

Introduction

The Romantic Poetry Handbook seeks to enhance an understanding and appreciation of British Romantic poetry. Its intended audience is readers at all levels of familiarity with the work that it addresses. It takes its cue from Coleridge's comment in *Biographia Literaria* that 'A poem is that species of composition, which is opposed to works of science, by proposing for its *immediate* object pleasure, not truth'.¹ Coleridge does not finally outlaw 'truth', but he reminds us that poetry involves play, aesthetic delight, miracles of rare devices, 'pleasure'. The word catches the professional literary critic off guard, with its seeming suggestion of something amoral, frivolous, irresponsible. Yet Coleridge invites reflection on the process and upshot of reading poems rather than, say, scientific papers. Certainly, the boldness of his investment in 'pleasure' – even when that pleasure takes the form of responding to the representation of difficult, painful or sorrowful experience – is one we take to be a clarion-call for critical practice at a time when the word 'pleasure' is almost transgressively non-utilitarian. Put simply, then, the book's '*immediate* object' is to convey the two authors' enjoyment of Romantic poetry.

Jerome J. McGann argues that 'The Romantic – prototypically Coleridgean – concept of poetic pleasure is a philosophic category of human Being', claiming that 'through subjective experience' such pleasure 'is metaphysically transcendent'. There is a link in Coleridge between the aesthetic and the metaphysical, but it is not our purpose to enlist Romantic poetry in support of the 'transcendent form of being' that McGann half-stigmatizes.² Our purpose is simpler, to read the poetry as poetry and not another thing. As McGann's work shows, the idea of 'Romantic poetry' is the subject of critical critique in recent decades. Much work has questioned assumptions underpinning the category of 'Romantic poetry'. The current volume responds to the stimulating provocation supplied by much of this work, often associated with critics writing from a new historicist perspective, but it owes its existence to a belief in the arresting achievement of poets writing in the last two decades of the eighteenth century and, principally, the first three of the nineteenth century, though beyond 1830 as well. Readings of a range of poems provide a concerted attempt to explore, illuminate, and define the nature of that achievement. At the outset, we would highlight, among the many pointers towards what makes Romantic poets original and significant, Wordsworth's assertion in his Note to 'The Thorn' that 'the Reader cannot be too often reminded that Poetry is passion: it is the history or science of feelings'.³

Definitions

The idea of the 'Romantic' is entangled with seemingly endless problems of definition. When did British Romanticism begin? What, if any, are its essential characteristics? Is it merely a retrospective construction that bears witness to our need for an order to be imposed upon the flux and chaos of literary history? We acknowledge, in Stuart Curran's words, that it is 'possible that we are holding up a mirror to ourselves and calling the reflection Romanticism'.⁴ But we also note the contemporary awareness which Shelley proclaims in *A Defence of Poetry* of living

through ‘a memorable age in intellectual [and poetic] achievements’.⁵ We concede that not every poet in the period betrays characteristics that can be termed ‘Romantic’ and that it is easy to overlook figures who don’t neatly fit or who challenge subsequent categorizations: the belated admission of Byron, the poet who felt that he and his contemporaries were ‘upon the wrong revolutionary poetical system’, into the canon of the major Romantics proves the point.⁶ We allow for possibly problematic overlaps and gaps between ‘Romantic poetry’ and ‘Romantic-period poetry’, and we have responded enthusiastically to the expansion of the canon undertaken in work on Romantic poetry in recent decades.

Accounts of the ‘Romantic’ that overlook the claims on our attention of writers who fail to fit a schematic critical version can be unnecessarily exclusive, and our readings indicate a wish to break away from fixation on the work of a few major writers. We by no means abandon the idea of literary or aesthetic merit, but we allow it to be explored and tested in the way that it is explored and tested by poets of the period. Our understanding of Romantic poetry has benefited from the work of those many critics and scholars who have made it possible and necessary to enlarge the number of poets writing in the period on whom critical attention can and should be brought. We acknowledge that challenges to a particular model of Romantic poetry mean that René Wellek’s pithy formulation of Romanticism (first published in 1949) as ‘imagination for the view of poetry, nature for the view of the world, and symbol and myth for poetic style’ is under assault.⁷

And yet those ideas named by Wellek still hold a central role in thinking about Romantic poetry. Romantic poetry prizes the imagination, praises nature, deploys symbol, and reformulates myth. The prizing of the imagination found in the poetry and poetics of the period may not be everyone’s taste; it doesn’t mean that it isn’t present. In addition, Romantic poetry often contains a powerful capacity for self-critique. Coleridge’s *Kubla Khan* imagines a recreation of vision, but it does so in a spirit of conditionality. Wordsworth sees nature as a ministering force that ‘never did betray / The heart that loved her’ (123–4), yet earlier in the same poem, ‘Lines Written a Few Miles above Tintern Abbey’, he worries whether trust in the gifts of insight and memory bequeathed by natural scenes ‘Be but a vain belief’ (50). Poets may reach for the image that embodies symbolic resolution of tensions. Yet often symbolic resolutions in Romantic poetry invite and seem aware of deconstructive energies; they participate in the dialogic instinct present in philosophers as diverse as Plato and Hume, whose influence on Romantic poetry lies more in their drive to present their thought through dramatic means than in their supposedly paraphrasable positions. In its dealings with analytical thought, Romantic poetry shapes procedures that put into the foreground the value of imaginative thinking and experiencing as ongoing actions of consciousness. One can speak of *Adonais* as showing the influence on Shelley of Platonic conceptions and imagery, yet to describe it as a poem written by a Platonist, someone who adopts fully a supposedly Platonic world-view, ignores its self-shaped existence as a drama of feeling and thought. Comparable energies are operative in the reworking of myth in Romantic

poetry. The Romantics remake traditional myth, as in Keats's *Endymion*, in ways that serve less to consolidate the truth of a new story than to remind us that all human stories can be endlessly reinterpreted. And yet this two-sidedness does not mean that imagination, nature, symbol, and myth are not crucially important in the work of Romantic poetry.

