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MADNESS
& THE
ROMANTIC
POET

A Critical History

JAMES WHITEHEAD

Madness and the Romantic Poet

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MADNESS AND THE ROMANTIC POET

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List of Abbreviations

- DNB* *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography*, online 2nd edn (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005–)
- OED* *Oxford English Dictionary*, online 3rd edn (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000–)
- Wellesley* *The Wellesley Index to Victorian Periodicals, 1824–1900*, online edn (2006–10)

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Introduction

A century ago poets deranged themselves with opium or alcohol so that from the brink of madness they could issue reports on their visionary experiences... In the Romantic era artists went mad on an extravagant scale. Madness poured out of them in reams of delirious verse or great gouts of paint. That era is over.¹

This book examines nineteenth-century writing that linked poetry and poets to madness, and charts how the idea of this supposed connection was debated, developed, and disseminated across a longer period from the eighteenth century to the twentieth century. More specifically, it offers an account of how a group of associated ideas about poetic 'genius', creativity, the imagination, and mental disorder gathered around the British writers who came to be canonized as 'the Romantic poets', crystallizing into an image that I shall call 'the Romantic mad poet'. This is an image that is still immediately and easily identifiable in contemporary culture, not only in relation to historical literature but also visible in the representation of other creative artists and celebrities. The Romantic mad poet has had an enduring and recurrent appeal. Peter Ackroyd, trailing his BBC television series *The Romantics*, broadcast in early 2006, deploys the image as the clinching part of an argument that 'writers are different. They must exist in isolation... They must be allowed to create their own morality, indeed their own reality,' Ackroyd continues:

These poets were in every respect solitaires. It was understood, by their example, that genius would never be understood. That is why the Romantics and their successors were preoccupied with melancholy, madness, isolation.²

Ackroyd's article immediately suggests some of the ways in which the image of the Romantic mad poet overlaps with broader received ideas about Romanticism. In this narrative, Romanticism was (and still is) a revolt against Enlightenment rationalism, and takes madness as one of its natural allies; in P. M. S. Dawson's summary, 'Romantic poetry is so often concerned with childhood, madness, the socially inferior, myth, and superstition—with everything that was marginalized by the dominant philosophy of progress and utility.'³ Romanticism is taken to be the literature of feeling, and madness represents sensibility in poetic bodies and minds pushed to its furthest extent; Romantic poetry is endowed with supernatural potency, and releases its large creative energies in mental fission; Romantic poets chose therefore to reanimate or reinvent older notions of originality, genius, and

inspiration in their most extreme forms. Other ideas frequently identified as Romantic 'myths', although perhaps only fully developed in the twentieth century and its avant-gardes, include the notion that madness can be a vehicle for radical difference from, or opposition to, social, moral, and political norms, and also the characterization of madness as a kind of primitive state—a primitivism of the mind rather than of national or racial character. Finally, there has been a long association of the Romantic poet with extreme solitude, an inward turn precluding popular comprehension or acceptance, or anything other than flight from the social universe. In this received version of events, Romanticism saw the first expression of the solitary individualism of the avant-garde artist, and so madness, as the most solitary of afflictions, was therefore its natural preoccupation.

I would like to suggest in this book that the relation of the figure of the Romantic mad poet and the proximate concept of poetic madness to these broad cultural tropes is complex and fraught. Inasmuch as madness could represent the extreme extent and furthest expression of these aspects of Romanticism, it also marked the point at which they might fail or fall into contradiction, impossibility, or opposite states—a conceptual testing to destruction, as it were. The Romantic mad poet is therefore an image marked by fundamental double-sidedness or ambivalence. In the culture of sensibility, images of madness as intense feeling also expressed anxiety about the collapse and exhaustion attendant on sustained reliance on the sympathies of the nervous body, or the apparently contagious ease with which affective disturbance spread through social words and private bodies. Madness might represent opposition to 'normalcy', but it could also be an object lesson in the control and confinement of political and social deviance, a particularly important point in relation to changes in the care of the insane and the institutions developing around them from the Romantic period forward. The attachment of early medical ideas about collective psychopathology to revolution denoted a deep ambivalence about the consequences of political upheaval. The increasing association of madness with the primitive could suggest a regression to an atavistic state rather than the *fons et origo* of human creativity; the creative forces released by madness could be dangerous, themselves repressive, or merely useless sound and fury. When originality, the sublime, genius, and inspiration were invested in the divisive and stigmatized figure of the madman, those terms became suspect by association, and subject to popular incredulity and satirical invective; or worse, to automatic hostility, and the association of all creative activity with mental disintegration and incapacity generally, as was to happen with increasing force through the nineteenth century. 'Mad genius' implicitly critiques 'genius'. Finally, images of isolation could represent both the triumph of individual sovereignty, and also the atomized or alienated victim of modernity. The madman, as the Romantic isolate par excellence, encompasses both possibilities.

