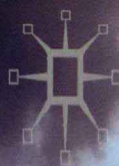




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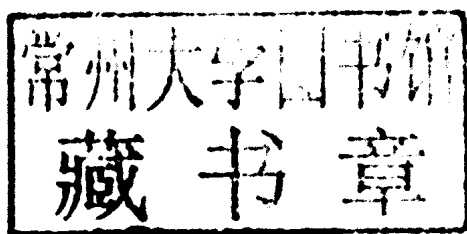
KEY CONCEPTS IN ROMANTIC LITERATURE

jane moore and
john strachan

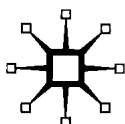


Key Concepts in Romantic Literature

Jane Moore and John Strachan



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General Editors' Preface

The purpose of Palgrave Key Concepts in Literature is to provide students with key critical and historical ideas about the texts they are studying as part of their literature courses. These ideas include information about the historical and cultural contexts of literature as well as the theoretical approaches current in the subject today. Behind the series lies a recognition of the need nowadays for students to be familiar with a range of concepts and contextual material to inform their reading and writing about literature.

This series is also based on a recognition of the changes that have transformed degree courses in Literature in recent years. Central to these changes has been the impact of critical theory together with a renewed interest in the way in which texts intersect with their immediate context and historical circumstances. The result has been an opening up of new ways of reading texts and a new understanding of what the study of literature involves together with the introduction of a wide set of new critical issues that demand our attention. An important aim of Palgrave Key Concepts in Literature is to provide accessible introductions to these new ways of reading and new issues.

Each volume in Palgrave Key Concepts in Literature follows the same structure. An initial overview essay is followed by three sections – Contexts, Texts and Criticism – each containing a sequence of alphabetically arranged entries on a sequence of topics. 'Contexts' essays provide an impression of the historical, social and cultural environment in which literary texts were produced. 'Texts' essays, as might be expected, focus more directly on the works themselves. 'Criticism' essays then outline the manner in which changes and developments in criticism have affected the ways in which we discuss the texts featured in the volume. The informing intention throughout is to help the reader create something new in the process of combining context, text and criticism.

John Peck
Martin Coyle

Cardiff University

General Introduction

This book offers a guide to the extraordinary efflorescence of English literature in the 'Romantic period', as the era between the outbreak of the French Revolution in 1789 and the passing of the Reform Act in 1832 is commonly denominated in conventional accounts of literary history. This relatively short period of time is rich in great literature, boasting as it does what are generally labelled the first (Blake, Coleridge and Wordsworth) and second (Byron, Keats and Shelley) generations of Romantic poets, several remarkable novelists (Jane Austen, Maria Edgeworth, James Hogg, Walter Scott and others), and potent and gifted essayists (Thomas De Quincey, William Hazlitt, Leigh Hunt, Charles Lamb amongst them). Literary historians have also reminded us that there were many important and highly significant women poets active in the age, from Mary Robinson and Charlotte Smith in the 1780s and 1790s through to Felicia Hemans and Letitia Elizabeth Landon in the 1820s and 1830s, figures who, though critically respected and highly successful in their day, have been – until recently – omitted from the Romantic canon.

Key Concepts in Romantic Literature is divided into three parts. The first, 'Contexts: History, Politics, Culture', examines the external forces which shaped the writers of the Romantic period, exploring the social, historical and philosophical contexts in which those authors worked. Poets and novelists do not write in a vacuum untouched by the world around them, and it is important that students of English literature have a sense of the society which fashioned the works that they discuss and critically dissect. This part of the book surveys British politics in the period after the cataclysmic French Revolution, which the poet Shelley rightly described as 'the master theme of the epoch', as well as showing how the contemporaneous Industrial Revolution indelibly changed the economic landscape of Great Britain. The Romantic poets emerged from the maelstrom of late Georgian British politics ('late Georgian' refers to the final third of the period between the accession of George I in 1714 and the death of George IV in 1830). This was by no means an age of political serenity: the first half of the Romantic age was dominated by European war and the second part, after the fall of Napoleon in 1815, was characterised by financial turmoil, political unrest and abortive revolution. Abroad, alongside its being embroiled in the Revolutionary and Napoleonic Wars, this was the period in which the British Empire was growing apace and attempting to recover from the

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recent, shattering loss of the American colonies in the 1770s. Great political issues such as these permeated through the literary consciousness of the age, alongside equally resonant matters such as the abolition of slavery, the position of women, and the future of Ireland and the so-called 'Catholic question'. We also examine the intellectual context which shaped British Romanticism, considering contemporary philosophy, religion (and atheism), science, and medicine.