Certainly doubleness and doubt haunt and energize Romantic poetry,⁸ and the imps that bedevil literary history mockingly disrupt any attempt to fix a point of origin: 1784, with Smith's *Elegiac Sonnets?* 1786, with Burns's *Poems, Chiefly in the Scottish Dialect?* 1789, with Blake's *Songs of Innocence?* 1798, with Wordsworth and Coleridge's *Lyrical Ballads?*⁹ But the fact that there are multiple claimants for a point of origin does not invalidate the sense that something new has come into being. Our solution is to accommodate all four writers as occupying the field of the Romantic, to see Smith and Burns as participating in a process of adumbration of, approach to, and involvement in the Romantic, while Blake and Wordsworth are claimed – to the degree that comparative word-length involves an implicit claim about significance – as figures at the heart of a process that then runs its generational course through to the later asylum poems of John Clare. Chronological messiness and complications are no reason to invalidate the emergence of a force and energy into literary history that we may justifiably call 'Romantic'. We recognize the force of Seamus Perry's point that, unless we think about the various functions that the word 'Romantic' has been made to perform, we risk 'covert prescriptiveness', but like him we see the word as serving an 'organising' function, allowing us to adopt 'a way of learning about' the particulars of Romantic poetry.¹⁰

Thought, Feeling, History

To return to our earlier quotation from Wordsworth, Romantic poetry gives prominence to 'passion': feeling at its most intense. But it is also often 'the history or science of feelings', less a licensed outpouring than a troubled exploration. T. S. Eliot contended that in and around the Romantic period poets 'thought and felt by fits, unbalanced'.¹¹ Yet if there is much fascination in poetry of the period with the 'unbalanced', there is a preoccupation, too, with reconciliation, harmony, often difficult to attain, but striven for with impassioned intelligence. These are not static conditions, but glimpsed outcomes of what might, oxymoronically, be termed a permanent process: Coleridge describes the 'poet, in ideal perfection' as one who 'brings the whole soul of man into activity'¹² – and the word that asks to be singled out there is 'activity', activity involving the 'whole soul', including its endless potential for division. Romantic poetry matters because it recognizes the facts of division and disunity and longs to repair rents in the fabric of experience. These recognitions and longings enmesh with its high valuation of what we are told by both heart and head, by 'feelings' which, as Wordsworth writes in the Preface to *Lyrical Ballads* (1800), 'are modified by our thoughts, which are indeed the representatives of all our past feelings' (p. 60).

Our working assumption is that Romantic poems warrant attention and praise for their high intelligence and intense dramatizations rather than wary criticism because of their supposed recourse to aesthetic mystifications. Robert Browning, a major heir of the Romantics, offers in 'Childe Roland to the Dark Tower Came', a nightmarish, possibly ironized version of his predecessors' commitment to quest, a quest that, as Harold Bloom has argued, is often internalized.¹³ But he also reminds us at his poem's close of a central virtue of Romantic questers, whether conveyed through the motif of intrepid pursuit in, say, Shelley's *Alastor* or through the verve of Byron's refusal to disengage from the human comedy in the English cantos of *Don Juan*. That virtue is courage, courage displayed when, almost mocking his refusal to despair, Browning's speaker asserts, 'And yet / Dauntless the slug-horn to my lips I set / And blew' (202–4).¹⁴ Such 'dauntlessness', pointed up by the tenacious rhyme that places 'set' against 'yet' (each six-line stanza has only two rhymes), is a feature typical of our poets. Their poems concede doubt as they hope for certainty, yet they press on, as in so many of Shelley's poems; they deal with what is unique to the poet and what has wider significance, as in Wordsworth's 'Ode: Intimations of Immortality'; they constantly brave extremes of passionate feeling, as in Hemans's *Records of Woman*.