These are some of the paradoxes which are captured in the figuration of madness in the Romantic period, then. However, the image of the mad poet is clearly not the product of the Romantic period alone, nor of its major authors. The reception and reputation of Romantic poetry are important, even central elements of the problem. The Romantic mad poet primarily emerged or was constructed in the nineteenth

century, I will argue, from criticism, biography, and other discourse built around and over the remains of Romantic writers, and much of the accumulated meaning of the image developed after and on top of—with the occlusion and suppression this implies—authors' own intentions and literary productions, which cannot in any case be straightforwardly equated or seen outside the social process of creating and publishing texts. Peter Ackroyd's hyperbole would make most modern critics and scholars of Romanticism uncomfortable, in the wake of more than a quarter-century of rejections or revisions of the 'Romantic ideology' or the 'myth of solitary genius'. This is apparent not only in the positions of Jerome McGann and Jack Stillerger associated with these phrases respectively, but in the contemporary prevalence of historicist Romantic studies. That is to say, more attempts have been made to refute such ideologies and myths through an expanded canon, or new contexts and disciplinary approaches, than to discuss how and why they emerged and developed in the first place. As Christopher R. Miller has suggested in a recent account of the overlapping idea of the 'misunderstood genius' in Romanticism, which traces the figure through influential critics such as M. H. Abrams, Walter Jackson Bate, and Harold Bloom to the present, contemporary critics have largely 'been interested in demystifying or problematizing the archetype of Romantic genius rather than in inquiring into its continued relevance'.⁴ The Romantic mad poet is indeed bound up with ideology, and is indeed sometimes a product of pure mythologization and mystification, in the different shades of meaning these cognate words suggest, i.e. expressed in the literary mythology developed in the body of a writer's work, or attached to the writer's persona in the form of biographical and biographical-critical myths. Nevertheless, as an enduring and influential cultural fantasy at the very least, 'its continued relevance' demands more than the blunt dismissal or plain debunking that is often the initial response of informed readers or critics.

A further analogy for the ironies and complexities surrounding the image of the Romantic mad poet may be seen in the quotation above from *Youth* (2002), the delicately merciless exposure of personal and aesthetic lost illusions that constitutes the middle volume of J. M. Coetzee's 'autre-biography'. The protagonist 'John', struggling hopelessly with his dutiful modernism, his study of Ford Madox Ford and his sterile pseudo-Eliotic poetry, wonders if madness might be the answer, the key needed to transform his 'exhaustion and misery' into the stuff of real poetic inspiration. Despite his self-defining hostility to Romantic writing ('How he could once have been so infatuated with Keats as to write Keatsian sonnets he cannot comprehend... Reading half a dozen pages of Keats is like yielding to seduction'), John cannot help but invoke and place his hope in this old belief, even as it is caught in historical self-consciousness ('That era is over') and dismissed as personally incongruous or, even worse, unfashionable ('Surely absinthe and tattered clothes are old-fashioned by now... anyway?'). 'His own madness,' he decides, 'if it is to be his lot to suffer madness, will be otherwise—quiet, discreet.'⁵ The latter part of Coetzee's book, in which the protagonist finds himself mired in his emblematically rational job as a computer programmer, both traces the fulfilment of this pose and, with increasingly devastating irony, coolly exposes its hollowness. It is

possible to be deluded about delusion, then; to pronounce the belief in poetic madness and the mad poet dead and buried, and yet subscribe to it still. Both as Romantic ideology and romantic myth, it may be dangerous to handle.

With these dangers in mind, it may be useful to emphasize or expand upon what this book is *not*. It is not—and this should already be apparent—in any sense a straightforward endorsement of poetic madness or the Romantic mad poet as emblems of rebellious, illimitable genius, struggling heroically against the oppressions of sanity and convention with the liberating primal force of madness. My concern with this idea, recurrent and possibly ineradicable as it may be, at least in popular culture and popular conceptions of the Romantic, is to provide a genealogy of its development in the nineteenth century. This concern emerged from earlier research undertaken into twentieth-century attempts, in the writing of the modernist or postmodernist avant-garde, and subsequently in popular fiction, to imitate schizophrenia; or rather, those features widely and often inaccurately thought to characterize the 'schizophrenic'. It became clear that many of the attitudes underlying this questionable yet productive enterprise (for example, the role of primitivism and a primitivist aesthetic) required tracing back through the previous century.⁶ Given this rich and contentious subject, it is surprising that there has been no sustained account dealing with the development of the image of the Romantic mad poet, and the possibilities and pitfalls of the role. In most secondary references to the subject, this troublesome inheritance is either endorsed with merry hyperbole, on which more presently, or in older scholarly writing dismissed as nothing more than an embarrassing fiction to be stepped past or preferably ignored.

