PART I

Introduction

CHAPTER 1

What is the people?

Philip Connell and Nigel Leask

> – And who are you that ask the question? One of the people. And yet you would be something! Then you would not have the People nothing. For what is the People? Millions of men, like you, with hearts beating in their bosoms, with thoughts stirring in their minds, with the blood circulating in their veins, with wants and appetites, and passions and anxious cares, and busy purposes and affections for others and a respect for themselves, and a desire for happiness, and a right to freedom, and a will to be free.[1]

The opening sentences of William Hazlitt's celebrated essay suggest both the historical urgency of his eponymous question, and the irreducible plurality of its object. Published in a radical periodical in 1817, during an unprecedented era of plebeian political organization, 'What is the People?' speaks directly to a radicalized *demos*, yet remains acutely conscious of its textual abstraction from the diversity and particularity of popular experience. The essay's interrogatory frame enacts this tension, in the unstable *prosopopoeia* through which addressee and object ('you', 'the people') coalesce and diverge in unsettling succession. Hazlitt's vividly corporeal imagery proceeds, with a certain rhetorical inevitability, to describe the people's collective embodiment as 'the heart of the nation'; but the peculiar forcefulness of the essay's beginning relies as much on its address to a singular reader. The identity of that reader, moreover, remains very much at issue, as the personification of a universalized political nation – *vox populi* – which remains unambiguously masculine in its gender ('millions of *men* like you').

At one level Hazlitt's address evokes Rousseau's republican apotheosis of popular festival in the 1758 *Lettre à d'Alembert*, in opposition to the spectacular detachment of theatre: 'put the spectators into the show; make them actors themselves; contrive it that everyone sees and adores themselves in others, and everyone will be bound together as never before'.[2] Suspicious of the reactionary or revolutionary appeal to 'public

opinion' as a dangerous abstraction, Hazlitt's rhetorical strategy assumes a rigorous inclusiveness, in contrast to a characteristic tendency of many Romantic writers to view 'the people' as 'other', implying 'a certain distance, a position from which the popular can be evaluated, analysed, and perhaps dismissed'.[3] Yet Hazlitt's career as a political and literary journalist was marked by a persistent equivocation between the 'popular' and 'polite' readerships created by widening literacy and an increasingly stratified marketplace of print. His question, even in its articulation, thus posits a more complex field of inquiry, concerning not just the changing nature of 'popular culture' in Britain and Ireland, but the relationship between that culture and the realm of polite arts and letters that would later come to be identified with the concept of Romanticism.

Although the question raised by Hazlitt's essay is still pertinent today, the chapters in this book are concerned with the practice and emergent discourse of popular culture within the Romantic period, and its entanglement with those concepts which would, in subsequent decades, come to define the meaning of Romanticism. (We are not concerned, therefore, with the representation of Romanticism in the popular literature, cinema, or music of the twentieth and twenty-first centuries: that would be the subject of another book.) As a point of entry, we might consider one of the most significant literary appropriations of the 'popular' within the Romantic period, and one with which Hazlitt was certainly well acquainted. In the 1800 Preface to the *Lyrical Ballads*, Wordsworth famously proposed 'a selection of the real language of men in a state of vivid sensation' as a model for his poetry, locating that language in the condition of 'low and rustic life'.[4] If Hazlitt's prose returns upon its relation to the demotic reader in a relation of rigorous inclusivity, Wordsworthian poetics, it is often assumed, is based on detached sympathy rather than identification, and addressed to a reader who, it is supposed, is *not* 'one of the people'. His appeal to the language and culture of a peasantry which was, by his own confession, in a condition of rapid attenuation signals the return of pastoral to late eighteenth-century poetic theory, as a means of criticizing 'the bourgeois sociolect that gives rise to poetic diction', although Wordsworth studiously avoids the word 'peasant' and always qualifies the word 'pastoral'.[5]

