

conducted along dialectical lines that honor rather than resolve into simple formula the tensions responsible for its dynamic energies. This volume is a collaborative effort of an international panel of distinguished scholars who have sought to give English-speaking students, whatever their culture or level of training, a coherent access to the historical roots, the intellectual ferment, and the cultural range of the Romantic age without sacrificing its diversity and even its salutary contradictions. At the intersection of competing philosophical traditions, of political and class divisions, of emergent gender distinctions, of high and low and sacred and profane cultures, of battles of the books (prose and poetry, fiction and history), and contested claims among the arts, the literature of this age – the incomparable literature of Romanticism – reflects the tensions that attend and often empower its creation. The authors recognize that this book will most often be turned to by students of the six great poets who dominate the modern canon (Blake, Wordsworth, Coleridge, Byron, Shelley, and Keats); but they are also well aware that newer voices, novelists and women authors particularly, are increasingly resonant in our classrooms as in our historical perspective. By giving space to those relatively unregarded now the volume at once testifies to the literary riches of the age and encourages readers to explore them further on their own.

I Romanticism, criticism and theory

THE terms of my title will probably seem to some readers rather bland, to others inevitably contentious. *Romanticism* has functioned as a period term, with somewhat different limits in different countries, and its use has led to a tradition of attempts at defining what it is, or what is most central to it. *Criticism* tends to pass us by as an unassuming description of what we do if we teach or study literature in universities, while *theory* is one of those terms that has caused arguments in seminars and tantrums at dinner parties. But criticism is by no means an innocent term, nor need theory always bite in the way that its bark has seemed to promise, if indeed it bite at all.

So it may be as well to begin with some working definitions – not trenchant specifications of exclusive or exact definitions of these terms, but loose explanations of what I mean by them, and of how they will function in the following pages. By *Romanticism* I mean, very roughly, the writings of the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries, sharing a general historical situation but not necessarily held together by any essential or prescriptive characteristics. Literary critics and historians have traditionally posited such characteristics in a manner allowing them to distinguish between what is more or less “romantic,” early and late romantic, pre- and postromantic, highly or antiromantic. Such usages are seldom consistent, and have mostly been employed to justify one set of preferences over others according to some standard or other of exemplary historicity.

By *criticism* I mean the practice of writing about literature, which became gradually professionalized, and professionalized in different ways, between the publication of *The Spectator* and that of *PMLA*. Eighteenth-century critics like Addison and Johnson were commonly men of letters or journalists. Their modern successors tend to hold jobs as university and college teachers. But “criticism” has never lost its associations of gifted amateurism and spontaneity, so that its exponents have largely not adhered to explicit or self-imposed standards of logical and philosophical coherence or methodological self-consciousness. Some criticism does indeed do this, and

when it does, it takes on some of the characteristics commonly associated with *theory*. Hence we get literary or critical theory, which attempts either to do or to discuss criticism or literature according to a clear set of principles or general categories. The theorist will usually and reasonably make the claim that all criticism functions by way of some theory or other, some set of principles, whether or not it recognizes or admits them. The critics, reciprocally, may espouse or disavow the claims and aspirations of theory. And theory may also claim to be an activity unto itself, a form of argument and inquiry that need not be referred "back" to literature or to criticism, because it maintains its own rules and its own particular ambitions, whether formal or referential.

The coexistence within modern English departments of criticism and theory, and of their various subdivisions – criticism against theory, literary theory, theories of criticism and of literature, and so on – helps to explain some of the powerful passions that arise around questions of theory in relation to the teaching of literature. And the role of the various constructions of Romanticism in the articulation of these relations has been significant. Generally speaking, until relatively recently, Romanticism has served literary criticism as an ally in its disciplinary habit of downplaying or denying the usefulness of theory. This tradition has been stronger in Britain than in America, as we shall see. But it has a lively existence throughout the anglophone cultures, where the Romantic poets (along with Shakespeare) have done yeoman's service as recycled opponents of rational thought, analytical precision, and systematic speculation – all those habits we think of as described by "theory." Alternatively, they have been proffered as exponents of the opposite virtues of passionate sensibility, human and humanitarian warmth, and lifelike confusion; of nature over culture, country over city, and spontaneity over premeditation.