For the latter tendency, one might observe how rapidly Frank Kermode, in the chapter on 'The Artist in Isolation' and 'the evolution of assumptions relating to the image of poetry' in his book *Romantic Image* (1957), moves to 'distinguish, in passing, between this opinion [*sc.* that "artists are different, isolated"] as a serious belief held by and about artists, and the vulgarized bohemian tradition... really a confused echo from the Paris of Mürger and Huysmans and the *poètes maudits*, with a few collateral English rumours'. Kermode is careful to mark off both of these 'ubiquitous' topics as nevertheless only 'a subsidiary theme', and 'rumours' of madness are quickly subsumed into 'the paradox that the artist is magnificently sane'.⁷ For individual poets, Northrop Frye's terse judgement that 'the question of Blake's "madness", of course, is now recognized to be not a question of fact at all, but a pseudo-problem' is also representative of scholarly touchiness on the subject.⁸ Yet Frye's labours, in *Fearful Symmetry* (1947) and elsewhere, to fix Blake as a thoroughly, even ruthlessly systematic poetic thinker, were arguably a response to the earlier tradition of his supposed anti-rational mysticism and vagueness, a tradition built out of the elements of contemporary critical and later biographical characterizations of Blake as a madman or abstracted man-child, incapable of practicality or coherence, especially in his later poetry. The case of Shelley is complementary: continued attempts either to position him within a frame of idealism or irrationality, or to rescue him from that frame—from Matthew Arnold, via T. S. Eliot, and F. R. Leavis's notorious judgement on 'a recognized essential trait of Shelley's: his

weak grasp upon the actual', through to the psychoanalysed and then thoroughly historicized and political author—both echoed and sought to repudiate earlier versions of 'Mad Shelley' from contemporary responses and subsequent criticism and biography.⁹ Even 'pseudo-problems' can have significant and lasting after-effects on the way in which an author, their works, or indeed an entire literary movement, are read and conceptualized.

As for hyperbole, a problematic reiteration and endorsement of post-Romantic prejudices about the liberating effect of insanity is clear in general critical writing on madness and literature. Even the title of *Dionysus in Literature* (1994), one thematic collection of essays, suggests the slide from historical assessment into participation in such rhetoric—here a version of Nietzsche's arguments on the Apollonian and Dionysian in *The Birth of Tragedy* (1871). And indeed the collection's commentary does set a vaguely Nietzschean model of rebellion and freedom against an equally vague repressive 'sanity', scare quotes included. This oppositional relationship is taken to be culturally and historically universal, and madness is used as a reversible concept that reflects a supposed 'insanity of daily existence and of absurd situations' yet captures a higher ground of moral or spiritual sanity and righteousness.¹⁰ As Shoshana Felman has suggested, there is often an 'inflation of discourses' about madness and literature.¹¹ Critical material less caught up in the rhetoric of opposition also sometimes resorts to emotive or promotional hyperbole. For example, in a more varied and grounded collection of essays on the subject, a vocabulary of mysterious allure and fascination still intrudes: literary madness is 'a seductive, a compelling subject... like a drug'.¹²

Part of the picture here is the diffused influence, whether acknowledged or not, of the anti-psychiatry movement and its role in the 1960s counterculture. The visibility and reputation of R. D. Laing, David Cooper, Thomas Szasz, and other such thinkers may have declined towards the end of the century, especially among those professionally concerned with thinking about and treating mental illness. However, it is not unusual in critical and literary writing on madness to encounter what are essentially uncritical endorsements of Laing's notorious statement from the height of the late 1960s: 'Madness need not be all breakdown. It may also be break-through. It is potentially liberation and renewal as well as enslavement and existential death.'¹³ Of course, the 1960s counterculture saw its version of liberation as Romanticism's legacy, to some extent. Figures such as Blake were ubiquitous touchstones in the sixties, especially in his contrarian aspect from *The Marriage of Heaven and Hell*. But Blake was also cited as a specifically anti-psychiatric authority. Laing quotes him repeatedly, even before his radical phase and *The Politics of Experience*, alongside the case histories in his earlier and less explicitly polemical work, *The Divided Self* (1960). Indeed Blake is credited with a better understanding of Laing's idea of schizophrenia than any other writer.¹⁴ Other Romantic poets also appeared as anti-psychiatric icons. Edward Bond's play about John Clare, *The Fool* (1975), was produced at the home of modern British theatrical radicalism, the Royal Court, with Tom Courtenay, an established idol of the awkward squad, as Clare. As Rebecca Nesvet has noted, Bond's Clare is the mad poet as doomed rebel, 'fighting vainly with his circumstances, the class system, reality', reflecting a more

