In his Preface to *Poems* (1853), Matthew Arnold describes as almost a form of sickness the self-referential character of modern Victorian poetry. Its morbidly introspective preoccupations lead him to remark that ‘the dialogue of the mind with itself has begun’. Today, however, we expect that the ‘modern’ work of literature will provide this personal voice; that originality and freshness of response will in some way replace old forms and rules with writing that is accessible, revealing what is going on inside the author’s head, instead of primarily describing the world outside.

It was during the Romantic period that the life of the writer began to come under the same kind of scrutiny as the work. First called to many people’s minds when thinking of the poet Percy Bysshe Shelley, for example, are the circumstances of his death. He was drowned when his small boat encountered a storm off the north-west coast of Italy, and his body was washed ashore with a copy of John Keats’s poems open in his pocket. He was cremated on the seashore by Lord Byron and the adventurer Edward Trelawney, and Byron snatched his heart out of the flames. This well-documented story inevitably led readers to think of Romantic poets like Shelley in terms of an enduring public image (that of the youthful and tragic Romantic exile) based on legendary episodes in their careers. A predominant notion of the Romantic poet is still popularly that of a subjective, introverted, young and storm-tossed
figure, perhaps dying young in pathetic, or in the case of Byron fighting for the cause of Greek independence, heroic circumstances.*

As virtual inventor of the ‘Romantic hero’ figure, in the celebrated verse-tales of his early years of fame (see Part Four: ‘Heroes and Anti-heroes’), it was Byron who recognised the limitations of making a cult of the value, and even the grandeur, of the individual sensitive soul. As the chapter on ‘Heroes and Anti-heroes’ shows, Byron was to turn away from the popular image of heroism with which he was associated, realising that although writing can be a valuable form of action, it must not be made a substitute for other kinds of action. He understood that working directly in the world to build a republic or going to fight in the cause of liberty is of more importance than the self-regard which, in its subscription to the myth of the writer-hero, can sometimes lead to destructiveness.

In Don Juan (1819–24), Byron engages directly with the real world, leaving behind the melancholy egotism of Childe Harold (1812, 1816 and 1818) and the heroes of the verse-tales and, in so doing, escapes the kind of morbidity that Matthew Arnold objects to in modern literature. By the middle of the nineteenth century, continental Romanticism was tied up with nationalism, and individual self-assertion took the form of glorying in the strength and power of the hero. Nietzsche, Wagner and Hitler have all been described as ‘Romantics’, and Oceanus’s remark in Keats’s Hyperion (1820), ‘’tis the eternal law / That first in beauty should be first in might’’, is a reminder that certain elements of Romanticism could be enlisted in the cause of dangerous ideologies.

The stereotyped version of the Romantic poet is a patchwork made up of very different figures. William Blake, a poet of the city, and William Wordsworth, a poet of nature, were innovative writers, physically dissimilar from the iconic images of the younger Romantics. Even in his youth, although a sympathiser, Wordsworth was not an active participant in the French Revolution of 1789, and in his greatest poetry he is not a rebel at all. In ‘Resolution and Independence’ (published in Poems in Two Volumes, 1807) he places, or displaces, the

* Although Byron was active in the campaign, he actually died in bed from a fever which he contracted at Missolonghi in 1824.
notions that literary men sometimes have of themselves, the sense of
the artist as bohemian rebel with or without a cause, when he remarks
on the deaths of young contemporaries (Robert Burns at thirty-seven,
Thomas Chatterton at seventeen), ‘We poets in our youth begin in
gladness; / But thereof comes in the end despondency and madness’
(ll. 48–9). After his encounter with the old leech-gatherer, a man ‘bent
double’ in age, yet still cheerfully responsive to the poet’s questions, he
realises the falsehood of an obsessive self-indulgence: ‘I could have
laughed myself to scorn, to find / In that decrepit Man so firm a mind’
(ll. 144–5).

The diversity in Romantic literature led A. O. Lovejoy to write of the
need to discriminate among many different ‘Romanticisms’. Romanticism
can involve a taste for nature and common life, or a taste for the
extraordinary, the supernatural and grotesque. It can describe the local
colour of one’s native country, but equally the exoticism of foreign parts.
It may either exalt simplicity or revolt against it. It can admire particularity
in describing a landscape or move away from the material world
altogether. To the English reader, the work of Blake, Wordsworth, Byron
and Shelley might suggest that the Romantics belong on the side of the
political Left. Yet it can be equally obvious from some European
perspectives that Romanticism can be a right-wing movement, beginning
with the resistance of France’s conservative neighbours to the French
Revolution, and linked with a Catholic religious revival.