It is easy to argue that this is merely an uninformed understanding of Romantic writing, a reductive "Romanticism," but it is one which has been powerfully legitimated by some of the most influential twentieth-century literary critics, and it continues to play its part in the hostilities that commence at regular intervals over the place of theory in the humanities. And there were indeed important emphases within Romantic writing itself arguing against the aspirations of systematic or speculative thought, and thus against theory. Even before the French Revolution, the British tradition had for a century and a half been belligerently empiricist. The Restoration of 1660 brought with it a visible increase in the rhetoric of national identity, wherein being properly British involved a commitment to common sense, to an ethic of compromise, and to a respect for special circumstances rather

than an adherence to general rules. France was the historic enemy throughout the eighteenth century, in both military and cultural terms, so that the French were commonly demonized as the bearers of an adverse national character, one typified by a schizophrenic and unpredictable oscillation between extremes of passionate sensibility and cold-hearted logicity. Frenchmen were either inhumane philosophers or all-too-human libertines. They lacked the British disposition to sail comfortably with the winds of change, making up rules only as they were needed and discarding them as soon as they got in the way.

The events of 1789 and after only emphasized the already dominant ideology of the British national character in its happy contradiction of the French. Descartes had not sent people to the guillotine; he was, in the standard British mythology, merely a misguided intellectual with an obsessive respect for simplicity. Robespierre and his kind were much more dangerous; backed by a falsely propositional series of constitutions, they used theory for tyranny and murder and invented a logic for sheer cruelty. In perceived contrast, the glory of the British constitution came to consist in its having no theory, in its being the gradual and patient accumulation of practice and precedent, in its being, above all, unwritten. This is the "constitution" that Edmund Burke championed as peculiarly and fortunately British. To most undecided observers Tom Paine and the radicals, with their liking for propositions and for written laws, must have looked all too French. Arthur Young, in remarkably prescient phrasing, was quite typical of the British mainstream in his condemnation of "French theory" and his reliance "merely on experience."¹

It is within this context of nationalist rhetoric, wherein those associated with a belief in the powers of theory (the radicals and the democrats) were unable to compete successfully for recognition as "patriots," that we must understand the profile that students and historians of literature have taken to be typically Romantic. For those involved in the profession of literature generally chose not to align themselves with theory, even when they sought alliances with radical politics. That is, if they placed themselves in opposition to the ruling interests, as many of them did, they yet tended to stay away from the kinds of affirmations of theory that would have marked them as in some obvious way "un-English." Even a visibly radical poet like Blake had little time for what we would now recognize as theory. In the largely negative figure of Urizen he critiques the overestimation of system and stability as

¹ Arthur Young, *The Example of France a Warning to Britain* (Dublin, 1793), pp. 79, 3. For an extended account of the British disposition against theory, see my *Romanticism, Nationalism, and the Revolt Against Theory* (London and New York: Routledge, 1992).

inhibitions on the free expression of bodily and spiritual energy. Regularity, symmetry and predictability are not virtues in Blake's bible, but the tools of tyrants and oppressors. Shelley, Coleridge, Wordsworth, Keats and their contemporaries take quite complicated positions on the status and implications of systematic thought, but the general drift of their respective evaluations of theory, in the sense here intended, is negative. So, just as Blake tells us that exuberance and not formality is beauty, so Wordsworth tells us that we murder to dissect, and Keats that philosophy will clip an angel's wings. Cobbett, who did successfully identify himself as a patriotic radical, began his career as a violent francophobe; and John Clare, who certainly felt the value of the rights of man, had no faith in grand theory or French constitutions. Byron and the mature Shelley, who did not hate the French, were not rationalists. Only Coleridge, among those writers who remain familiar to us today, dabbled much in what we now call theory. But he did so with explicitly conservative intentions, and the complexity of his attempt to establish a theory for the existing conventions of church and state and for a Christian rather than a rationalist culture results not a little from its going against the grain of a tradition whereby the theoretical mode had been generally recognized as the dialect of a radical-democratic philosophy.

