

The Context of English Literature

THE ROMANTICS

Edited by Stephen Prickett



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ENGLISH LITERATURE

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EDITED BY
STEPHEN PRICKETT

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- 3 W. Blake, *The Canterbury Pilgrims*.
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- 9 J. Constable, *The Haywain*.
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Introduction

STEPHEN PRICKETT

Unlike other volumes in this series, whose titles denote periods of time with more or less arbitrary boundaries, we see the 'Romantics' as characterizing a distinctive age, or even a 'movement'. The period between, say, 1770 and 1830 had, or was believed to have, an internal consistency and rationale uniquely its own. Our problem is how to define it.

There is, in fact, remarkably little agreement on what constitutes 'Romanticism'. The original meaning of 'romantic' was simply 'as in the old romances'. It first came to prominence as one of a group of similarly derived words in the 1650s – along with such forms as 'romancical' (1656) 'romancial' (1653) and even 'romancy' (1654). It was nearly always used in an uncomplimentary sense, as in the case of 'romancer' (1663), meaning 'liar'. If not always so bluntly disreputable, the suggestions of fable, fairy tale and even dream were never very far from the word throughout most of the eighteenth century. We find references to 'childish and romantic poems', 'romantic absurdities and incredible fictions', and even to 'vile and romantic' deceptions. As late as 1803 Mrs Trimmer, a stalwart of the Society for Promoting Christian Knowledge (SPCK) Tract Committee and indefatigable do-gooder, published in her magazine, *The Guardian of Education*, an attack on a recently published collection of fairy stories, describing them as 'full of romantic nonsense'. Coleridge himself in *Biographia Literaria* (1817) tells us that in the *Lyrical Ballads* he had undertaken to write of 'persons

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and characters supernatural, or at least romantic'. But even from the middle of the eighteenth century another tone had crept into the word. For some the very element of unreality or even of the supernatural was strangely attractive. Sometimes indeed it is not easy to detect the exact flavour of the word as it was used, and this may even suggest an ambiguity in the mind of the user. Thus Thomas Percy, the antiquary, in his 'Essay on the Ancient Minstrels in England' described King Richard I simply as 'romantic'. Percy's essay was published as a preface to his enormously influential *Reliques of Ancient Poetry* in 1765; and he was writing of Richard in the specific context of medieval metrical romances. Nevertheless, the adjective seems to imply something more than a mere story-book quality, and it is not difficult in the case of Richard the Lion-heart to see how 'romantic', the antiquarian and poetic adjective, could come almost insensibly to convey another much more exciting meaning, a meaning that was to be fully explicit by the time of Scott's novel *Ivanhoe*, on the same theme, which was published in 1819, only twenty-five years later than the fourth and final edition of Percy's *Reliques* (1794).

The first clearly unambiguous examples of the new sense of the word, however, came not from England but from Germany in the opening years of the nineteenth century. According to Goethe, he and Schiller were the first to use it as the opposite of 'classical'. For August Wilhelm von Schlegel the 'modern' (which generously embraces the entire Christian era) is 'romantic' in contrast with the classic spirit of the ancient world. 'The term', he continues,

is certainly not inappropriate; the word is derived from *romance* – the name originally given to the languages which were formed from the mixture of the Latin and the old Teutonic dialects, in the same manner as modern civilization is the fruit of the heterogeneous union of the peculiarities of the northern nations and the fragments of antiquity; whereas the civilization of the ancients was much more of a piece.¹

For Schlegel the characteristic quality of 'romanticism' is this union of opposite or discordant qualities. It is dialectical, whereas 'classicism' is homogeneous. In this is expressed the predominant sensibility of his own time. 'Romantic, for Schlegel,' writes A. K.