The poetry we discuss was written in a period of turbulent change politically, historically, and culturally, and in a detailed time-chart we plot the major events of the period, alongside dates associated with the poets and poems of the period. The period is an age of revolution in politics. The War of American Independence represents a struggle that would result in a constitution and a polity that prefigure modern ideas of equality and democracy. It may have had flaws, as commentators such as Alan Ryan have brought out, but it served as a lodestar of hope to those fired by the desire of liberty. Above all, it generated confidence in a people's political agency, as the ardent revolutionist Tom Paine saw and articulated. Specifically, the new American constitution encouraged the view, ascribed by Ryan to Thomas Jefferson, chief among the Founding Fathers, 'that it was the inalienable right of every generation to imagine its own future and rebuild its institutions as it chose'.¹⁵ The French Revolution and the libertarian opinions of Rousseau and others that, in part, led to it was, for the critic and essayist William Hazlitt, one of the prime movers of Wordsworth's 1790s poetry, as M. H. Abrams notes, quoting Hazlitt's comment on Wordsworth: 'His Muse ... is a levelling one.'¹⁶

The Revolution created exhilaration but also dismay. It may have been heavenly bliss for the young Wordsworth to have been alive at such a time (*The Prelude*, 1805, X.692–3). Yet for Edmund Burke, staunch supporter of the American cause, the French Revolution presented itself, from the outset and well before fraternity turned into fratricide, as a terrifying rationalist assault on the links and bonds, the feelings that held society and culture together, and enabled the establishment and maintenance of an unwritten but deeply important 'partnership not only between those who are living, but between those who are living, those who are dead, and those who are to be born'.¹⁷ Burke's wary pessimism is a powerful presence in the period, even when it

is contested. Byron illustrates ambivalences found in writers of his generation. The Revolution resulted in the overthrow of 'old opinions', in a phrase from *Childe Harold's Pilgrimage*, canto 3 (771). At the same time, he offers a tempered and ironic view of the Revolution as a force that 'overthrew' 'good with ill' (774) and allowed for the return, after the resulting war with Napoleon and the re-establishment at the Congress of Vienna of former political structures, of 'Dungeons and thrones' (777).¹⁸

The Revolution appears in the work of all the Romantics as an event of fundamental significance, as we bring out in our comments, say, on Wordsworth's *The Prelude* or Shelley's *Prometheus Unbound*. War is a central historical experience in the period, as is noticed by Simon Bainbridge in accounting for the great popularity of Walter Scott's verse romances such as *The Lady of the Lake* and *Marmion*, works responsible for a 'transforming of war', couched in 'the conventions of romance'.¹⁹ That process of transforming conflict varies from poet to poet, but 'Visions of Conflict', to quote Bainbridge's well-chosen subtitle, run through Romantic poetry, sometimes confronting grim realities with near-journalistic aplomb, as in *Childe Harold's Pilgrimage*, sometimes recasting them with mythologizing, epic ambition, as in Keats's *Hyperion* poems. The period is often one of upheaval and crisis in British domestic affairs, as many poems reveal, and we touch, as appropriate, on relevant contexts in our commentary. It is also a time in which poets write with a strong awareness of history as the sum total of cultural and human experience. Multiple perspectives arise: there is the sense, as Isaiah Berlin paraphrases Vico, that 'man is not distinguishable from the actual process of his development'²⁰ and there is, too, a sense of history's prefigurings and patternings, of its millennial or cyclical or Utopian trajectories.²¹

Biography, Groupings, and Genres

The volume never loses sight of the fact that poems are written by talented individuals. To that end, and to aid in understanding of their writings, we offer brief biographies of the eighteen poets we have selected – Barbauld, Smith, Yearsley, Blake, Robinson, Burns, Wordsworth, Coleridge, Southey, Moore, Hunt, Byron, Shelley, Clare, Hemans, Keats, Landon, and Beddoes. For convenience, we organize these biographies in alphabetical order, though in our 'Readings' section, to point up the inter-generational nature of Romantic poetry, its layerings of inheritance and bequest, we group poets into three main areas or observable generations (we are aware of chronological overlap and complication here, but would argue that the essential usefulness of the organizing device holds).²² In 'Readings', the main part of the book, as noted above, individual accounts of poems and poets are supplied to bring out the diversity and range of Romantic poetic achievement. And in a section on further reading, as in our notes, we offer suggestions for more detailed exploration and study.

The book seeks in its 'Readings' to bring out Romantic poetry's capacity to move, affect, provoke, re-examine, imagine, and re-imagine. We focus on a great range of kinds of poems: epic, lyric, including odes, sonnets, and songs, conversation poems in blank verse, narratives, romances,

satires, and meditations in many metres and styles – Spenserian stanzas, couplets, *ottava rima*, *terza rima*. The same form may serve different purposes, as the use of the iambic pentameter couplet reveals: Anna Barbauld pens her controversial state of the nation poem, *Eighteen Hundred and Eleven*, in stinging incisive couplets; Leigh Hunt deploys couplets for more sympathetically inward accounts of psychological process in *The Story of Rimini*, even if that poem has its own transgressive impulses; Keats is politically liberal and imaginatively adventurous in his handling of the form in *Endymion*, whilst being more poised, ironic, and detached in his management of the couplet in the later work, *Lamia*. But the three poets use the same form in different ways: Barbauld uses closed heroic couplets deriving from the practice of Pope, possibly, as Daniel P. Watkins suggests, to mirror ironically the ‘restrictions’ that ‘British society’ has enjoined on the abolition of slavery.²³ Hunt enjambes freely, varies the position of his caesural pauses, moving them on many occasions to a position after the seventh syllable rather than the standard Augustan practice of placing them after the fourth or sixth syllables, and uses feminine rhymes: all in the cause of a libertarian assault on the assumptions propelling the closed heroic couplet. Keats, after following Hunt’s more liberal practice in earlier poems such as *Endymion*, strives in *Lamia* for a mode that consciously looks back to Dryden, with its reduction of run-on lines, its uses of the occasional alexandrine and triplet, its lexical and prosodic strength married to narrative focus.²⁴

