

Romanticism and Popular Culture in Britain and Ireland

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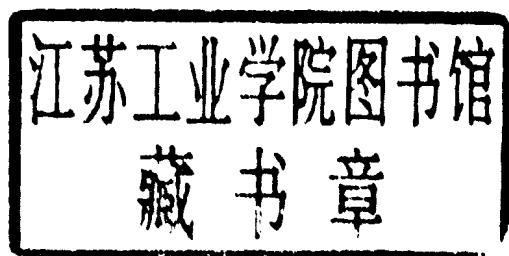
Philip Connell and Nigel Leask



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PHILIP CONNELL AND NIGEL LEASK



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ROMANTICISM AND POPULAR CULTURE IN BRITAIN AND IRELAND

From the ballad seller to the Highland bard, from 'pot-house politics' to the language of low and rustic life, the writers and artists of the British Romantic period drew eclectic inspiration from the realm of plebeian experience, even as they helped to constitute the field of popular culture as a new object of polite consumption.

Representing the work of leading scholars from both Britain and North America, *Romanticism and Popular Culture in Britain and Ireland* offers a series of fascinating insights into changing representations of 'the people', while demonstrating at the same time a unifying commitment to rethinking some of the fundamental categories that have shaped our view of the Romantic period. Addressing a series of key themes, including the ballad revival, popular politics, urbanization, and literary canon-formation, the volume also contains a substantial introductory essay, which provides a wide-ranging theoretical and historical overview of the subject.

PHILIP CONNELL is a university lecturer at the University of Cambridge, and a Fellow of Selwyn College. His first book, *Romanticism, Economics and the Question of 'Culture'*, was published in 2001. He has also published a number of essays on the literature and culture of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, and has held an Early Career Fellowship at the Centre for Research in the Arts, Social Sciences, and Humanities (CRASSH) in Cambridge.

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PART I

Introduction

CHAPTER I

What is the people?

Philip Connell and Nigel Leask

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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