The second part of the book, 'Texts: Themes, Issues, Concepts', examines the literature of the Romantic period in detail, addressing the Lake Poets Wordsworth and Coleridge alongside the other important poetic voices of the age: the iconoclast William Blake, the extraordinary cultural phenomenon that was Lord Byron and 'Byronism', the philosophical and poetical radical P. B. Shelley, the peerless prodigy John Keats and the remarkable women poets such as Smith, Hemans and Landon, who flourished in their day and are only now beginning to be read with assiduity once again, together with the no less noteworthy body of labouring-class poets, as we now call them (contemporaries preferred the term 'peasant poets'), figures such as Robert Burns and John Clare, who rose from relatively humble backgrounds to poetic eminence.

We should not see the Romantic period as notable in literary terms purely because of its poetry, and this part of the book also covers the other key literary genres in the literature of the day: the drama (Romantic-era theatre, like its women's writing, has been the recipient of much recent critical attention), the novel, the national tale and the Gothic romance. This section also discusses British poetry from outside England, from Scotland, Wales and Ireland – from 1801 a part of the United Kingdom – and examines some of the most crucial literary preoccupations of the writing of the age: nature, medievalism, the periodical essay, and discusses the frequently ferocious satire evident throughout the age.

The third and final part of this volume, 'Criticism: Approaches, Theory, Practice', examines the way in which Romanticism has been received from its earliest inception to the criticism of the present day. From the first, Romantic verse prompted debate and discussion; though we now think of them as 'canonical' writers of great importance, many of these poets were contentious in their day. William Wordsworth, for instance, was derided by some as a namby-pamby simpleton and John Keats by others as a vulgar 'Cockney'. From contemporaneous criticism, whether laudatory or vituperative, to Victorian idealisation of the Romantics, and after that to the late nineteenth- and early twentieth-century institutionalisation of the poets in early university syllabi, the repudiation of Romanticism by T. S. Eliot and the modernists, and on to the modern-day controversies attendant to deconstruction, the Yale School, psychoanalysis, feminism and the New

Historicism, this book surveys the way in which Romanticism has possessed an enduring appeal for literary criticism of all casts.

A note to the reader

This volume has something of the work of reference about it, and is not necessarily to be read from start to finish as if it were a novel, play or poem. Given that many readers will dip into the book where it suits their current need for information rather than reading the whole as continuous prose, some information is repeated occasionally, though, of course, written differently. An entry on 'What is Romanticism?', for instance, and an entry on the 'Literary and Philosophical Key Concepts' of the first generation of Romantic poets will both need to cover such issues as the creative imagination and nature. However, this overlap is kept to a minimum, and each essay is accompanied by cross-referencing as required.

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Introduction

What is Romanticism?

'Romanticism', declared the critic Thomas McFarland in 1987, 'is the true beginning of our modern world.' Though such bold idealism regarding the importance of the Romantic era has come under fire in recent years, notably from the New Historicist critics discussed below, the sense that there was something epoch-making about the literature of the period around the turn of the nineteenth century is difficult to shift, and perhaps with good reason. For better or worse, the work of Wordsworth, Blake and Coleridge, and that of Byron, Shelley and Keats after them, changed the face of English poetry. For well over a century, whether admiring the Romantics and learning from them (Tennyson, Arnold and much of Victorian poetry) or, indeed, consciously repudiating their values (T. S. Eliot, Ezra Pound and much of modernist poetry), Romanticism shaped the nature of English verse from the late eighteenth century to the 1920s, and it continues to cast a long shadow to this day.

