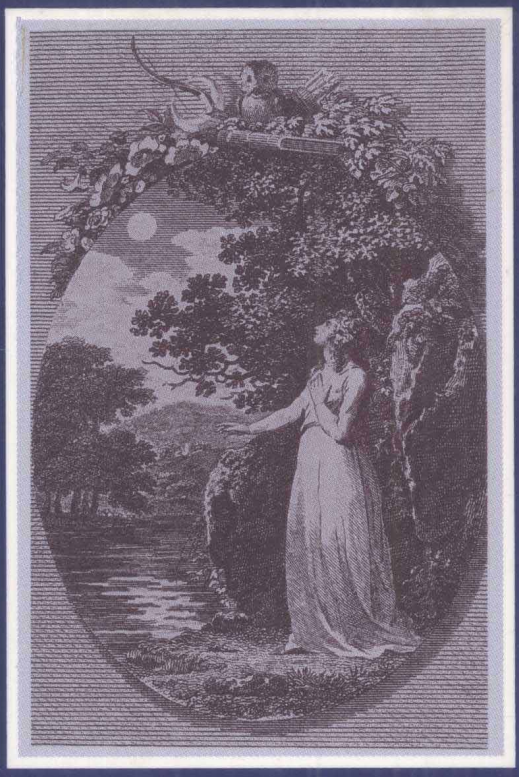

ROMANTICISM, LYRICISM, AND HISTORY

SARAH M. ZIMMERMAN

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For my family—
Jay, Isabel, Jay, and Chad

Preface

This study investigates the Romantic lyric's possibilities for engaging reading audiences on matters both private and public. The topic itself challenges a persistent, if often unstated, equation of the mode with the personal as opposed to the social, and with the autobiographical as opposed to the historical. I argue instead that Romantic lyricism is more accurately a vehicle for collapsing these distinctions, and that in fact the mode's great appeal to contemporaneous readers was its capacity for submitting the seemingly private reflections of an autobiographical speaker to public view. Given this persuasive potential, the mode facilitated a greater range of impulses—political as well as meditative or emotional—than has yet been sufficiently acknowledged.

Romantic lyricism has been central to critical understandings of the period, and was for a long time virtually identified with it. Although recent historical approaches have inflected the other major genres, key underlying assumptions about Romantic lyricism have remained surprisingly stable since John Stuart Mill's pithy definitions in "What is Poetry?" (1833). Drawing largely on his reading of William Wordsworth, Mill severs "eloquence"—which seeks a social world—from "poetry," which turns away from that same world. He thereby invests the lyric with an aura of detachment from quotidian

concerns and a defining drive toward transcendence. In an important if not immediately apparent sense, this view has persisted well into the 1990s, leaving intact key tenets of such critics as M. H. Abrams and Northrop Frye, who cast Romantic lyricism as an inward-looking form. Abrams and Frye accept as necessary the ways in which the poet "turns his back on his audience"; influential Romantic new historical critiques have, in effect, reinforced this paradigm by elaborating the ideological implications of a desire for transcendence without interrogating the preeminence of that desire in characterizing the period's lyric impulses. For Abrams, the mode's privacy works toward a spiritual self-renewal; for new historicists, this orientation coincides with the repression of traumatic social events. Yet these critics agree that Romantic lyricism relinquishes sociohistorical immediacy for the sake of a cultivated disinterestedness. What we have lost in this contentious critical history is a clear view of the myriad ways in which many of the period's lyric poems display a pronounced "eloquence" that writers understood and employed, and that contemporaneous readers and critics seized upon as compelling.

In several landmark studies that appeared across two decades, Abrams defined a canonical view of Romantic lyricism as the primary poetic vehicle for a "spirit of the age": *The Mirror and the Lamp* (1953), "English Romanticism: The Spirit of the Age" (1963), "Structure and Style in the Greater Romantic Lyric" (1965), and *Natural Supernaturalism* (1972). These works' cumulative account of Romantic lyricism has retained a hold on the critical imagination, which is operative even when Abrams's influence is not explicitly recognized, since his claims have been so thoroughly absorbed into working perceptions of the mode. By the same token, we have often lost sight of Abrams's own assiduous circumspection in defining Romantic lyricism and the flexibility of his definitions. Despite his clear interest in championing Romanticism as a field worthy of scholarly and pedagogical attention after its stern critique by T. S. Eliot and some of the New Critics, Abrams defines his terms with marked care—he describes the "greater Romantic lyric" rather than Romantic lyricism—and he cites in almost encyclopedic detail the exceptions to all of his rules. It is thus a testament to the immense persuasiveness of Abrams's models that these qualifications have frequently been obscured in the subsequent appropriation and contestation of his key terms.