For his part, George Crabbe reminds us, as do Hunt, Keats, and Byron (the example we supply in our ‘Readings’ is *Lara*), of the couplet’s durability as a medium for narrative, offering both distillation and flow. Crabbe is able in a poem such as *Peter Grimes* to employ the couplet for a mode of seemingly uneventful if quietly harrowing literary delineation, finally taking us into the guilt-ridden mind of Peter, who has enslaved, tormented, and murdered ‘parish-boys’ (62). Crabbe uses the couplet for forms of trenchant understatement, as when he describes the indifference of others to Peter’s beating of a boy: ‘some, on hearing cries, / Said calmly, “Grimes is at his exercise”’ (77–8). Contemporaries felt that Crabbe wrote in a different manner from the innovative style associated with Wordsworth and Coleridge that laid emphasis on the imagination. Hazlitt saw Crabbe as intent only on making ‘an exact image of any thing on the earth’, and Wordsworth felt that ‘19 out of 20 of Crabbe’s pictures are mere matters of fact with which the Muses have just about as much to do as they have with a collection of medical reports, or of law cases’.²⁵ But Crabbe’s understatements connect with as much as they differ from Wordsworth’s indirections, and he shares with other Romantic-period writers an ability to depict and understand the workings of human evil. The poem slides, stage by stage, into Peter’s dawning acquaintance with the horror of his actions, hinted at in the apparently factual description of the local seascape, ‘The bounding marsh-bank and the blighted tree’ (174). Related to Peter’s state of mind, this scene of stagnation takes one into a permanent circle of hell, which one enters fully in Peter’s death-bed confession, when first-person narration replaces the previous detachment as we hear of Peter’s being haunted by the ghosts of the dead boys:

But there they were, hard by me in the tide,
The three unbodied forms – and ‘Come’, still ‘come!’ they cried. (325–6)

Those ‘unbodied forms’ take on an unbudgeable if spectral reality in that final lengthened alexandrine (an extra iambic foot).²⁶

Crabbe is one of many poets who illustrate the rich diversity of poets in the period, and while he is not included in our ‘Readings’, we urge readers to embrace this diversity. In reading across our sections on the poets, readers are encouraged both to recognize shared techniques and concerns, and to explore the individual nature of our chosen poets’ talents and experimentations.

Nowhere is this experimentation more evident than in the Romantics’ fascination with hybrid genres: poems such as Shelley’s *Prometheus Unbound*, subtitled a ‘lyrical drama’, a wording probably indebted to Wordsworth and Coleridge’s *Lyrical Ballads*, one of the foundational texts for British Romanticism in its hospitality to plain speech and imaginative effects, and in its grasp of the fact that poetry is less a question of decorative figuration than of passion demanding unique expression. That the cumulative line of Wordsworth’s narrative ‘Michael’, first included in the 1800 version of the volume, should be the simple yet complexly affecting, ‘And never lifted up a single stone’ (475), speaks eloquently about Romanticism’s new emphasis on a showing forth of ‘the essential passions of the heart’ (59), in Wordsworth’s phrase from the Preface to *Lyrical Ballads*. Crucially, this showing forth results in a poetry that, in *Lyrical Ballads*, interweaves narrative and lyric; lyric, with its concern for feeling and the arrangements of metre and rhythm, often has commerce with the story-telling dynamic central to narrative, yet the story told by Wordsworthian narrative in particular is often one that centres less on what happens than what a protagonist and, in turn, a reader feel about what has happened – in the case of ‘Michael’, what the old shepherd feels about his life now that it is clear that his son, Luke, sent to London to make his way and help pay off an outstanding debt, has gone to the bad, been driven overseas, never to return to help his father complete the sheepfold, symbol of the covenant between father and son.

It is possible that the reader will discern in the poem echoes of the test set Abraham by God when he is told to sacrifice his son Isaac, a sacrifice that is stopped even as Abraham is ready to strike. Michael, too, might be thought to sacrifice his son on the altar of economic necessity.²⁷ If so, he pays the price, so the poem hints, as it associates him with another patriarch, the tragic figure of Lear, for whom his daughter Cordelia will ‘never’ come again. These literary and biblical associations arise quietly, and in an unforced way. They bear witness not to a Romantic desire to exhibit literary knowledge, but to Wordsworth’s understanding that his tale bears witness to a suffering intensity and depth of implication that rivals even as it calls up memories of ancestral texts. In *Prometheus Unbound*, Shelley displays an even more ambitious originality, one that depends on our awareness of how he is vying with and outdoing precursor texts, in this case, the

Prometheus Bound and its lost sequel by Aeschylus. Whereas Pope and Dryden offer satirical mock-epic as their best, admiring response to the formidable achievement of Homer, Virgil, and Milton, Shelley, drawing on but revising Aeschylus, Dante, and Milton, among others, writes a work that imagines a creative revival of hope, imagination, and love, a mode of responding to political defeat with Utopian fortitude. Shelley writes that 'Didactic poetry is my abhorrence' (*Major Works*, p. 232); he makes his appeal to the reader's imagination.