Despite its contemporary resonance and posthumous influence, the idea of 'Romanticism' is a hotly contested notion. Beyond stating that in terms of English literature it is generally seen as the writing of the period between 1789, the date of the French Revolution, and 1832, the year which saw the passing of the Great Reform Act, and pointing out that it has not much to do with 'romantic' in the St Valentine's Day sense of the term, defining Romanticism is not easy. As E. B. Burgum wrote in 1941, a critic 'who seeks to define Romanticism is entering a hazardous occupation which has claimed many victims'. Nonetheless, many have tried. Perhaps Arthur O. Lovejoy's famous 1924 notion of a 'plurality' of 'Romanticisms' lacking in a single unifying definition is more relevant than ever today when women poets and dramatists have somewhat belatedly been admitted to the Romantic canon. Indeed, part of Romanticism's appeal is the very plurality of its taxonomy. The leading New Historicist critic Jerome J. McGann optimistically contrives to see this very vagueness as a positive, writing in 1999 that 'it is the very looseness of the term that can promote helpful critical discussion. For the phenomena associated with Romanticism and Romantic poetry are volatile even to this day.' The present authors, studying Romantic poetry as undergraduates in the 1980s, were presented with courses entirely devoted to the so-called 'Big Six' male poets (Wordsworth, Coleridge, Blake, Byron, Shelley and Keats) in a manner unthinkable twenty

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years later, when survey courses on Romantic poetry included the likes of Mary Robinson, Charlotte Smith, Felicia Hemans and Letitia Elizabeth Landon as a matter of course. The nature of Romanticism is indeed volatile and has been so from the start of the nineteenth century.

Whatever its fruitful instability, certainly 'Romanticism' is a critical label that it is very difficult to do without, and it is indeed possible to make generalisations about the nature of that extraordinary cultural movement. Thomas McFarland's argument quoted above that Romanticism marks the origin of 'our modern world' might have an element of special pleading or exaggeration about it, but in terms of the history of British and European poetry, it has the ring of truth. Historically, critics have argued that there was a 'shift in sensibility' in the Romantic era, a move from the eighteenth-century neoclassical poetic paradigms of 'mimesis' (imitation), the following of ancient precedent, and didacticism, and a simultaneous departure from the Enlightenment philosophical values of rationalism and empiricism towards an expressive literary model, that is, towards the sense of poetry as proceeding from the individual poetic genius and imagination of the poet together with a philosophical cast of mind more attuned to the sublime, the transcendental and the supernatural. Indeed, Romanticism and the supposed change in poetic values which it represented in many ways still condition the way in which most people – though not necessarily most poets – think about the nature of poetry today. Take the notion of what makes a good poem; though not all contemporary versifiers would agree with the idea, many people would see this as poetry which is 'self-expressive', 'original', or 'imaginative'. All of these concepts are high Romantic notions. And, though it might seem odd to us today, none of them was particularly important to neoclassical poetics in the period before the Romantics, in the so-called 'Augustan' period of the earlier eighteenth century, the age of Alexander Pope and Jonathan Swift.

In Romantic literature, we see the clear emergence of a central emphasis upon the 'imaginative genius' of the poet. Though praising imaginative originality might seem an eminently natural thing to the modern eye, this expressive model of creation is rather remarkable in eighteenth-century thought. According to the neoclassical literary paradigm, the poet such as Pope or Dr Johnson derives his raw material from the perception of the world around him (and occasionally her). To the Romantic poet, however, more emphasis is placed on the work of art coming from within, on the internal being made external and upon the 'wondrous interchange' – to use Wordsworth's phrase – between poetic selfhood and the external world. Instead of imitating the external world, poetry – for the Romantic – often comes about as the result of an impulse within the poet. And the key term for this impulse is the 'creative imagination'. In the Romantic period, the emphasis shifts, that is, from the

neoclassical priorities of learning, imitation, judgement and decorum to a particular stress on the poet's natural spontaneity and genius.