Abrams's massive critical and rhetorical endeavor has demanded equally grand reimaginings of Romanticism by those who would challenge his view of the field. The most important of these efforts have been a feminist critique of gendered power relations in the period's canonical lyrics and models of them, and a new historical critique of the ideological investment of certain tenets—introspection, transcendence, the aesthetic, and an attraction to the natural world—long deemed central to Romanticism. These paradigms and counterparadigms comprise what Eliot might have termed a monumental critical history of the Romantic lyric. They have been sharply inveighed contests, since what was at stake for a long time was, in effect, a definition of the period itself. Abrams influentially defined the "greater Romantic lyric" around an exchange of hopes—of social revolution for poetic renovation—on the part of Samuel Taylor Coleridge and Wordsworth in the aftermath of the French Revolution. New historicism has in turn represented the Romantic lyric as suppressing historical trauma in the service of an ideology of the imagination and the aesthetic.

Yet a different historical approach to the period's lyric poems is possible, one that I will argue is better suited to catching the subtle indirection of the mode's capacity for social engagement. If the period's lyric poems are read only in relation to major historical events and judged according to a mimetic standard of reference to them, then very few indeed of the period's lyric poems seem responsive to their social contexts. This study recommends instead situating the period's lyric poems not only in relation to its major events but also within their myriad local contexts, including the biographical matrices of the poet's career; the literary marketplace and the processes of book production; relevant cultural traditions, such as the cult of sensibility; literary works' critical reception in the period's thriving periodical culture; and readers' consumption of poems in newspapers, miscellanies, periodicals, annuals, and individually bound volumes and their responses to those poems—in poems and letters submitted to periodical editors, and in private letters, diaries, and memoirs. This study is predicated upon the notion that the period's various reading audiences—critics, middle- and upper-class patrons, other writers, and readers—can tell us more than we have asked about the Romantic lyric's rhetorical possibilities.

John Clare's poetry provides a particularly clear argument that gauging the social responsiveness of lyric poems requires close attention to local contexts (such as his economic dependence upon his patrons) as well as to national events (parliamentary enclosure). Since Clare's more explicit poetic statements against enclosure were monitored by his patrons, it becomes necessary to read his lyrics within the context of his promotion as "the Northamptonshire peasant." Because of his acute dependence upon his patrons and publishers, he could not address enclosure directly without risking a contest over those lines. Yet by heightening a conventional sense of the poet's strong affection for his natural environment and lamenting any changes to its scenes, Clare manages to convey a subtle but powerful critique of enclosure's devastating alterations. His poems demonstrate how a feature common to many of the period's lyric poems—the poet's strong attraction to rural scenes—may be weighted with political significance in a period of intensified parliamentary enclosure and rural resistance to it. In a historical materialist project that informs this study, Walter Benjamin provides a theoretical imperative for a close consideration of such local contexts, along with major social events: "A chronicler who recites events without distinguishing between major and minor ones acts in accordance with the following truth: nothing that has ever happened should be regarded as lost for history."[1] This perspective is vital for reading the political valences of lyric poems by writers such as Charlotte Smith, Clare, and—at some moments in his career—William Wordsworth, who could quite literally not afford directly to address the period's most volatile social events.