Wordsworth here appeals to rural vernacular speech, albeit a 'selection' thereof, as the model for an experimental poetry seeking to redress the ills of modern commercial society, a collective pathology characterized by 'a degrading thirst after outrageous stimulation'. Such a condition is the result, Wordsworth argues, of war, urbanization, 'the rapid communication

of intelligence', and a national literature deformed by 'frantic novels, sickly and stupid German Tragedies, and deluges of idle and extravagant stories in verse'.[6] But despite a widely acknowledged sense that his 'poetic experiment' was inspired by the social experience and cultural forms of 'the people', it is hard to specify the exact nature of the debt. Riding the crest of a contemporary fashion for labouring-class poetry, as well as reflecting the powerful and under-acknowledged influence of Robert Burns and Scottish song, Wordsworth's Preface deterritorializes his Scottish and English regional sources in an impossible quest for a rustic lower-class vernacular that simultaneously transcends regional dialect.[7] In itself this need not reflect any disregard for vernacular poetry as such; the poet elsewhere attacks Adam Smith, a theorist of sympathy who 'could not endure the ballad of Clym of the Clough, because the [au]thor had not written like a gentleman'.[8] Yet as Jon Klancher has argued, *Lyrical Ballads* could 'claim no naïve mimesis . . . deprived of the real by the corruption of his own language, the self-conscious poet must now hypothesize another language – the language of the peasant poor – that preserves all the crucial referentials the poet can no longer summon himself'.[9] Such a 'popular' language is by its very nature an elusive object, at once removed (as contemporary reviewers frequently emphasized) from the actual vernacular speech of rural Britain, while at the same time 'all but inaccessible to the middle class mind'.[10]

In the same year in which Hazlitt sought to politicize the question of the 'People', Wordsworth's erstwhile collaborator Samuel Taylor Coleridge set out to extricate Romantic cultural theory from the 'levelling muse' of the revolutionary decade – and Wordsworth's early poetry, more particularly – in the second volume of his *Biographia Literaria*. Ignoring Wordsworth's deterritorializing imperative, Coleridge attempted to root out any ambiguity which might still adhere to the *Lyrical Ballads*' 'jacobinical' notion of a 'real language of men'. 'A rustic's language,' he wrote, 'purified from all provincialism and grossness, and so far re-constructed as to be made consistent with the rules of grammar . . . will not differ from the language of any other man of common-sense . . . except so far as the notions, which the rustic has to convey, are fewer and more indiscriminate.'[11] Coleridge substitutes a *lingua communis* (the cultural capital of which is signalled by its Latinity) for Wordsworth's 'real language of men', redirecting attention from the language and ordonnance of 'the market, wake, high-road or plough-field' to the professional, academic values of 'grammar, logic and psychology', whose models are Dante, Scaliger, and the Italian poets of the *Seicento*.[12] The mind's power of

reflection, and its articulation in a language of philosophical inwardness, are the fruits of education and no instinctual property of the *demos*: 'though in a civilized society, by imitation and passive remembrance of what they hear from their religious instructors and other superiors, the most uneducated share in the harvest which they neither sowed nor reaped'.[13]

Coleridge's objection had to some extent been anticipated by Wordsworth himself, whose 1815 'Essay Supplementary to the Preface' offered a qualified withdrawal from his earlier demotic location of cultural value. Although Wordsworth praised Percy's *Reliques* and the humble vernacular ballad which had 'absolutely redeemed' the poetry of both Germany and Britain from false taste, he expressed reservations about the term 'popular', condemning 'the senseless iteration of the word, *popular*, applied to new works in poetry, as if there were no test of excellence in this first of the fine arts but that all men should run after its productions, as if urged by an appetite, or constrained by a spell!'[14] Wordsworth now understands the word not in the primary sense of '*belonging* to the people', but rather as 'finding favour with or approved by the people', thus associating it with the point of readerly consumption, rather than of production.[15] As Philip Connell points out in his chapter in this volume, Wordsworth's poetry was not obviously 'popular' in this secondary sense; but the alternative locus of poetic value was now precisely *depopulated*, translated into the terms of a bloodless abstraction.