Romantic Poetry and the Reader

The reader comes of age in Romantic poetry, continually appealed to as completer and maker of meaning, as the focus of the poetry's imaginative designs. 'All deities reside in the human breast', Blake asserts in plate 11 of *The Marriage of Heaven and Hell*, his magnificent retort to orthodox theology,²⁸ and one heard again in many Romantic relocations of deity or its replacements, Shelley's 'Hymn to Intellectual Beauty', for example. But he might well have written, his own remarkable *Songs of Innocence and of Experience* in mind, that 'All meanings reside within the reader's head – and heart'. Over and over, Romantic poetry transfers the burden of meaning-making to the reader and tests the process of doing so, whether through tactics of incompleteness and fragmentation that invite the rounding out of a broken arc, or through concluding questions as in Shelley's 'Ode to the West Wind' or Keats's 'Ode to a Nightingale', or through moments of aporia, enigma, or uncertainty, as at the close of Wordsworth's 'Simon Lee', or, indeed, through Prefaces that purport to explain all, but only generate further questions, as in Coleridge's 1816 version of *Kubla Khan*.

If dramatic monologue will become the Victorian mode par excellence, its roots are visible in many Romantic predecessors, even as the Romantics place their emphasis less on limited partiality of viewpoint than on unignorable subjectivity: Felicia Hemans's *Records of Woman* comes to mind, with its invitations to empathize with a range of female speakers, such as Arabella Stuart or Properzia Rossi. So, too, as suggested above, do Blake's *Songs*. Intent on 'Shewing the Two Contrary States of the Human Soul', as the title page of the joint *Songs* has it, the poems seek to 'show' the state of soul of their speakers.²⁹ This state may be the concern for others and acceptance of his fate displayed by the speaker in 'The Chimney Sweeper' in *Innocence*. The poem is certainly conscious of the misery inflicted on young children through the practice of sending them up chimneys to clean them from soot, but its mode is less that of head-on critique than of an entrance into the speaker's way of thinking. This way of thinking carries a loaded reproach to the poem's readers; it also conveys the value of the speaker's innocence, itself contrasted with that of Tom Dacre's more naïve, yet more visionary (or possibly fantasizing) approach. The poem comes to a potentially disturbing close in its last line, 'So if all do their duty they need not fear harm' (24), a typical Blakean riddle coiling itself inside the line. Does it indicate the speaker's indoctrinated response to being told about 'duty', non-adherence to which can lead to 'harm'? This seems likely, and avoids us having to suppose the late intervention of an ironized or unironized authorial surrogate. If so, it makes us aware of how vital perspective and

angles of approach are to Blake's work, if we are to hear the precise inflections of words such as 'duty'.

In poems from *Experience*, Blake reminds us of the role played by what in 'London' he calls 'The mind-forg'd manacles' (8): manacles forged, that is, by and for the mind. It is this mind-manacled that is central to many Romantic poets' vision of oppression. At the same time they sense the possibility of a mental unchaining, which will have liberating effects. They do not deny the influence of contexts and material pressures, but they centre their investigations of the human condition on what it is to possess a mind, heart, and soul. From Burns's lament over 'Man's inhumanity to man' in 'Men Were Made to Mourn' to Landon's vision of escape from socially intimidating and corrupting pressures in 'Lines of Life', the Romantic poetic vision appeals directly and forcefully not only to what we know, or can be persuaded to imagine, but also to an unconquerable impulse in human beings for a better way.

To put it so might seem uncritically to subscribe to what Jerome J. McGann stigmatized as the 'Romantic ideology', by which he means 'an uncritical absorption in Romanticism's own self-representations'.³⁰ Yet even if a neutral or hostile tone towards such 'self-representations' is sometimes nowadays preferred, to adapt a line from Donald Davie's 'Remembering the 'Thirties',³¹ it is worth asserting that Romantic poetry demands that we bring our full humanity and capacity for thought and feeling to bear on its creations. The luxury of detached uninvolvedness is rarely available in their work. Even in *Lamia*, where Keats subjects to appraisal both 'Cold philosophy' (2.230) and warm imaginings,³² the subsequent poetic contest offers the difficult pleasure of continuous if differently directed sympathy and recoil. Nor for that matter is it often the case that the Romantics allow us easily to adopt a single position. One reason why the ode makes so spectacular a generic return in the period is because, with its architecture of turn and counter-turn, the form is a plastic medium for the revelation of complicated feelings: loss and asserted recovery in Wordsworth's 'Ode: Intimations of Immortality', for instance, or depression accompanied by an imaginative rallying that belies the poem's stated loss of the 'shaping spirit of Imagination' (86) in Coleridge's 'Dejection: An Ode'.

The result is nothing less than an astonishing transformation of resources made available by eighteenth-century poets such as Thomson, Cowper, Gray, and Collins. We attend in the volume to those resources, evident in the use to which the influence exerted by Cowper's *The Task* on Coleridge's 'Frost at Midnight' is put. There, Cowperesque self-awareness undergoes a characteristic Romantic transformation. Coleridge discovers that the self opens up new depths as it alights, through processes of imaginative association, on mysteries of growth, development, hope, and a vision of connectedness. As Coleridge lays open to view the very pulse of conscious being, 'the interspersed vacancies / And momentary pauses of the thought' (51-2), he draws attention to the capacity of Romantic poets to move, in their depiction of the self, from the classical 'I think', in Christian la Cassagnère's terms, to revelation of 'an "I" watching a stream of

thought or of imagery in the making and in the welling from a self below the self'.³³ In revaluations of eighteenth-century ideas of the sublime, the self's discovery of its capacity for what Wordsworth will call 'unknown modes of being' (*The Prelude*, 1805, 1.420) is revelatory, even apocalyptic.