Numerous lyric poems in the period directly address social concerns—some canonical, such as William Blake's *Songs of Innocence and of Experience,* and others increasingly prominent, such as Percy Bysshe Shelley's 1819 political poems. I am concerned instead with poems that seem to resist historical engagement and thereby to uphold conventional views of the mode as inherently asocial. My critical object thus approximates what was once called "high Romantic lyricism": poems that feature an autobiographical and often solitary or self-absorbed speaker whose subjectivity is often elaborated via the processes of remembrance and meditation and poems that emphasize the speaker's affinity for natural surroundings and interest in the possibilities of transcendence.[2] My central claim is that these quali-

ties need not add up to a familiar account of a Romantic lyricism in retreat from the social into the self and the aesthetic. This kind of reassessment was spurred by my sense that, in a field newly rich with a variety of writers and genres, Romantic lyricism has become an antiquated critical object, a synecdoche for an older version of the period that featured from four to six canonical poets and a handful of lyric poems. In criticism of the period, Romantic lyricism is frequently referred to as a kind of shorthand for the most conservative impulses of canonical Romanticism. The mode has been characterized almost allegorically, as embodying in poetic form certain tenets that once defined our view of the period's literary production: a solitary, implicitly masculine poet alienated from his social surroundings, looking inward and upward (in Frye's model), into a personal past and beyond a quotidian realm.

Some of the freshest insights into Romantic lyricism have been provided by recent attention to noncanonical poets. A number of critics have reapproached Romantic lyricism by defining a variety of lyrical practices as alternative to a canonical (often Wordsworthian) model, and thus one brand of "high Romantic lyricism" no longer dominates the critical imagination of the period's lyric poetry; we now have a vivid sense of the vast output of lyric poetry in this era. This panoramic view is being gradually but dramatically articulated by a number of critics in the wake of the field's early feminist arguments, which influentially gestured toward a field of women's poetry waiting to be remembered, studied, and theorized.[3] Working-class poets like Clare, too, receive increasing attention. Yet even though the field seems newly populated by varied lyric practices, key assumptions about Romantic lyricism remain intact.[4] My study participates in this ongoing effort to reimagine Romantic lyricism in the aftermath of these challenges to the once narrow canon of Romantic lyricism. I would, however, situate my project in the next stage of this reevaluation of the canon: my aim is to rethink canonical paradigms not only because they have excluded so many poets but also because they have trained our focus on canonical figures in limiting ways. An adequate reassessment of Romantic lyricism requires not only including poets ignored in conventional paradigms but also rethinking those paradigms and in order to reread canonical poets. Thus, I return to Wordsworth by reading him alongside three noncanonical

contemporaries—Charlotte Smith, Dorothy Wordsworth, and John Clare—who shed light on each other's and on Wordsworth's poetic concerns and strategies.

William Wordsworth assumes an important role in this study precisely because he is still a key figure in definitions and debates about Romantic lyricism. His preeminence in defining the mode began in the collaborative relationship with Coleridge, with the latter's vexed and painful relinquishment of the role of poet in favor of Wordsworth's rising star. Abrams gives Coleridge precedence in developing the "greater Romantic lyric" in "Structure and Style," but it is Wordsworth to whom Abrams (in *Natural Supernaturalism*) and his successors have turned in contesting Romantic lyricism. As Jerome McGann explains in his landmark reimagining of Abrams's "Romanticism," Wordsworth's "works—like his position in the Romantic Movement—are normative and, in every sense, exemplary."[5] It is important not to leave Wordsworthian lyricism intact as a canonical monolith against which to define different brands of lyricism, for to be "alternative" is still to be excluded from centers of definitional power. My aim in rethinking Romantic lyricism without reinscribing a center and periphery distinction is to introduce noncanonical writers more fully into our view of the period while allowing those writers to render canonical lyrics markedly less familiar. When William Wordsworth is read within a diverse field of the period's lyric practices—a field that includes Smith as an acknowledged predecessor, Dorothy Wordsworth as a well-positioned contemporary, and Clare as an inheritor of a Wordsworthian poetics—his lyricism looks far more heterogeneous than canonical paradigms of Romantic lyricism have suggested. Together, the four writers in this study span the development of Romantic lyricism, from the late eighteenth century to the early Victorian era, and reflect a range of the period's lyric practices: canonical and noncanonical; male and female; and landed gentry, middle class, and working class.