Samuel Taylor Coleridge, the most theoretical of the English
Romantics, links poetry with the new philosophy of Kant,* and reflects
the inwardness of the contemporary religious revival in his sense of the
poet as a prophet, of being even God-like, in the importance he attaches
to the role of the creative Imagination (see Part Four: ‘Imagination,
Truth and Reason’). His views are developed after twenty years of a

* Immanuel Kant’s concept of Pure Reason (Critique of Pure Reason, 1781) is that of a
faculty which enables us to ‘think’ certain ideas, like ‘freedom’, without ‘understanding’
what such ideas could possibly mean. In this sense, poetry, while it might give us
intimations of what cannot be ‘understood’, nevertheless communicates something
acknowledged to be no less ‘real’. In The Prelude (1805) Wordsworth defines Imagination
as ‘absolute strength / And clearest insight, amplitude of mind, / And reason in her most
exalted mood’ (XIII.168–70).
bitter, divisive war in Europe and, in this context, it was deeply consoling, for writers and readers alike, to make art and the ideal seem to be more important and valid than reality. The concept of Romantic Imagination, for which Coleridge provided the essential definitions, has to be seen in this sense as a post-war phenomenon.

Wordsworth, who writes in his epic poem *The Prelude* (1805) of the growth of his own mind, is probably the most prominent English figure reflecting the Romantic subjectivism of a period often referred to as the ‘age of Wordsworth’. Traditionally, epics had been written on national or universal themes. Yet Wordsworth does go on to write about his nation after completing *The Prelude*, in his sonnets and in *The Excursion* (1814). The real-life subjects of his *Lyrical Ballads* collection (1798) fit in with a previous taste in poetry rather than establish a new one. But in these Wordsworth does not write as a simple man. Although he employs the ballad form and deals with elemental situations, his poems are not remotely like the folk ballads of tradition. They are a thoughtful man’s poems about simplicity. In poems which deal with figures from common life, Wordsworth shifts his emphasis from the poor subjects themselves to place it instead on the way he responds to them. Similarly, the landscape of ‘Tintern Abbey’, the last poem in the collection, is not presented as the busy, even industrialised, scene which it was in Wordsworth’s time, but as unpeopled, and therefore very different from the populated landscapes of George Crabbe in *The Village* (1783) or of Burns in ‘The Cotter’s Saturday Night’ (1786), or the countryside of William Cowper in *The Task* (1785), or even the churchyard of Thomas Gray’s ‘Elegy written in a Country Church-Yard’ (1751).

It has to be stressed, however, that not all Romantic literature is about introversion and self-communication. Crabbe, Cowper and Burns write about the natural world in an objective and radically simple manner. Though Burns was explicitly radical in his politics and the others not necessarily so, all reflect in their various ways the sentiments of the last two decades of the eighteenth century. This was a period of great upheaval, in the shape of the American and French Revolutions, which attracted much favourable comment from the radical intellectuals of the day. Sophisticated writers become interested in the popular ballad
form with its simple metres and vocabulary, its universal themes of love and death, and its links with the common people. The concerns of daily life among the lower orders in society become the subjects of literatures making a point of contrasting what they are doing with poetic conventions and earlier traditions. ‘By such examples taught’, writes Crabbe, ‘I paint the cot, / As truth will paint it, and as bards will not’. The Prophetic Books of Blake, too, share something of the radical simplicity of primitive literature. Their main literary model is the Old Testament, and the simple free-verse form of their sentences is without any of the subjective feelings of the storyteller.

The chapters which follow set out to explore the diversity and range of Romantic-period literature. Although now distant from us, it seems somehow still more intimate to our concerns than other literature historically closer, that of the 1930s, for instance. Concepts of rights, of freedom and equality which it enshrines, together with its quest to find new psychological depths that give identity to the individual and meaning to human life, have a peculiarly modern resonance.

It is important to understand a period’s history as much as possible, both for its own intrinsic interest, and as an essential background for the writing it produced (see Part Two: ‘A Cultural Overview’). The chapters in Part Three: ‘Texts, Writers and Contexts’ look first of all at ‘writing in revolution’, setting an agenda not only for exploring the literature of an age of social and political revolution, but also with the additional purpose of examining a literature which was itself in a state of revolution. A discussion of the pamphlet wars and Revolution controversy of the 790s, as seen through the writings of its prominent contributors, is followed by a chapter on the place of the natural world in Romantic writing, and then chapters on dramatic writing, verse narrative, fiction and travel writing. Part Four: ‘Critical Theories and Debates’ explores topics central to the period, such as imagination, religion, the concept of Romantic ‘heroism’, and the decline of civilisations. Part Five provides timelines, detailed further reading and some useful electronic resources.