The resulting myth of theory in nineteenth-century Britain was, then, that it was either pernicious, in the manner of Paine, or incomprehensible, in the manner of Coleridge. The other major example of visibly theoretical work, that instanced by Bentham and the Utilitarians, was variously felt by its opponents to be *both* pernicious and incomprehensible. Moreover the liberal reformers who did find in Benthamism a critical articulation of their ideals and concerns were social scientists and civil servants rather than men or women of letters. The Benthamites were generally hostile to the language of fiction and fantasy, which they saw (as had some of the French philosophers) as the rhetoric of a mystified social discipline; thus they were not kind to the claims of literature.

For these reasons, among others, the most authentically "English" literature (and this was the preferred term, rather than "British") came to be more and more defined as that which was most resistant to theoretical epitome and to the language of theory in general. Shakespeare was, as he has often remained, the titan of the national literature, and his qualities were felt most of all to consist in particularity of characterization and faithfulness to human variety – precisely the things that "theory" must fail to acknowledge in its search for common principles and general truths. Even Milton, a doctrinally saturated and even occasionally dogmatic genius, had been reconstructed by a tradition of eighteenth-century criticism as the exponent

of a very British sublime. *Paradise Lost* was denarrativized, doctrinally deprogrammed, and depoliticized, and made provocative simply of a heightened reader response. According to Addison and others like him, we tremble but do not think too hard as we read or hear the poem's great passages; they overpower us emotionally but do not exercise us intellectually.

This consensus about the national literary character was already in place before the French had their revolution and the Romantics wrote their poems. Those professing to write literature thus found themselves with a readership already predisposed against the French and against any positive estimation of systematic analysis. This readership, furthermore, was less and less dominated by university-trained men of letters, and more and more tenanted by women and by men of the middle ranks. Correspondingly, more and more women writers were appearing in the literary marketplace. The demographic feminization of that marketplace only served to reinforce the discursive feminization already represented by literature's refusal of logicity and system, traditionally masculinized attributes though disputed as such by Mary Wollstonecraft among others. The familiar and traditional view of Romanticism as privileging emotion, intuition and spontaneity should be understood as a gendered as well as a literary-political construction. Reciprocally, the attempts made by Wordsworth and others to restrain the power of spontaneity (always, remember, best recollected in *tranquillity*), must also be read as attempts at the partial remasculinization of literature.

But not, of course, to the point of *theory*. The identification of literature the Romantics inherited and in which they themselves participated was both extended and further simplified by their successors, the critics and commentators who looked to literature for inspiration and, more and more, for solace, for an emotionally gratifying respite from the rigors of a mechanized world. John Stuart Mill's *Autobiography* provides a classic statement of the revolt (stimulated indeed by a reading of Wordsworth) against utilitarian mental discipline and the ethic of use-value. Mill, writing in 1869–70, recalls his reading of Wordsworth (in 1828) as commencing casually, with no expectation of "mental relief." He had found nothing appealing in Byron, whose cynical and worldly temperament seemed too close to the very side of himself he was trying to escape, and indeed nothing in Wordsworth's own *Excursion* (a judgment shared by most subsequent readers). But in the lyric and miscellaneous poems of Wordsworth, Mill felt himself aroused by "the power of rural beauty" and by a synthesis of "thought coloured by feeling." He found here a literature which, he thought, had "no connexion with struggle or imperfection" and demonstrated a "permanent happiness in

tranquil contemplation," a happiness sufficiently powerful to affect even those trained in "the most confirmed habit of analysis."²