Self, World, and Metapoetry

Romantic absorption in the self's creative power quickly turns to the risky, exhilarating business of world-discovering and even world-making. Wordsworth's *The Prelude* replaces Milton's Christian story of Adam and Eve's fall from paradise and subsequent hope of redemption by 'one greater man' (1.4) with the account of his imagination's fall from early communion with nature and subsequent recovery.³⁴ The 'Mind of Man' is Wordsworth's 'haunt, and the main region of my Song' (40), as he wrote in a Prospectus at the head of *The Excursion* (1814) intended to outline the nature of an overall project, the ambitious long poem *The Recluse*, which he never completed.³⁵ And it is so (without gender implications) in the work of many of the major Romantic poets because it is in and through the mind that life is lived, that the ideas and ideals shaped therein are projected onto and help shape 'the very world', to quote Wordsworth again, 'which is the world / Of all of us, the place in which, in the end, / We find our happiness, or not at all' (*The Prelude*, 1805, 10.725–7).

Wordsworth helps us understand Romantic poetry through his comments on what he sought to do in his poetry. Metapoetic commentary is frequent in the period: the awareness of living 'A being more intense' (*Childe Harold's Pilgrimage* 3.6.47) in the act of creation is dramatized by Byron in *Childe Harold's Pilgrimage* and taken to brilliantly comic extremes in his *Don Juan*. It is evident in Keats's turn on his use of the word 'forlorn' (71) at the start of the final stanza of 'Ode to a Nightingale', in Shelley's assertion that, were he capable of a more peaceful state, he 'would ne'er have striven // As thus with thee in prayer in my sore need' (51–2) in 'Ode to the West Wind', in Letitia Landon's question, 'Why write I this?' in 'Lines of Life',³⁶ and in the orchestrated enquiries into and provisional answers to the question 'what is the value of poetry?' which haunt Romantic poetry. It is a sign of the poetic art's significance in the period that such self-consciousness abounds; at the same time it speaks of and to an anxiety, sometimes latent, sometimes overt, about the way in which poetry is its own guarantor in a period dominated, for the Shelley of *A Defence of Poetry*, by an 'excess of the selfish and calculating faculty' (p. 696).

Readings

The book's 'Readings' are central to its attempt to respond to and recreate the experience of reading Romantic poetry. As noted above, they begin with accounts of first-generation poets, including poets who might on a different if parallel account be thought of as precursors to Romantic poets, Barbauld, Burns, Robinson, Smith, and Yearsley. All five poets reinvigorate forms, especially the sonnet, song, and lyric, and bring eighteenth-century concerns with sensibility and sympathy into new regions of feeling and thought. Their work heralds and runs

alongside the productions of poets traditionally regarded as composing the first generation of Romantic poetry proper, Blake, Coleridge, Southey, and Wordsworth, poets who explore the possibilities and dangers of the unleashed imagination as they respond, above all else, to the challenge and stimulus of a revolutionary age. It is our sense that the very liminality of poets one is tempted to call precursors should lead us to be wary of imposing artificial fences, and we have thus included Barbauld, Burns, Robinson, Smith, and Yearsley in our grouping of first-generation Romantic poets.

Claims could, of course, be made for other writers to be included such as Helen Maria Williams or John Thelwall. In 'Bastille, A Vision', from her novel *Julia*, Williams writes with keen interest in feeling as she captures the glad surprise at the coming of freedom – 'I lose the sense of care! / I feel the vital air – / I see, I *see* the light of day!' (50–2) – that is forever haunting Romantic 'Visions of bliss' (53).³⁷ Thelwall's poetry and ideas about poetics and prosody are at last beginning to receive the attention they deserve.³⁸ It is, indeed, impossible to deny critical perceptiveness to a figure who could roundly describe passages of Coleridge's *Religious Musings* (to its author) as 'the very acme of abstruse, metaphysical, mystical rant', or poetic sensibility and skill to a poet who, in Coleridge's own conversation mode, speaks to Coleridge of 'Thy Sara and my Susan, and, perchance, / Alfoxden's musing tenant, and the maid / Of ardent eye who with fraternal love / Sweetens his solitude' ('Lines Written at Bridgwater ...', 123–6).³⁹ At once formal and conversational, Thelwall gives us an imperishable vignette of Wordsworth and Dorothy Wordsworth in these lines from 1797. We can only plead restrictions of time and space as an explanation for exclusions; the book seeks to be wide-ranging but it does not essay comprehensiveness.