pessimistic note about madness from those leaden years after the dialectics of liberation had fallen somewhat flat, also to be found in plays of the Royal Court era such as Peter Shaffer's *Equus* (1973) and David Edgar's *Mary Barnes* (1979).¹⁵ One needs to be careful about following this intuitive entanglement of radical cultures and revolutionary historical moments.

The appeal of 'madness as breakthrough' is obvious for an initial appraisal of the Romantic mad poet. It allows the reader to celebrate and endorse the value of misunderstood madness, or writers apparently neglected or unfairly maligned by philistine and reductively diagnostic predecessors—but still somehow within the canon. It gives the opportunity for the enlightened radical to himself or herself play Philippe Pinel, releasing the unfortunates from their chains. It also provides an open analogy for artistic progression, a framework for critical commentary on life and works, and ultimately a blank canvas, an unclaimed *terra nullius* into which one 'breaks through' with an interpretation, or a mirror in which our own ideas can be reflected and amplified. Such an approach can be seen in Jeremy Reed's *Madness: The Price of Poetry* (1989), in which madness stands for 'a stream that not even long drought could extinguish', an undefined, unlimited, and absolute plenitude of creation, and interpretation and exegesis.¹⁶ But it is important to resist, or at least to attempt to circumscribe, this sort of approach from the start. This is not to confine the cultural meanings and metaphors attached to madness, which even in a rigorous historical frame can be enormously divergent, nor merely to avoid common platitudes. Rather, the core problem is a spiral of unacknowledged repetition and reiteration. To use mid-twentieth-century enthusiasm or late twentieth-century theories about creative or liberating madness to examine nineteenth-century instances of the same is problematic as it ignores a line of transmission in which those instances, in various disciplinary, ideological, and institutional contexts, took key parts in forming apparently distant or distinct modern habits of thinking about madness. Romantic or post-Romantic (in the sense of reception and reputation) formulations of literary unreason have been so pervasive that it is hard to say that we have gone altogether beyond them, or can claim a neutral position from which to comment on these formulations.

So, as this book is not Nietzschean, nor Laingian, neither is it written in the spirit of Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari, nor any other similar critical theorists. Even more than for Laing, the stance taken here towards anachronism, retrospect, and genealogy precludes the use of a frame of ideas drawn from the two works these authors wrote together on madness, capitalism, schizophrenia, and psychoanalysis, *L'Anti-Édipe* (1972) and *Mille plateaux* (1980). These works are the clearest manifestations of Deleuze's place in the *soixante-huitard* generation alongside anti-psychiatry, or anti-psychoanalysis; they draw on a sense of madness, specifically schizophrenia, as release and liberation in a way that aligns them very much with that movement, although Deleuze and Guattari use their terms in complex and idiosyncratic ways. Deleuze, in his thinking on madness, also drew from his background as a Nietzschean, developed in *Nietzsche et la philosophie* (1962). More profoundly, however, the concern of this book is the patterns in the representation of Romanticism that historically underpinned the possibility

of articulating modern positions essentially predicated on ideas of the oppositional purity and supernatural creative capacity of madness, such as those evident in the anti-Oedipal project.

This book is also not itself psychoanalytic in the tradition of Freud, Jung, or any other similar thinker, or in their widespread and somewhat diluted literary influence. These demurrals are not motivated by any particular antagonism or indifference to psychoanalytic views of the mind, but by several further qualifications. Romanticism, like many areas of the literary canon, and probably more than most, is hardly lacking in interpretation from psychoanalytic perspectives of one sort or another.¹⁷ Following this closely, it should be becoming increasingly clear that I am also less interested here in using any theory of psychology to interpret Romantic poetry than in tracing the history of this interpretative habit itself; that is to say, the history of how a psychopathological or even simply a psychological approach to poetry emerged in the first place, and how this basic orientation, a version of what Paul Ricœur defined as the hermeneutics of suspicion, or what Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, following Ricœur, has called 'paranoid reading', is rooted in the reception of literature in the nineteenth century.¹⁸ The idea that this general approach or attitude is a post-Romantic problem is certainly not an entirely original conceit. Lionel Trilling articulated it as long ago as 1945, in 'Art and Neurosis', his response to Edmund Wilson's *The Wound and the Bow* (1941) as an exemplar of early psychoanalytic criticism:

The question of the mental health of the artist has engaged the attention of our culture since the beginning of the Romantic Movement. Before that time it was commonly said that the poet was 'mad', but this was only a manner of speaking, a way of saying that the mind of the poet worked in a different fashion from the mind of the philosopher; it had no real reference to the mental hygiene of the man who was the poet. But in the early nineteenth century, with the development of a more elaborate psychology and a stricter and more literal view of mental and emotional normality, the statement was more strictly and literally intended.¹⁹

Trilling suggests that there was a historical turn in social and individual attitudes towards artists, specifically towards poets, a turn in which a negative association between artistic creativity and mental suffering, especially through pathology, was either initiated or radically amplified, and in which a first step was made towards the Freudian view of the mind generally, and the poet as neurotic or otherwise mentally abnormal in particular. Other writers on the same theme have followed Trilling on locating this shift in or resulting from Romanticism, often explicitly so.²⁰ One major aim here is to fill out the exact details of the historical turn towards which Trilling only gestures, and also to expand on the suggestion he makes only in passing (as his target is Freud) about 'the development of a more elaborate psychology and a stricter and more literal view of mental and emotional normality' in the early nineteenth century.

On another level, the lines of connection and influence between Romantic art and literature (German Romantic art and literature especially) and psychoanalysis are generally well known, if only via Freud's own references to Hoffmann and other

Romantic writers as his precursors.²¹ Moreover, from the perspective of the history of psychology, and especially the scholarship that has followed in the wake of Henri Ellenberger's seminal *The Discovery of the Unconscious* (1970), it has also become increasingly difficult to see in Freud the great conceptual and cultural break with the earlier nineteenth century he was once thought to embody.²² The connection can seem frail in other respects: Freud's explicit theorizing on those great Romantic themes, creativity and the imagination, as laid out in 'Creative Writers and Day-Dreaming' (1908) for example, is often disappointingly reductive. As readers from Roger Fry on have complained, he reduces the esemplastic force to mere wish fulfilment.²³ Nevertheless, much general writing on madness and literature retains a somewhat vague or unexamined Freudian orientation, among the other primarily modern or contemporary concerns I have suggested. Lillian Feder's *Madness in Literature* (1980), with its conceptual frame of the conscious mind forming unconscious impulses into symbolic patterns, the dissolution of ego-boundaries and so on, provides good examples of such underlying assumptions. It is more instructive, however, to turn to a canonical example of literary criticism, born under the climate of Freud in its focus on the libido and erotic deviance, if not itself explicitly Freudian, to suggest how critical tradition has specifically reiterated constructions of the psychopathology of the poet contemporary with Romantic writing.

Mario Praz's *The Romantic Agony* (first published in 1930) states a not entirely sympathetic intent to map out 'certain states of mind and peculiarities of behaviour, which are given a definite direction by various types and themes that recur as insistently as myths engendered in the ferment of the blood'.²⁴ It is difficult in this last phrase, particularly in its odd archaic circulatory humoralism, not to hear an echo of William Hazlitt's sketch and other early biographical images of Shelley as having 'a fever in his blood, a maggot in his brain'.²⁵ (I discuss Hazlitt's sketch at further length in Chapter 5, on biography, in the section 'Shelley's Eccentricities'.) Praz, although Shelley is central to his book, does not refer to Hazlitt at all. Here one can see a major pattern in miniature. Later verdicts on Romantic writing, especially psychoanalytic or psychobiographical readings, reflect the transmitted influence of earlier, polemical constructions of authors' works, minds, and bodies as medically deviant, but discard or even disguise them in order to claim the position of modern critical authority. This pattern emerges even in relation to more apparently scientific, less obviously culturally and ideologically determined forms of knowledge. Hazlitt's language is also echoed in modern writing on madness and creativity, including in the rhetoric of the authors of the most widely read works of popular science and psychology on the topic: see, for example, Daniel Nettle's *Strong Imagination* (2001), as discussed in the first section of Chapter 6, or Kay Redfield Jamison's claim that 'mania is a strange and driving force, a destroyer, a fire in the blood'.²⁶

Another mode of analysis this book tries to avoid is the use of the nosology or diagnostic tools of contemporary medical-model psychology and psychiatry, as recorded for example in the 'psychiatrist's bible', the *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders* (DSM), published by the American Psychiatric