The scope of Romantic-period prose extends from the imaginative excesses of the gothic novel, in the writing of Horace Walpole (The
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Castle of Otranto, 1764), William Beckford (Vathek, 1786), Ann Radcliffe (The Mysteries of Udolpho, 1794) and Matthew Lewis (The Monk, 1796), to the political debate of ‘Jacobin’ fiction, in works such as William Godwin’s Caleb Williams (1794). A genuinely innovative conception, such as Mary Shelley’s Frankenstein (1818), combines both the gothic and the novel of ideas, while domestic and social concerns appear in the novels of writers such as Fanny Burney (Cecilia, 1782), Susan Ferrier (Marriage, 1818) and especially Jane Austen, whose six major works are pre-eminent in their handling of manners and social issues in the first quarter of the nineteenth century. Rivalling Byron’s stature and influence, Walter Scott, in his prolific Romantic fiction of regional and national manners, virtually invented the historical novel with Waverley (1814), while Thomas Love Peacock’s ‘satirical-conversation’ novels, such as Nightmare Abbey (1818), make use of dramatic form and dialogue to provide a satirical perspective, not only on prominent literary figures, but also on the ‘crotchets’, cults and fads of the time. In addition to fiction, the period abounds in the distinctive prose of Romantic polemicists and essayists such as William Cobbett, Thomas De Quincey, William Hazlitt and Charles Lamb, and the letters of major writers such as Keats and Coleridge have made, in their own right, important contributions to literary criticism.

Many benefits which make up the fabric of contemporary society and are now more or less taken for granted have their origins in the Romantic period. Shelley, a modern figure out to improve the humanity of the state system, argued for an extension of the franchise, universal suffrage, more frequent parliaments and the equalisation of constituencies. His pre-Marxist labour theory of value argues for a distinction to be made between estates and unearned income, and what a man earns by his talents, and that this should be an absolute principle of organising incomes and produce in society. In addition to such details in programmes for social reform, many of which have been adopted since Shelley’s time, the Romantic period saw the emergence of the women’s movement, and women writers of the Romantic period, although by and large neglected until the latter years
of the twentieth century, are now recognised as having made contributions of central importance to the cultural, political and aesthetic developments of the age.’ Writers such as Mary Wollstonecraft and Helen Maria Williams (1761–1827), for example, were key eyewitnesses to events in revolutionary France, while Mary Wollstonecraft is not only the most prominent writer in the earliest years of feminist thought, but also a distinctively new kind of travel writer. Her daughter, Mary, by William Godwin, would later write *Frankenstein*, the most famous and enduring of Romantic novels. In addition to the gathering momentum for the enfranchisement of women, the period also witnessed the abolition of slavery and the establishment of animal rights. At the very heart of Romantic doctrine is a democratic idealism proclaiming the dignity of man and the world’s potential for happiness rather than despair.

Perhaps something of the relevance and intimacy sustained by Romantic-period literature in the present day concerns the special immediacy with which it is often thought to express the ‘essential passions of the heart’. The phrase is used by Wordsworth in his Preface to *Lyrical Ballads* to explain why he chose to write about low and rustic life, and in a selection of the ‘language really used by men’. He argues that such conditions make a good subject for poetry because, together, they express the deepest and most permanent human experiences that will survive the fashionable and ephemeral interests of the day. Wordsworth here argues primarily against the kind of poetry of his own day, which he considered to be superficial in its human content and overly artificial in its style. But the claim he makes for his poetry is a large one and suggests that it offers stability and a permanence beyond the reach of historical change.

The Romantic period, though, was one of enormous change. Wordsworth’s taste for the landscape of the Lake District, and his

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particular attitudes to the natural world which have tutored our own current ones, were not shared by the dominant literary culture of the century before him. Concepts such as the ‘essential passions of the heart’ perhaps need to be debated in order to discover whether they can survive from one historical period to another. Do more recent notions, shaped by the very different circumstances of the present century and the last one, correspond with Wordsworth’s account of such ‘passions’? Even with the help of historical knowledge, it is important to find in Romantic literature relevant contemporary meanings, and this process always underlines the fact that the literature of its own time inevitably differs to a degree from what can be made of it today.

John Gilroy

Notes

3 Helen Maria Williams, *Letters Written in France* (1790).