Gone is any conception now of a popular source or inspiration for poetic creativity (as in the 1800 Preface), since 'grand thoughts . . . naturally and most fitly conceived in solitude . . . can . . . not be brought forth in the midst of plaudits, without some violation of their sanctity'.[16] But because Wordsworth, like Hazlitt's interlocutor, 'would not have the people nothing' in exchange for poetic solipsism, the Essay's celebrated conclusion struggles to distinguish a genuine *vox populi* from 'that small though loud portion of the community, ever governed by factitious influence, which, under the name of the PUBLIC, passes itself, upon the unthinking, for the PEOPLE'. Nevertheless, his reverence for 'the People, philosophically characterised' derives primarily from Wordsworth's concern to embody a select poetic audience, rather than from any sense of a common culture with which the poet might creatively sympathize, as in the 1800 Preface.[17]

It was the post-1815 position of Wordsworth and Coleridge, rather than Hazlitt's more heuristic questioning of the popular, which proved formative for the nineteenth-century rise of English literary studies, even as

the demotic and vernacular elements within Romantic culture continued to be widely acknowledged. One legacy of these developments is an unfortunate ambiguity in the meaning of the term 'popular' which, in discussions of Romantic literature, tends to denote *either* the values of an idealized and evanescent peasantry (as in Wordsworth's earlier theorizations), *or else* what Pierre Bourdieu denominates 'heteronomous' cultural production, the commercially driven 'culture industry' spurned by post-Romantic aesthetic taste.[18] This ambiguity, added to the fact that the emergence of the English literary canon is historically dependent upon an objectifying distinction between high and low, 'the people' and 'the public' (a distinction which Romantic theory itself did much to entrench), may explain why recent studies of the relationship between Romanticism and popular culture have been few and far between.

In an attempt to redress this situation, the present volume revisits the terrain of 'the popular', albeit without the ability, or indeed inclination, to produce a singular and definitive answer to Hazlitt's question. One way of answering that question might lead us to contemporary political discourse. But what do Romantic attitudes to popular culture have to say about the relationship between country and city? And how might the relationship between elite and popular culture differ across the diverse territories of the 'Atlantic archipelago' (as, for instance, in the 'intensely bilingual and diglossic society' of eighteenth-century Ireland, the subject of Leith Davis's chapter in this volume)?[19] The chapters gathered here collectively acknowledge the irremediably protean, particularized character of 'the popular', while mapping some of the strategies through which writers and artists of the Romantic period sought to accommodate, incorporate, or exclude the realm of popular experience and tradition. From the urban ballad seller to the Highland or Irish bard, from 'pot-house' politics to the language of 'low and rustic life', the writers and artists of the Romantic period responded in eclectic and often contradictory ways to the realm of the demotic and the plebeian, even as they helped to constitute the field of popular culture as a new object of 'polite' consumption. In doing so, they also confronted an interpretative dilemma that continues to trouble modern scholarly treatments of this subject. For what does it mean to see 'people' as '*the* people' or, indeed, as the constitutive elements of 'popular culture'? 'They cannot represent themselves; they must be represented', in the words of Karl Marx's famous apothegm from *The Eighteenth Brumaire of Louis Napoleon*, cited by Edward Said as an epigraph to his 1978 study *Orientalism*.[20] And like a species of internal orientalism, translated from geographical into social space, 'the people'

appear to demand acknowledgement, recuperation, representation; yet the product of such efforts – particularly at a historical distance – all too easily reflects the operations of distorting prejudice or idealizing projection, telling us more about the mediators than their object.

POPULAR CULTURE: A BRIEF SURVEY OF SCHOLARSHIP

If these questions have been more widely debated by historians than literary scholars, it is largely due to the stimulus of Peter Burke's influential study, *Popular Culture in Early Modern Europe*. Burke opens by defining culture as 'a system of shared meanings, attitudes and values, and the symbolic forms (performances, artefacts) in which they are expressed', and (more tentatively) defines 'popular culture' as 'the culture of the non-elite, the "subordinate classes" as Gramsci calls them'.[21] His first chapter describes the 'discovery of the people' by J. G. Herder and the Grimm brothers in the Romantic period, closely linked with the cultural and linguistic agenda of German proto-nationalism. Three elements of the German 'discovery' are underlined in particular: 'primitivism', 'purism', and 'communalism'. The first entails the belief that the 'songs and stories and festivals and beliefs' (p. 21) collected *circa* 1800 were thousands of years old, even if in fact they may have been invented not more than two generations before. The second heading, 'purism', anticipates Hazlitt's question, 'What is the People?', but answers it very differently. For Herder (to some extent like Wordsworth) 'the people' are the peasantry, living close to nature, untainted by new or foreign manners, emphatically not the town dwellers, least of all 'the mob of the streets, who never sing or compose but shriek and mutilate' (p. 22). The third heading, 'communalism', glosses Herder's famous theory of communal creation, *das Volk dichtet*, 'the folk creates', an idea which in imposing abstract unity on the people has the effect not only of denying creative agency to individuals, but of artificially isolating the peasantry (the concept is inapplicable to town dwellers) from external cultural influences or artefacts, not to mention print culture.[22]