We then look at the revisionary and independent work of the next generation of poets, Byron, Hunt, Keats, Moore, and Shelley and beyond them the poets of a discernibly later grouping, poets whose major work is written in the 1820s and 1830s, even later in the case of Clare: Beddoes, Clare, Hemans (whose career covers several decades, though we focus on her later 1820s work), and Landon – all poets in whom a sophisticated sense of working within and against a tradition, a tradition carving itself into being in the writings of the first two generations of Romantic poets, can be felt as a creatively enabling presence. Here boundaries productively criss-cross: words like 'Romantic' and 'Victorian' have the solidity of monolithic nation-states, but something of the tendency, too, of nations to yield up wholly discrete identities. Tennyson's early volumes, for example, show a deep responsiveness to the poetry of Keats and Shelley. His close friend Arthur Hallam classed Tennyson with Keats and Shelley as 'Poets of Sensation' and contended that 'There is a strange earnestness in his worship of beauty which throws a charm over his impassioned song', comments that link him with the Shelley of 'Hymn to Intellectual Beauty' or the Keats of the odes.⁴⁰

Echoes of the older poets abound in Tennyson's work, yet in his attraction to distilled portraits of weariness and despair, as in 'Mariana', there is a concentration on landscape as the correlative of mood, which declines the more overt if highly dynamic and often complex poetry of process typical of the Romantics. Tennyson absorbs himself in a brooding attention to externals, which is less Keats's self-forgetfulness in the presence of being than a constant pressure, almost nightmarish in intensity, to fetch out images that hurt and connect, in Auden's phrase ('The Novelist'). Harold Bloom suggests with typical acuteness that 'the poem remains the finest example in the language of an embowered consciousness representing itself as being too happy in its happiness to want anything more',⁴¹ and the allusion there to the opening of Keats's 'Ode to a Nightingale' serves to define the difference between Keats and Tennyson. We read Tennyson less as a latter-day Romantic poet, though he illustrates with unusual complexity the enduring vitality of Romantic legacies, than as a poet who shapes a consciously post-Romantic body of work. Even though Beddoes, Clare, Hemans, and Landon wrote poems that appeared after Tennyson's youthful volumes, they participate in Romantic currents of thought and feeling with a different, more participative sympathy, and it is on their work that we focus.

But we are conscious of poetry's refusal to obey 'keep out' signs erected by custodians of chronological or periodic order, and offer all our responses as prompts for further thought about the nature of Romantic poetry as well as about the achievement of many Romantic poems. Our 'Readings' sometimes focus on an individual poem or volume, sometimes on groupings of poems, usually by genre, sometimes by theme. We point up the ability of Romantic poets to write major long poems, such as Wordsworth's *The Excursion* and Southey's *Thalaba* and *The Curse of Kehama*. We also include accounts of individual collections: Wordsworth and Coleridge's *Lyrical Ballads*, Moore's *Irish Melodies*, Keats's 1820 volume, Hemans's *Records of Woman*. In addition, we draw explicit attention to the generic experimentation which is a notable feature of the poetic output of writers such as Byron and Shelley. We choose, for example, to devote one section on Byron to his eastern tale *Lara* (the most psychologically compelling of the tales), along with two lyrics ('When We Two Parted') and his dramatic poem *Manfred*. Honouring Byron's variegated creativity, the section also finds a thematic continuity in the poet's concern with performing the self. Elsewhere, as in our second section on Blake, we track the developing trajectory of a poet's career. Our general hope and intention throughout our 'Readings' is that the varying nature of the focal lens we supply will encourage appropriate flexibility of approach and response. Always to the fore is the verbal thisness, the imaginative life, of our chosen poems.

¹ Coleridge's *Poetry and Prose*, ed. Nicholas Halmi, Paul Magnuson, and Raimonda Modiano (New York: Norton, 2004), p. 492. Unless indicated otherwise, this edition is used for all of Coleridge's writings.

² Jerome J. McGann, 'The Anachronism of George Crabbe', *ELH* 48 (1981): 555-72 (at 564).

³ Qtd, as is all of Wordsworth's writing, unless indicated otherwise, from *William Wordsworth*, ed. Stephen Gill, 21st-Century Oxford Authors (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010), p. 728.

⁴ Stuart Curran, 'Romantic Poetry: Why and Wherefore?', in *The Cambridge Companion to British Romanticism*, ed. Stuart Curran, 2nd edn (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010), p. 210.

⁵ *Percy Bysshe Shelley: The Major Works*, ed. Zachary Leader and Michael O'Neill (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2003), p. 700. Shelley is quoted from this edition, unless stated otherwise.

⁶ *Byron's Letters and Journals*, ed. Leslie Marchand, 12 vols (London: Murray, 1973–82), 5.265 (hereafter *BLJ*).

⁷ 'The Concept of Romanticism in Literary History', in *Concepts of Criticism* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1963), pp. 128–98 (at p. 161).

⁸ See Michael O'Neill, 'Introduction: Romantic Doubleness', in *Romantic Poetry: An Annotated Anthology*, ed. Michael O'Neill and Charles Mahoney (Malden, MA: Wiley Blackwell, 2008), pp. xxi–xxix.

⁹ For a salutary caution against making too bold claims for supposed points of origin, see Duncan Wu's demolition of the 'myth' (his word) of the idea that 'Wordsworth's Preface to *Lyrical Ballads* Was a Manifesto for the Romantic Revolution', to quote his chapter title, in *30 Great Myths about the Romantics* (Malden, MA: Wiley Blackwell, 2015), pp. 82–9 (at p. 82).

¹⁰ Seamus Perry, 'Romanticism: The Brief History of a Concept', in *A Companion to Romanticism*, ed. Duncan Wu (Oxford: Blackwell, 1998), pp. 4, 9.