Mill professed to admire Wordsworth's synthesis of thought and feeling, rather than any displacement of the one by the other. But Matthew Arnold's rewriting of this relation was to prove much more typical of the critical tradition that grew up around Romanticism. Arnold wanted to encourage the reading of poetry as "in itself it really is," without the contamination of either a "historic" or a "personal estimate." For him, it is a mistake to value a poem because of its historically informative qualities and merely because of its place in some sequence of writers and writings, as it is also a mistake to derive critical estimations from what we each happen to like. A test of quality must be applied, but it cannot be a theoretically deduced or formulated standard: we must rely, instead, on "tact," which is an intuitive faculty developed by the habitual contemplation of the best passages in the best writings.³ This is Arnold's famous "touchstone" method, which is never explained in terms other than those of self-evidence: if we are properly trained and attuned, we know quality when we see it.

The passages offered for the cultivation of this tact are always short, often just a line or two. Unsurprisingly, then, the preface to his edition of Wordsworth declares a clear preference for the "shorter pieces" over the longer poems, which are often "flat and dull." Arnold finds that the "philosophy" in Wordsworth is mostly an "illusion"; Wordsworth is not the poet of the intellect but, once again, of nature and of the feelings (*Essays*, pp. 96, 105). Where Mill admired thought *and* feeling, Arnold places feeling over thought. In distinguishing the good in Wordsworth from the bad and the boring, Arnold rewrites the poet's own editorial categories. His three categories of "Lyrical Poems," "Sonnets," and "Reflective and Elegiac Poems" include all but thirty-one of the one hundred and sixty-eight poems in the 1879 edition. Wordsworth, who declared himself (in the preface to the 1807 *Poems*) ashamed to have no substantial long poem to publish, thus became for Arnold the genius of the short lyric.

But Arnold may here have been responding to as much as creating the popular taste. F. T. Palgrave's *Golden Treasury* had been immensely popular, going through twenty-three printings and editions (four printings in the first year) between 1861 and 1888. Palgrave offered the Romantics as the summation of English poetry, and the lyrics as the essence of Romanticism. He

gave the Romantics half his volume, as much as the rest of English poetry put together. Among the Romantics Wordsworth again dominated, half the poems selected being his.⁴ Arnold and Palgrave together thus seem to instance a profile in popular taste (or its creation) characterized by the predominance of Wordsworth among the Romantics, and of the lyric in Wordsworth's writings. The lyric has always been associated with the casual, the spontaneous, and the occasional. In other words, it is as far as it is possible to be from the narrativized coherence or expository ambition that might verge on "theory." Walter Pater also rendered Wordsworth as a natural rather than an intellectual being. He saw in him the "true forerunner of the deepest and most passionate poetry of our day," discovering a life-affirming spontaneity quite at odds with the "sickly thought" and "excess of seriousness" he found in Coleridge. The true humanist, for Pater, could never "weep" over the failure of a "theory" or a "philosophical formula" or attempt, as Coleridge misguidedly did, to "reclaim the world of art as a world of fixed laws."⁵

The discipline of literary criticism evolving in the universities at the turn of the twentieth century did not refer to Palgrave for any serious inspiration: the *Golden Treasury* was, after all, a symptom of exactly the kind of popular taste that the university study of literature set out consciously to displace in its hostility to belle-lettrism and to the "stock response" (as I. A. Richards called it). In his preface Palgrave invoked as his standard of judgment the "general verdict of popular fame." This could never do for an intellectual subculture anxious to establish its own specialist credentials as well as its potential for the cleaning up of contemporary culture. But a number of Palgrave's priorities found their analogues in the more sophisticated formulations of the professional critics and their respectably intellectual predecessors. Palgrave admired those poems that turned "on some single thought, feeling, or situation" and sought his standard of excellence "rather in the Whole than in the Parts" (*Golden Treasury*, preface). These are neo-Coleridgean values, or rather simplifications of Coleridge's interest in a poetry that could recompose difference *into* unity and exercise the adverting mind with the process of composition itself. Both Palgrave and Coleridge were concerned with the elaboration of a distinctly British or "English" national consciousness, though at quite different levels of subtlety and complexity.