Politically, Romanticism is permeated to the core by the French Revolution and France and the British reaction to it. *Intellectually*, it takes issue with the rationalist emphasis evident in much eighteenth-century Enlightenment thought. In the work of Wordsworth, Coleridge and Blake, and after them Keats and Shelley, there is a sense that there is something within the human individual for which empiricist thought fails to account, 'a sense sublime', to borrow another phrase from Wordsworth, 'of something far more deeply interfused'. And the Romantics have various names for that other: the sublime, the imaginative, the visionary, the poetic. *Thematically*, there is a concentration on 'nature'; but on the elemental side of nature rather than the carefully landscaped nature evident in neoclassical poetic imagery. Wordsworth, Coleridge and Shelley offer a vision of the wild and sublime power of the landscape and the centrality of humanity's relationship with nature. *Emotionally*, British Romanticism often expresses an extreme assertion of individual experience. *Poetically*, Romanticism took issue with the theoretical concerns and poetic practices of the neoclassical tradition: Wordsworth's literary criticism berates what he sees as the moribund formalism and laboured decorativeness of the 'poetic diction' of eighteenth-century poetry. Romanticism was also an acutely self-conscious literary form, whether in Coleridge and Wordsworth's autobiographical verse (the latter jocularly pointed out that 'it was a thing unprecedented in literary history for a man to talk so much about himself'), or in Keats's career-long tendency to write poems about poetry – 'meta-poetical' poetry – and the creative urge ('Romantic poems tend to be about romantic imagination' wrote W. K. Wimsatt and Cleanth Brooks in 1970).

Above all, perhaps, *selfhood* has generally been seen as the central preoccupation of Romantic poetry. The critic Harold Bloom once wrote that this was 'an age of ferocious selfhood', and he was only half joking. After Wordsworth (1770–1850), the poetic consciousness moves to the heart of English poetics. Certainly Romanticism stresses individual experience and, in particular, the individual experience of the poet, who is often characterised as a seer, a figure in receipt of intuitive truth who has a sense, sometimes strongly, sometimes tentatively, of the infinite and the transcendental. Romantic poetry manifests a stress on the poetic subject, whether in moments of exhilaration and inspiration or in periods of doubt and anxiety, as in the Romantic crisis lyric – Coleridge's 'Dejection. An Ode' (1802) or Wordsworth's 'Immortality Ode' (published 1807) – where the poet feels a sense of poetic and personal loss, which may – as in Wordsworth's poem – or may not – as in Coleridge's poem – be resolved by what the latter calls the 'shaping spirit of imagination'.

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So, what did this all-important word 'poetry' mean to the Romantic poets? In what is conventionally seen as one of the foundational documents of British Romanticism, William Wordsworth's combative 'Preface' to the *Lyrical Ballads* (1800), one of the most notable critical polemics in English literary history, the poet declares that 'I here use the word "Poetry" ... as opposed to the word Prose, as synonymous with metrical composition.' This plain-speaking characterisation is uncontentious in contemporary terms, conforming as it does to Dr Johnson's definition of poetry in his 1755 *Dictionary of the English Language*: 'Metrical composition; the art or practice of writing poems'. However, after beginning with the bald Johnsonian usage, Wordsworth goes on to insist that metrical composition must be used in a particular manner, a manner which epitomises imaginative activity. 'Poetry is the spontaneous overflow of powerful feelings', he declares, in the most notable short definition of the expressive literary model (though this is not to say that poetry has absolutely no connection with reason or thought; Wordsworth also insists that a poet is 'a man ... being possessed of more than usual organic sensibility, [who] had also thought long and deeply'). The simple notion of poetry as metrical composition is insufficient; for Wordsworth, metre must be employed in verse which speaks from the heart and the imagination.

Wordsworth returned to this idea subsequently, refining it in even more elevated fashion in his 1816 'Essay, Supplementary to the "Preface"' (i.e. to the *Lyrical Ballads*): 'Poetry proceeds ... from the soul of man, communicating its creative energies to the images of the external world.' In this and in several of the most notable conceptualisations of poetry offered by Romantic-era poet-critics, from Wordsworth and Coleridge to Shelley and Keats, what we are actually dealing with is what a given poet or critic would *like* poetry to be rather what it actually *is*. When we write of a poet's 'definition' of poetry – Wordsworth's 'emotion recollected in tranquillity' or Coleridge's notion of poetry (in the *Biographia Literaria* (1817)) as an art which 'brings the whole soul of man into activity' – what we are usually examining are idealist formulations, often made in some kind of poetical manifesto, rather than scholarly attempts to define poetry in a cool or dispassionate manner. Indeed, such declarations are frequently prompted by an awareness that poetry as it is currently manifested is nothing like what the poet-critic is declaring it to be. Thus Wordsworth, faced with a residual fondness amongst the reading public for the Popean couplet and 'poetic diction', is simultaneously offering a call to arms and repudiating the inheritance of early eighteenth-century poetry. He is describing the best form of poetry, celebrating what poetry should be rather than describing what it is. In the preface to his 1815 *Works*, Wordsworth quoted a dictum of Coleridge's approvingly: 'every great and original writer, in proportion as