Burke here perhaps overstates the relative importance of German theory, for, as we shall see, Scottish and English antiquarians had raised some of these issues half a century earlier, and many of the ideas of Herder and the Grimms – especially the notion of communal creativity – went virtually unnoticed in Britain and Ireland during the Romantic period. More useful is his location of 'the discovery of the people' 'in the main in what might be called the cultural periphery of Europe as a whole

and of different countries within it' (pp. 13–14). Since the original publication of Burke's book, the rise of 'four nations' historiography has profoundly reshaped our sense of British historical and cultural identities, raising important questions about the emergence in this period of the vernacular canon, and a sense of the arts more generally, as a 'national' concern. Burke's notion of the peripheral (or especially 'northern'/Scottish or 'western'/Welsh and Irish) location of the inquiry still holds good, as is evident in the chapters in the present collection by Leask, McCue, Davis, and Ferris.

Also significant is Burke's contribution to theorizing the highly problematic relations between 'elite' and 'popular' culture. Possibly because of the 'objectifying' tendencies of commentators discussed above, analysis has often projected a form of conceptual dualism onto the social body itself. Burke was to some extent aware of this danger, revising Robert Redfield's bi-polar account of the relations between the 'great tradition' (a 'scholarly learned culture transmitted formally at grammar schools and universities') and a 'little tradition' of popular culture disseminated in marketplaces, taverns, and other places of popular assembly, by arguing that at least until the eighteenth century, 'there were two cultural traditions . . . but they did not correspond symmetrically to the two main social groups, the elite and the common people. The elite participated in the little tradition, but the common people did not participate in the great tradition' (p. 28).[23] Burke's asymmetrical model may itself be unduly restrictive for our period, however, given that in the course of the eighteenth century the 'great tradition' was itself increasingly democratized. It is certainly true that in 1763 James Boswell (following in the footsteps of Pepys and Selden and anticipating Scott) derived 'a pleasing romantic feeling' from the eighty-three chapbooks – which he labelled 'Curious Productions' – purchased from Dicey's Ballad Warehouse at Bow Church Yard.[24] But it is also the case that two decades later Robert Burns struggled to acquire the rudiments of French and Latin in his father's Ayrshire farm whilst familiarizing himself with Shakespeare, Milton, and Dryden; James Hogg read Burnet's *Sacred Theory of the Earth* as an eighteen-year-old shepherd boy in the Ettrick Valley; and the young John Clare saved up to purchase Thomson's *Seasons* at Peterborough Fair. Although the rise of the novel might be seen as itself an extension of the 'great tradition', in his *Memoirs* the radical publisher James Lackington embraced the eclipse of the 'little tradition' with glee rather than nostalgia: 'The poorer sort of farmers, and even the poor country people in general, who before that period spent their winter evenings in relating stories of witches, hobgoblins,

&c. now shorten the winter nights by hearing their sons and daughters read tales, romances, &c. and on entering their houses, you may see Tom Jones, Roderic Random, and other entertaining books, stuck up on their bacon-racks, &c.'[25] All this represented one aspect of what the eighteenth century denominated 'improvement', whether of land, economy, or plebeian manners.[26]