¹¹ T. S. Eliot, 'The Metaphysical Poets', in *The Complete Prose of T. S. Eliot*, vol. 2, *The Perfect Critic*, ed. Anthony Cuda and Ronald Schuchard (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2014), p. 381.

¹² *Coleridge's Poetry and Prose*, p. 495.

¹³ Harold Bloom, 'The Internalization of Quest-Romance' (1970), in *Romanticism: Critical Concepts in Literary and Cultural Studies*, ed. Michael O'Neill and Mark Sandy, 4 vols (London: Routledge, 2006), 1.102–21.

¹⁴ *Robert Browning*, Oxford Authors, ed. Adam Roberts, intro. Daniel Karlin (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1997).

¹⁵ Alan Ryan, *On Politics: A History of Political Thought from Herodotus to the Present* (London: Penguin, 2012), p. 611.

¹⁶ Hazlitt in *The Spirit of the Age* (1825), qtd from M. H. Abrams, 'English Romanticism: The Spirit of the Age' (1963), in *Romanticism*, ed. O'Neill and Sandy, 1.74.

¹⁷ See Edmund Burke, *Reflections on the Revolution in France* (1790; London: Dodsley, 1791), p. 144.

¹⁸ Qtd from *Lord Byron: The Major Works*, ed. Jerome J. McGann (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008).

¹⁹ Simon Bainbridge, *British Poetry and the Revolutionary and Napoleonic Wars: Visions of Conflict* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2003), p. 2.

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- ²⁰ Isaiah Berlin, *Vico and Herder: Two Studies in the History of Ideas* (London: Chatto & Windus, 1976), p. 65.
- ²¹ For essays that explore Romantic writers' conceptions and depictions of history, see *Rethinking British Romantic History, 1770–1845*, ed. Porscha Fermanis and John Regan (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014).
- ²² For the idea of a 'third generation', and for emphasis on the 'generational' nature of Romantic poetry, see Donald H. Reiman, 'Keats and the Third Generation', in *The Persistence of Poetry: Bicentennial Essays on Keats*, ed. Robert M. Ryan and Ronald A. Sharp (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 1998), pp. 109-19 (at p. 109).
- ²³ Daniel P. Watkins, *Anna Laetitia Barbauld and Eighteenth-Century Visionary Poetics* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2012), p. 186.
- ²⁴ See Walter Jackson Bate, *The Stylistic Development of Keats* (1945; London: Routledge, 2016), p. 151. For a brief, valuable reminder of Dryden's presence in the period (he is a writer edited by Walter Scott, among other things), see *John Dryden*, poems sel. Charles Tomlinson (London: Faber, 2004), p. xiv.
- ²⁵ Qtd, as is the text of *Peter Grimes*, from *Romanticism: An Anthology*, ed. Duncan Wu, 3rd edn (Malden, MA: Blackwell, 2006), p. 142.
- ²⁶ For fine discussion of Crabbe's descriptive effects and handling of the couplet, see Fiona Stafford, "'Of Sea or River": Crabbe's best description', *Romanticism* 20 (2014): 162-73.
- ²⁷ See *Lyrical Ballads*, ed. Michael Mason (London: Longman, 1992), p. 341.
- ²⁸ Qtd, as is all of Blake's writings unless indicated otherwise, from *Blake: Complete Writings*, ed. Geoffrey Keynes (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1966). For more on Romanticism and religion, see Robert M. Ryan, *The Romantic Reformation: Religious Politics in English Literature, 1789–1824* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997).
- ²⁹ *Blake: Complete Writings*, p. 210.
- ³⁰ Jerome J. McGann, *The Romantic Ideology: A Critical Investigation* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1983), p. 1.
- ³¹ Qtd from *New Lines*, ed. Robert Conquest (London: Macmillan, 1956).
- ³² John Keats, 'Sleep and Poetry', in *John Keats: The Complete Poems*, ed. John Barnard, 3rd edn (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1988). All poetry by John Keats will be quoted from this edition, unless specified otherwise.
- ³³ 'The Self', in *A Handbook to English Romanticism*, ed. Jean Raimond and J. R. Watson (Basingstoke: Macmillan, 1992), p. 239.
- ³⁴ *John Milton: The Complete Poems*, ed. with preface and notes by John Leonard (London: Penguin, 1998).
- ³⁵ See Kenneth R. Johnston, *Wordsworth and 'The Recluse'* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1984).
- ³⁶ Qtd from Letitia Elizabeth Landon, *Selected Writings* (Peterborough, Ont.: Broadview, 1997).
- ³⁷ Qtd from *Romanticism*, ed. Wu.

³⁸ See, among others, *John Thelwall: Selected Poetry and Poetics*, ed. Judith Thompson (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2015) and Richard Gravil, “Mr Thelwall’s Ear”; or, Hearing *The Excursion*’, in *Grasmere 2011: Selected Papers from the Wordsworth Summer Conference*, ed. Richard Gravil (Humanities Ebooks, 2011), pp. 171–202.

³⁹ Qtd from *Romanticism*, ed. Wu.

⁴⁰ Qtd from Tennyson, *Poems of 1842*, ed. Christopher Ricks (London: Methuen, 1968), p. 365.

⁴¹ *Poetry and Repression: Revisionism from Blake to Stevens* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1976), p. 152.