he is great or original, must create the taste by which he is to be relished'. Wordsworth's poetry did not sell well in its early years and his work was also critically contentious, notably in the stinging attacks by the editor of the *Edinburgh Review*, Francis Jeffrey. However, after an initially mixed reception, attacked by Jeffrey but championed by the poetic avant garde, Wordsworth did create a taste for his work and, indeed, achieved the status of a classic during his long lifetime, his verse heavily influencing the poetry of the next hundred years and beyond. As Thomas De Quincey wrote in 1835, 'up to 1820 the name of Wordsworth was trampled underfoot; from 1820 to 1830 it was militant; from 1830 to 1835 it has been triumphant.'

Wordsworth's expressive model of poetry, with its emphasis on the emotional power of poetry, influenced the so-called 'second generation' of Romantic poets in Byron's 1813 conceptualisation of poetry as 'the lava of the imagination, whose eruption prevents an earthquake', Shelley's contention in the 'Defence of Poetry' (1821) that poetry, 'in a general sense' was 'the expression of the imagination', and in Keats's declaration in a letter of November 1817 that 'I am certain of nothing but of the holiness of the Heart's affections and the truth of the Imagination.' This second generation of Romantic poets veered between adoration of Wordsworth to frequent expressions of a kind of patricidal venom towards the poet. However, though Keats defined his verse against Wordsworth's in negative terms, characterising his own work as lacking in Wordsworth's 'egotistical sublime', though Shelley satirised the poet in his *Alastor; or, the Spirit of Solitude* (1816), on account of his political apostasy in turning from Radical to Tory, as one of those whose 'hearts are dry as summer dust', and though Byron mocked the Lake poet in his satires, from *English Bards and Scotch Reviewers* (1809) to *Don Juan* (1819–24), all of them were shaped and formed by Wordsworth. Indeed, Byron, whose third canto of *Childe Harold's Pilgrimage* (1816) is so infused by the Wordsworthian sublime and sense of the imagination, jestingly described the poet's work as a kind of inescapable contagion, writing in January 1817 that 'Shelley, when I was in Switzerland, used to dose me with Wordsworth physic even to nausea. ... I should, many a good day, have blown my brains out, but for the recollection that it would have given pleasure to my mother-in-law.'

Quite apart from his complex influence on the second generation of the Romantic poets, it is fair to say that Wordsworth shaped the poetic consciousness of the whole of the nineteenth century. Certainly, the Romantic vision prompted a significant number of later, Victorian conceptualisations of poetry, the most concise formulation of which is Thomas Hardy's declaration that poetry is 'emotion put into measure', a definition which manages to combine in four words both the functional ('measure') and the idealist ('emotion') definition of the term. John Ruskin's *Lectures on*

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Art (1870) poses a rhetorical question and answers thus: 'What is poetry? The suggestion, by the imagination, of noble grounds for the noble emotions.' It is in the face of such brazen post-Romantic idealism that modernist attacks on Romantic ideas of poetry were aimed, a fact best demonstrated in T. S. Eliot's declaration in 'Tradition and the Individual Talent' (1919) that 'Poetry is not a turning loose of emotion, but an escape from emotion; it is not the expression of personality, but an escape from personality.' Literary movements are fond of issuing manifestos and calls-to-arms, and here Eliot repudiates his immediate poetic inheritance just as Romantic – at least Wordsworthian Romantic – notions of poetry were themselves reactions against earlier, neoclassical notions of poetry.

