questioned by deconstruction as are other notions of presentness or context. The analytic considerations which may buttress this kind of argument may be well illustrated from the case of Blake. A student who has studied Pope, Young, Gray and Macpherson, and also the Hermetic tradition, has a better chance of properly understanding Blake's strategies and terms than one who has not. Yet from this list only Macpherson makes regular, though by no means reliable, appearances on 'Romanticism' courses. And again, when did Blake first find a wide readership? From the point of view of the study of reception Blake is a late nineteenth-century and twentieth-century poet, important to the understanding of Swinburne, Yeats and Joyce, Ginsberg and Ted Hughes. In fact, if only in these precise senses, Blake is not a poet of the Romantic period. This kind of multiple temporality certainly problematises the rather shabby question, 'Are you a real Romanticist?' Yet the question is becoming more common in an age when scrutiny of research by funding councils requires the

application of easily-grasped criteria. Of course, many 'historicist' critics would argue strongly that they assume good scholarship can only be produced in the willingness to confront complex temporalities such as the above. Nevertheless, much historicist criticism depends on a privileging of the idea of context, and the assumption that the best literature of a period is essentially engaging with contemporary political realities. A basic epitome of this cast of mind is to be found in McGann's anthology, where the poems selected are printed not by author but by date of publication. This fascinating volume is illuminating about the whole period, and much of the illumination derives from the wide range of non-canonical texts printed, well-chosen to illustrate connections. Immediate contextualisation is often revealing, but not always in an especially striking way. Printing, next to Blake's *Marriage of Heaven and Hell*, a relatively insignificant poem, the anonymous 'Humble Petition of the British Jacobins to their Brethren of France', is indeed mildly interesting, in the way that a lecturer's adverting to context might be. More interesting (as of course it was intended to be) is the reprinting of some of Sir William Jones's translations of Sanskrit mythological poems at various points in the volume. But simply by virtue of being what they are, as well as by virtue of occurring at different dates, these cannot be said to benefit from the same straightforward concept of contextualisation as governed the choice of the 'Humble Petition'. Elam and McGann might seem to represent opposite poles in a system which nevertheless revolves around questions of historicity. But the real critical opposites in our period, are, if anything, even further apart than that. Clifford Siskin, in a rigorous version of anti-collusionism, castigates the 'lyric turn' of criticism of Romantic writing, a lyric turn which mirrors the movement of its object.<sup>17</sup> Yet much of the poststructuralist thought which has influenced Post-modernism has been devoted to the attempt to demonstrate that it is almost impossible for language to escape a lyric turn, whether because 'there is no metalanguage' (Lacan), or because there is no escape from metaphor (Derrida, 'Mythologie blanche'). Indeed, the work of Julia Kristeva attributes an emancipatory power to a poetic language which itself derives from a dimension of language in general. It is precisely because of the destabilising inheritance of poststructuralism that the historicists are so chary of grand claims, and yet they seek to don the mantle of scientificity. It is arguable that no theorist has yet proved adequate to the complex questions raised



by this encounter. Yet as far as the criticism of Romanticism is concerned, both positions are indebted to poststructuralism and to Romanticism at the same time. It is in this light that the essays which follow should be read, for part of their claim to attention resides not only in the fact that they reflect the current conjuncture, but that they were commissioned to do so in full consciousness of what was at stake.