Thorlby, 'meant more than a modern style, it meant a modern manner of experiencing reality.'²

Yet the very breadth of Schlegel's category of the 'modern' must give us pause in trying to narrow down the Romantic era to a mere sixty years. Schlegel, after all, thought of Shakespeare as the greatest 'modern' writer and the supreme example of a 'romantic' artist. If the qualities we characterize as 'Romantic' have been with us for two thousand years, is it not more plausible to see them as *permanent* aspects of the human spirit? Should we not, perhaps, abandon Schlegel's idea that romanticism replaced classicism with the coming of Christianity and agree that *both* elements are to some extent present as perpetual 'contraries' in every period? In the Greek world, for instance, it is not difficult to see Aeschylus as 'romantic' and Sophocles as 'classic'. In England the Elizabethan was surely as much a 'romantic' age as was the end of the eighteenth century. Augustanism was, by its own claim, an essentially neoclassic ideal. So some writers have argued. F. L. Lucas, for instance, has plausibly suggested that the essential difference between romanticism and classicism is not aesthetic, but psychological – reflecting 'the strictures with which . . . the reality-principle and the super-ego control . . . emanations from the unconscious mind'.³ The former word attracts such adjectives as 'wild', 'natural', 'spontaneous', and is in Nietzsche's language 'Dionysian', while the latter implies control, order, reality and the 'Apollonian' qualities.

Faced with such a broad use of the term, yet other critics have reacted by becoming sternly nominalist, and insisting that we restrict the use of 'Romantic' to no more than the last thirty years of the eighteenth century and the first thirty of the nineteenth. In other words, that we should stipulatively *define* the word simply and sweepingly as 'that which was thought, felt, and written between 1770 and 1830'. But though this may introduce some kind of order into semantic confusion, it raises, of course, even more severe problems than it solves. Can we *really* class together Crabbe and Wordsworth, Scott and Jane Austen, Peacock and Shelley like this without drawing further distinctions?

Partly in face of such dilemmas, one eminent twentieth-century American scholar, A. O. Lovejoy, has argued with great controversial panache that the term 'Romanticism', *in the singular*, has no meaning at all.

What is needed is that any study of the subject should begin with a recognition of a *prima-facie* plurality of Romanticisms, of possibly quite distinct thought-complexes, a number of which may appear in any one country. . . . There is a movement which began in Germany in the seventeen-nineties – the only one which has an indisputable title to be called Romanticism, since it invented the term for its own use. There is another movement which began pretty definitely in England in the seventeen-forties. There is a movement which began in France in 1801. There is another movement which began in France in the second decade of the century, is linked with the German movement, and took over the German name. There is the rich and incongruous collection of ideas to be found in Rousseau. There are numerous other things called Romanticism by various writers whom I cited at the outset. The fact that the same name has been given by different scholars to all of these episodes is no evidence, and scarcely even establishes a presumption, that they are identical in essentials. There may be some common denominator of them all; but if so, it has never yet been clearly exhibited, and its presence is not to be assumed *a priori*.⁴

Lovejoy's argument is a salutary reminder of the dangers of national parochialism or of too neat a system of classification. Other scholars, however, have accepted his challenge and attempted to show that just such a 'common denominator' or denominators exist – and with some success. René Wellek, for instance, argues that in spite of obvious differences:

If we examine the characteristics of the actual literature which called itself and was called 'romantic' all over the continent, we find throughout Europe the same conceptions of poetry and of the workings and nature of poetic imagination, the same conception of nature and its relation to man, and basically the same poetic style, with a use of imagery, symbolism, and myth which is clearly distinct from those of eighteenth-century neoclassicism. This conclusion might be strengthened or modified by attention to other frequently discussed elements; subjectivism, mediaevalism,

folklore, etc. But the following three criteria should be particularly convincing, since each is central for one aspect of the practice of literature: imagination for the view of poetry, nature for the view of the world; and symbol and myth for poetic style.⁵

This attempt to find in Romanticism certain characteristic ways of looking at the world, distinctive to the period, represents a kind of half-way house between those who would see it in terms of specific beliefs, and those who would emphasize merely common states of mind. Certainly it is true that, say, Blake, Wordsworth, Coleridge and Keats did appear to share broadly similar concerns in their lives, their art and in their attitude to their 'environment' (itself, in this sense, a late Romantic word actually coined by Carlyle). Yet as Wellek half-admits by his caution and studied generality, this similarity tends to be one of terminology rather than of substance. Wordsworth and Coleridge, for instance, commonly used 'imagination' to describe a *psychological* activity, whereas for Blake and Keats (in very different ways) the word carried a transcendent or visionary connotation.