Two important caveats should be made here. As we will see in the 'Texts' and 'Criticism' sections of this book, such representations of the nature of Romantic poetry, which stress the importance of the creative imagination and emphasise the centrality of the first and second generation of Romantic poets, have been put under great critical pressure in recent years, from two main sources. First, in the last two decades, feminist critics have pointed out that the standard narration of ('Big Six') Romantic poetry is solely confined to male poets, and ignores the fact that the Romantic era possessed a significant number of female poets who were both critically esteemed and highly successful in their day. Secondly, the revisionist criticism prompted by the work of Marilyn Butler in Great Britain and the New Historicist school inspired by Jerome McGann in North America has argued that Romantic criticism has generally been a criticism in thrall to Romanticism's own self-representations, a sense, in Butler's terminology, that critics 'of English Romanticism have tended to seem dazzled by the brilliance of the theoreticians of that movement', and consequently have been unwilling to offer a dispassionate critical analysis of their work. Such criticism also argued that, historically, Romantic criticism, as well as being preoccupied with such issues as the creative imagination, the sublime and so on, has also tended to concentrate on the formal properties of the works under discussion and is inattentive to the socio-historical contexts in which it was written. There has undeniably been a 'turn to history' in Romantic Studies since the late 1970s, away from the single attention to the text alone evident in the New Criticism of previous decades.

In conclusion, it should also be pointed out in any general discussion of the nature of Romanticism that the 'Romantic poets' did not see themselves as such. In Britain the word had several meanings, none of which pertain to our modern sense of the term. Dr Johnson's *Dictionary* defines 'romantick' as 'resembling the tales of romances, wild', 'improbable, false', and 'fanciful; full of wild scenery'. As Ian Jack amusingly puts it, 'Wordsworth, Byron, Shelley and Keats did not regard themselves as writing "romantic" poems

and would not – in fact – have been particularly flattered if they had been told that was what they were doing.’ The word did not carry the connotations it does today. This is not to say that there was not a sense that something new was happening in the poetry of the early nineteenth century. From the 1790s onwards there was a perception that a ‘new school’ of poetry was at work, a notion, characterised by Shelley, of the ‘spirit of the age acting through us all’. The notion of a ‘Romantic School’ of poetry was posthumously applied by Victorian critics seeking to make sense of the poetry of the opening decades of their century. The actual term ‘Romantic’ began to be applied only later (George Whalley dates the first appearance of the term ‘English Romantic School’ to Hippolyte Taine’s *Histoire de la Littérature Anglaise* (1862–7; English version 1871–2)), particularly amongst literary historians of the last quarter of the nineteenth century.

The eighteenth-century word ‘romantick’, Johnson tells us, derives from the word ‘romance’, ‘a tale of wild adventure’. In Britain in the eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries, it was understood in literary terms in the twin senses used by Horace Walpole in the preface to his Gothic novel *The Castle of Otranto* (1764), where he speaks of the ‘ancient romance’ – medieval tales of chivalry such as Chaucer’s ‘Knight’s Tale’ – and of the ‘modern romance’, the English novel in the manner of Defoe, Richardson and Fielding. So, how did the term change in meaning? The antecedents of the modern literary sense of ‘Romantic’ lie, in fact, in German literature and the modern sense was borrowed in the Victorian era from debates which had resonated through European – and in particular German and French – culture from the turn of the nineteenth century. When Wordsworth and Coleridge were in Germany in the winter of 1798–9, a controversy was beginning which would eventually change the nature of the word ‘Romantic’ in Britain. In 1798, August Wilhelm von Schlegel (1767–1845), the critic, philosopher and translator of Shakespeare, and his younger brother, the essayist and critic Friedrich von Schlegel (1772–1829), published a polemical magazine *Das Athenäum* (1798–1800) which noisily proselytised for what it called ‘romantisch’ poetry. In 1798 Friedrich declared that ‘Romantic poetry is a progressive, universal poetry,’ and between 1801 and 1804, August subsequently formulated the tenets of the new school in a series of lectures. The Schlegels, who saw themselves as twin volcanoes of literary-philosophical subversion, celebrated the Romantic, in contradistinction to the classical, which they characterised as dry and arid when compared with Romanticism, which was ‘forever striving after new and wonderful births’. The quarrels over Romanticism made little impact in the United Kingdom; as late as 1831, Thomas Carlyle, writing on the German poet Schiller, declared that ‘we are troubled with no controversies on Romanticism and Classicism’. However, within fifty years of Carlyle’s blithe