Chapter 1 undertakes my study's first aim: to chart the gradual, often contentious development of a canonical view of Romantic lyricism, beginning with William Wordsworth's own shifting definitions and moving toward a Romantic new historicism richly informed by deconstruction, especially in the work of Marjorie Levinson and Alan

Liu. These critics have described the ideological workings of some of the period's canonized lyrics by theorizing an autobiographical impulse that strives to define an autonomous poetic self, one that transcends quotidian temporality and especially the cause-and-effect of history's narratives.[6] I will argue, however, that their accounts of the lyric overlook the genre's capacity for a more profound ambivalence and discount its pursuit of less-otherworldly aims. After outlining the contours of these prominent debates about Romantic lyricism, I turn to the task of developing an account of the mode as a popular poetic vehicle in the period for multiple and often complex treatments of both personal and social concerns. In doing so, I draw on Benjamin's historical materialism to incorporate a more skeptical account of the workings of subjectivity than has generally informed definitions of Romantic lyricism. Benjamin's emphasis on the imbrication of social experience and memory informs my argument against a conventional equation of the poet's act of recollection with a retreat from a political present to a personal past.

Chapter 2 charts Smith's discovery that the most introspective lyric poetry can be a compelling vehicle for social critique. In *Elegiac Sonnets*, her autobiographical poet's absorption in private sorrows operates with a theatrical dynamic to engage reading audiences in the substance of her meditations, which shift repeatedly and easily between personal and social dilemmas. Because the period's more introspective lyrics rarely address readers directly, it has been largely assumed that the poet-reader relationship is peripheral to the mode's workings. Smith's sonnets demonstrate how an autobiographical speaker could generate a cult of personality, which might then be employed for social topics. Smith's striking popular success demonstrates how lyric poems may captivate readers and respond to social themes precisely by enhancing a feature often deemed to preclude the speaker's awareness of such concerns: that figure's turn away from readers in mournful contemplation of personal sorrows. Smith shows how, when the poet is a familiar figure from a tradition of sensibility—an abandoned mother—even the most contemplative lyric poetry becomes politically inflected. Her sympathetic self-portrait in the sonnets won partisans to whom she would later make her case for other social sufferers, including French émigrés. In *The Emigrants*,

Smith publicly identifies her poet with the persons arriving on her native Sussex shores as fellow exiles, thereby lending them some of the sympathetic appeal that she had garnered for herself.

Chapter 3 reads the early development of a canonical model of Romantic lyricism in William Wordsworth's career, beginning with his investigation in *Lyrical Ballads* of a lyric poetics that might win readers receptive to his poetic "experiments" with the scenes and events of rural working-class existence and the poet's emotional and reflective responses to them. I outline how this optimistic venture into the literary marketplace was followed by his gradual substitution of an ideal, transhistorical "People" for the all too present reading "Public" that he had failed to find in sufficient numbers, an exchange formally announced in the 1815 Essay, Supplementary to the Preface. I focus on Wordsworth's central role in producing a canonical model of Romantic lyricism drawn largely from his poems, from his prose criticism, and from readings of his career. According to Frye's canonical account of a poet happily unaware and independent of the literary marketplace, Wordsworth arrives at his mature poetic form in the lyricism of "Tintern Abbey" and *The Prelude*, poems characterized by introspection turned to psychological maturity. Yet *Lyrical Ballads* testifies to Wordsworth's early confidence in the lyric's potential both for engaging readers and for treating social themes, and I argue for the vexed persistence of this faith in the lyric's rhetorical capacity long after the optimistic predictions of this collaborative venture were first made.

Chapter 4 focuses on Dorothy Wordsworth's perceptive and instructive treatment in her prose works and letters of the implications of the poet's dependence on reading audiences in an increasingly anonymous literary marketplace. She helps to crystallize a critical understanding of the rhetorical potential of Romantic lyricism simply by assuming that it is operative, and therefore an object for investigation and concern. In the *Alfoxden Journal* and *Grasmere Journals*, *The Narrative of George and Sarah Green*, and in letters articulating her reasons against publishing her own works, Dorothy Wordsworth fosters an understanding of the liabilities of the lyric stance with which she experimented along with her brother and Coleridge. By participating in William's career, even as she consid-

ered publishing her own works, she develops a sharp sense of the costs of a lyric poetics that foregrounds the poet: capitalizing on the personal appeal of an autobiographical speaker also subjects that figure to public scrutiny, which constitutes a kind of exposure particularly risky for women writers and male writers who were dependent for their primary income on literary production. She also recognizes that she would put not only herself at risk: in deciding against publication of the *Narrative*, she considers the submission of impoverished rural scenes and their inhabitants to the curiosity and aesthetic pleasure of middle- and upper-class reading audiences. She is thus quite wary of the same rhetorical potential that Clare embraces in order to make a case against enclosure: its facility in presenting natural scenes to reading audiences with a persuasive immediacy underwritten by the writer's personal responses to those scenes.