Burke concludes his study with the claim that around 1800, 'the clergy, the nobility, the merchants, the professional men – and their wives – . . . abandoned popular culture to the lower classes, from whom they were now separated, as never before, by profound differences in world view' (p. 270). Burke's chronology for upper-class withdrawal (of particular significance to Romanticists) is of course itself roughly coterminous with the date of what he calls the 'discovery of the people', and beyond acknowledging the fact that the owl of Minerva always takes wing at dusk, the temporal coincidence remains unexamined, particularly considering that the learned discourse of popular culture wasn't always either regulative or directly discriminatory. But the fact that the tone of polite 'discovery' is frequently elegiac or nostalgic (in contrast to Lackington's more 'progressive' views) suggests that it often served as a paradigm to set against the socially atomizing tendencies and cultural *anomie* of modernity, a dominant theme of Romantic cultural critique. Whatever the crises effecting the 'great tradition', the 'embourgoisement' of the 'little tradition' is undeniable, particularly in Scotland where a commitment to popular enlightenment co-existed in highly creative tension with traditional 'folklore' (as it would come to be known).

Despite its initial dependence on Redfield's two traditions, Burke's asymmetrical model is considerably less 'bi-polar' than that underlying E. P. Thompson's *Customs in Common*, which tends to ignore 'the middling sort', perhaps comprising as much as a third of the English population in the eighteenth century, in favour of a society cleanly divided between 'patricians' and 'plebs'.[27] More recent revisionist historians such as Tim Harris have proposed that an oppositional model of culture endemic to bi-polar theories should be replaced by an interactive theory which allows for the agency of 'the middling sort', straddling elite and plebeian classes, a two-way mediation of culture which prevents popular culture being seen as a mere 'residue' of elite culture, while at the same time jettisoning an essentialist account which is often forced to define 'the popular' purely in terms of what it is *not*.[28] Jürgen Habermas's influential but much-contested notion of the eighteenth-century 'bourgeois public sphere' is relevant here in considering the mechanism of cultural

interaction: 'what is spoken or written, within this rational space, pays due deference to the niceties of class and rank; but the speech act itself, the *énonciation* as opposed to the *énoncé*, figures itself in its very form an equality, autonomy and reciprocity at odds with its class-bound content'.[29] The democratization of the 'great tradition' discussed above, symptomatic of the popular enlightenment which swept parts of eighteenth-century Britain and Ireland, might be seen as the result of an extension of Habermas's 'bourgeois public sphere', although the latter has frequently been seen as deeply hostile to popular culture as traditionally construed. The working-class reformers who sought (in Paul Keen's words) 'to storm the invisible walls of the republic of letters rather than the Houses of Parliament' in the 1790s could find intellectual inspiration in a variety of forms: from 'a proto-Victorian, self-help ideology' to the 'improving' discourse of pastoral sensibility discussed here in John Barrell's chapter.[30] But this by no means always entailed the rejection of communitarian concerns, including a commitment to more traditional forms of popular culture.

A word is due here about another body of theory that has proved influential in much recent work on popular culture, namely Bakhtin's notion of the carnivalesque as articulated in *Rabelais and His World* (first English translation 1968). Bakhtin has been far more important for literary critics than cultural historians, and it is strange that although Burke's book contains a whole chapter on popular carnival, and appropriates Bakhtin's concept of the carnivalesque, the Russian critic's name only occurs obliquely, in the book's endnotes. Bakhtin's appeal to literary critics is largely the result of his related work on language and stylistics, especially his theories of dialogism and privileging of 'heteroglossic' ('novelistic') over monologic ('poetic') discourse, important resources for late twentieth-century critics who sought to open the literary work to 'the social text'. Elements of Bakhtin's theory are undoubtedly productive for understanding the symbolic importance of the 'world turned upside down' (the carnival, the circus, the tavern, and other 'grotesque' sites and rituals) in the European cultural imaginary, instances of which are discussed below in Ian Haywood's account of Regency graphic satire and Gregory Dart's description of a 'mock election' in the King's Bench prison.

However, Bakhtin's theory is troubled by an uncritical equation between 'the people' and a collectivized 'grotesque body' celebrated in carnival rituals of feasting, drinking, belching, and fornicating. 'The material bodily principle is contained not in the biological individual, not in the bourgeois ego, but in the people, a people who are continually growing and renewed.'[31] To equate 'the people' with 'the grotesque body', and the