But perhaps the biggest criticism that can be made of Wellek's broad 'criteria' is that they explicitly leave out of account the wider non-literary aspects of Romanticism. Not merely did it affect literature but all the arts. Our criteria must include Turner and Beethoven as well as Coleridge. Furthermore, Romanticism was a political, religious and philosophic phenomenon. With this in mind, some have sought a common factor in the prevailing metaphysical ethos, rather than within the principles of any one art form or movement. T. E. Hulme, the philosopher (1888-1917), for instance, argued that in a curious kind of way Romanticism was fundamentally a religious phenomenon.

They had been taught by Rousseau that man was by nature good, that it was only bad laws and customs that had suppressed him. Remove all these and the infinite possibilities of man would have a chance. This is what made them think that something positive could come out of disorder, this is what created the religious enthusiasm. Here is the root of all romanticism: that man, the individual, is an infinite reservoir of possibilities; and if you

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can so rearrange society by the destruction of oppressive order then these possibilities will have a chance and you will get progress.⁶

The inevitable result of this kind of facile optimism, he goes on, was disillusion and despair.

Just as in the case of the other instincts, Nature has her revenge. The instincts that find their right and proper outlet in religion must come out in some other way. You don't believe in a God, so you begin to believe that man is a God. You don't believe in Heaven, so you begin to believe in a heaven on earth. In other words you get romanticism. The concepts that are right and proper in their own sphere are spread over, and so mess up, falsify and blur the clear outlines of human experience. It is like pouring a pot of treacle over the dinner table. Romanticism then, and this is the best definition I can give of it, is spilt religion.⁷

Though, as the style suggests, this is a tactical and polemical definition from a writer whom many might consider to be a highly romantic thinker himself, this notion of Romanticism as 'spilt religion' is a useful one – and not only because it helps us to shed narrowly literary definitions. In spite of the fact that, as we have seen, the origins of the word are indeed literary, literature was no more than one of a number of interconnected areas where the new mood revealed itself. For those who had lived through the French Revolution, the philosophical revolution initiated by Kant and the Idealist philosophers, together with the transformation of biblical studies by the Higher Critics in Germany; in England, the Evangelical Revival and the Oxford Movement (with their counterparts in a resurgent Catholicism in France and Germany), and the varying moods of elation and despair that accompanied the world's first industrial revolution; or the Europe-wide transformation of neoclassical ideals in the visual arts – it was clear that literature stood in a highly complex relationship to a world caught up in an unprecedented process of *change*.

Here, at least, is a simple but fundamental point over which there is little dispute. We may put it like this: up until sometime in the

middle of the eighteenth century it was possible for a great many people to believe (however falsely) that they lived in a world dominated by great unchangeable permanencies – in agriculture, in the means of production, in religion, in social and political relationships. By 1820 it was impossible to think in this way. We can focus this very neatly in a single literary example from Gray's *Elegy*, published, conveniently for our argument, at the mid-point of the eighteenth century, in 1751.

The early part of the poem is specifically devoted to a celebration of the unchanging pattern of village life. This Gray achieves through a dense network of classical quotations and allusions familiar to any educated reader of the day. Such lines as:

For them no more the blazing hearth shall burn,
Or busy housewife ply her evening care:
No children run to lisp their sire's return,
Or climb his knees the envied kiss to share.

(lines 21–4)

were not merely a conscious echo of Lucretius' *De Rerum Natura* (Book III, lines 894–6),⁸ but were specifically meant to *remind* the reader of that fact – just as the following stanza was intended to recall Virgil's *Georgics*. Gray is calling attention to his borrowings not to parade learning but to appeal to a common consensus on the familiar and unchanging rhythms of rural existence. This was how it had *always* been. The life of the Roman peasant, it is implied, was in its essentials no different from the cottager of Stoke Poges in Gray's own day. That this was in many ways untrue is beside the point. What matters is Gray's confident sense of that unbroken continuity and the fact that he can so effortlessly and (as we know from contemporary references) so successfully assume that his readers will share that sense.