Clare's lyric poems demonstrate how an aspect of Romantic lyricism generally assumed to preclude its capacity for social engagement might address the volatile issue of parliamentary enclosure. Chapter 5 describes how his speaker's intense identification with his natural surroundings in many of his poems constitutes not an exclusion of social concerns, but rather a furthering of Clare's case against enclosure. Unlike William Wordsworth, whose descriptions of natural scenes are generally more evocative than empirical, Clare emphasizes the particular and the local in order to register a pressing awareness of those scenes and thereby to protest their destruction. After establishing this poetic strategy in poems such as "Helpstone" and "Remembrances," Clare turns this poetic strategy upon himself in the wake of his perceived neglect by patrons, friends, and readers—and the onset of insanity. Several important late poems and prose fragments take the poet as the object of his own meditations, in an effort to preserve a stable sense of self that was jeopardized by the obscurity that followed his initial literary success and by the increasing mental deterioration of his last thirty years.

My first chapter examines the development of a canonical understanding of Romantic lyricism that, for a long time, kept Clare on the field's margins. We have been hampered by a persistent desire for a single, definitional key to understanding a lyric mode that has been so closely associated with the period's central mythologies. The rich,

fraught history of these critical efforts can now provide valuable insights into the mode's uses. A legacy of sharp disagreements about the nature of Romantic lyricism proves instructive about the mode's rhetorical power. For the impassioned tenor that has long characterized debates about Romantic lyricism testifies to just how much is at stake in the mode's "eloquence."

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This study represents in part a continuation of inquiries begun in the classrooms of Daniel Kiefer and K. K. Collins and then sustained in years since as friends and colleagues. John Shoptaw's course in Lyric Theory at Princeton University laid some of the groundwork for inquiries pursued here.

Both this book and the process of completing it owe far more than will readily be apparent to conversations that ranged well beyond Romantic lyricism with Anne-Lise François, Jenna Hayward, Allan Hepburn, and Ginger Strand. Writing this book would have been a much poorer experience without the seemingly limitless resources of Robert L. Mack's literary knowledge and humor, and his unerring and immensely humane sense of perspective.

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My greatest debts have also been the most sustaining; it is predictable Romantic logic that they would prove hardest to articulate. For once I will simply borrow one of the period's literary conventions—that of the ineffable—without interrogating it, and dedicate this book to my parents, Isabel and Jay, and to my brother Jay. Chad L. Edgar has been at once the best reader and engaged colleague, and the most constant companion that I could have desired.

Standard References

Unless otherwise noted, quotations from Charlotte Smith's poems, notes, and prefaces are from *The Poems of Charlotte Smith,* ed. Stuart Curran (New York: Oxford University Press, 1993).

Quotations from William Wordsworth's poems and notes to them in *Lyrical Ballads* are from *Lyrical Ballads, and Other Poems, 1797–1800,* ed. James Butler and Karen Green (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1992). Quotations from his prose works are from *The Prose Works of William Wordsworth*, ed. W. J. B. Owen and Jane Worthington Smyser, 3 vols. (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1974).

All quotations from the letters of William and Dorothy Wordsworth are from *The Letters of William and Dorothy Wordsworth*, ed. Ernest de Selincourt, 2d ed., vol. 1: *The Early Years, 1787–1805*, revised by Chester L. Shaver (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1967). Vol. 2: *The Middle Years, Part I, 1806–1811*, revised by Mary Moorman, 1969. Vol. 4: *The Later Years, Part I, 1821–1828*, revised by Alan G. Hill, 1978. Vol. 5: *The Later Years, Part II, 1829–1834*, revised by Alan G. Hill, 1979. Vol. 6: *The Later Years, Part III, 1835–1839*, revised by Alan G. Hill, 1982. Text and notes refer to this series as *Wordsworth Letters,* followed by the volume number and page number.

For the sake of clarity, I have sometimes cited Dorothy Wordsworth's prose works parenthetically by the following abbreviations.