What follows is, in the light of this, the more extraordinary:

Perhaps in this neglected spot is laid
Some heart once pregnant with celestial fire;
Hands that the rod of empire might have swayed,
Or waked to ecstasy the living lyre.

But knowledge to their eyes her ample page
Rich with the spoils of time did ne'er unroll;

Chill penury repressed their noble rage,
And froze the genial current of the soul (lines 45–52)

The elegiac mood is unbroken. Gray is ostensibly doing no more than extend the commonplace moral that whatever our station in life we are all equal in death – and, incidentally, once more demonstrating how rich with the spoils of time his own lines are by yet more allusions to Lucretius, Milton and Pope. They serve to re-affirm how far from his mind any thought of originality was. Yet his argument at this point is not based, as one might expect, upon conventional notions of ‘degree’, the Chain of Being, or any kind of divinely endorsed social order, but simply upon *poverty*. Earlier poets, as late as Pope in Gray’s own century, had taken it for granted that the inequalities of the social order, with its complex hierarchies of rank and privilege, were part of the unalterable nature of things – ordained, if not by God, then at least by necessity, and for many the latter was merely an expression of the former.

There is not the slightest evidence to suggest that Gray would have wished consciously to disagree, yet simply with that bald statement, ‘Chill penury repressed their noble rage’, we have passed almost insensibly into a world governed by a quite different set of rules. If *all* that holds these villagers back from the fruits of education, and inhibits the growth of other Miltons or Hampdens, is money, then that is a problem with an easy solution. We are a hairs-breadth away from a call for universal primary education.

A hairs-breadth – and yet that is enough. There is, as we have just said, not the slightest evidence to suggest that this thought *consciously* ever occurred to Gray. We are a full generation away from the French Revolution and its slogan *la carrière ouverte aux talents*. What makes the *Elegy* so fascinating for us is the very sensitivity with which it exhibits the delicate balance of forces for change and stasis within Gray’s own intellectual milieu. The year 1751 was perhaps the last moment in English history when a major author could so unquestioningly assume the permanent shape of rural life, and, simultaneously, so phrase it as to ensure its eventual transformation. Within a few years almost every part of the country was feeling the effects of the enclosure movement and the accompanying agrarian revolution. A population explosion, an

increasing drift of labourers to the towns and even the construction of new canals and turnpike roads were to transform not merely Stoke Poges (where tradition, at least, places the poem) and tens of thousands of other villages like it, but also the *attitude* of people towards that way of life. One might rejoice in progress, or, more likely, deplore it, as Goldsmith, Crabbe and Wordsworth all did, but no one any more was going to say that village life was fixed in a Lucretian permanence.

Moreover, the literary mould that shaped the *Elegy* was also shattered. Though, as we have seen, Gray's particular way of putting things had social and even political implications, the very form he had chosen for his poem, the pastoral elegy, would have helped to prevent him from seeing them. By its own convention, such a poem was about the unchanging verities, not a questioning of the social order. But for those who came after Gray such questions could no longer be avoided. Literature was not an activity separate from politics, philosophy or religion.

At no time in literary history have the boundaries between one field of activity and the next been more blurred or difficult to define as in the Romantic period. Wordsworth, in a very real sense, came to poetry *through* politics. For Coleridge, he was the man uniquely fitted to write the first great 'philosophic' poem; for Shelley, he was the 'subtle-souled psychologist'. Wordsworth's subject was mankind – not a subject neatly divisible into self-contained disciplines. And what of Coleridge himself? Nowadays we tend to think of him primarily as a poet, yet few of his contemporaries would have done. In effect, his poetic career spans no more than six years out of a life of over sixty. He was a political journalist, preacher and lecturer, philosopher, theologian and literary critic, yet what strikes the reader is not this amazing diversity but the essential *unity* of his thought. All his multifarious activities can be seen as parts of a single, organic and constantly developing whole. Similarly, what of Blake – poet, political thinker, philosopher and theologian, as well as artist, engraver and painter? We could multiply examples (Turner wrote a poem called 'The Fallacies of Hope'), but the point is clear. The response to a quite new quality of change experienced for the first time in England towards the end of the eighteenth century, and only slightly later in Germany and France, meant also an inevitable destruction of the old categories of knowledge and even the actual