² John Stuart Mill, *Autobiography*, ed. John M. Robson (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1989), pp. 120-2.

³ Matthew Arnold, "The Study of Poetry," in *Essays in Criticism, Second Series* (1888; reprinted, London: Macmillan, 1935), pp. 5, 14; hereafter cited as *Essays*.

⁴ The proportions are interesting. Forty-two of Wordsworth's poems are included, as against thirty-three of Shakespeare's, twenty-two of Shelley's, eleven each of Keats and Milton, eight by Byron, two by Coleridge, and only one by Blake (and this not in the first edition). The preface to *The Golden Treasury* (1888), hereafter cited, is unpaginated.

⁵ Walter Pater, *Appreciations: With an Essay on Style* (London and New York: Macmillan, 1895), pp. 63, 68, 74.

Coleridge was an admitted influence on the formation of literary criticism in the universities, as was Arnold. The values trenchantly set forth in the appreciation and critique of Wordsworth that take up so much of Coleridge's *Biographia Literaria* proved very influential upon generations of college and university teachers. Like Arnold and Mill, Coleridge admired a Wordsworth whom he saw as successfully transcribing organic unity of form and sentiment; he did not respond favorably to what he saw as an inconstancy of style, repetitiveness and matter of factness, a complex or ironic relation between poet and dramatic speaker; he did not like the mixing of high and low styles, the faithfulness to local histories, or the claims made for the value of ordinary language (*Biographia*, II, 121-36).⁶ He disputed, in other words, and like many other critics, the democratic aspirations of Wordsworth's poetry and sought to select the "best" of Wordsworth as that which might provide the model for an educated class committed to the dissemination of standards from the top down (in the intellectual hierarchy) and from the upper middle outwards (in the social hierarchy). In preferring the poetry of speculative self-control to that of political contingency or interactive confusion, Coleridge formulated a poetics that would provide a powerful precursor for those later critics also concerned to deploy poetry as a healing alternative to the ravages of a negatively modernized culture.

So far, I have commented at some length on the place of Wordsworth in the early reconstructions of Romanticism. But there were other models, albeit ones which even to this day have hardly become canonical. The complex, self-undermining Wordsworth whom Coleridge did not admire but nonetheless recognized points in the direction of a quite different and much less humanistically affirmative component of Romantic writing. Mill, it will be remembered, found that Byron threatened where Wordsworth offered comfort. But Arnold had good things to say of Byron, whom he also edited (in 1881), and whose "hastiness," "slovenliness" and "tunelessness" could not disguise his "sincerity" and "strength" (*Essays*, pp. 126, 136). In making Byron the other major Romantic, along with (if just below) Wordsworth, Arnold set the agenda for an alternative Romanticism whose full exploration we are still very much awaiting. (Ironically, when it has come, it has come from an "alternative" reading of Wordsworth as much as from any reading of Byron himself). *This* Romanticism, which much recent deconstructionist and social historical criticism has been recovering, offers a much more skeptical account of the capacities of self-consciousness and of

⁶ For a more extended argument, see my "Coleridge on Wordsworth and the Form of Poetry," in *Coleridge's Theory of Imagination Today*, ed. Christine Gallant (New York: AMS Press, 1989), pp. 211-25.

its literary expressions. While Coleridge and his heirs look to poetry to bring about some kind of peace, at least individual and often (if tentatively) social, the Byronic component, if we may so name it, leads principally to self-doubt and to an irony that is unresolved rather than comfortably accommodated by interpretive strategy. Of course, no single writer, and certainly not Wordsworth or Byron, is properly represented by either of these stereotypes; there are certain kinds of affirmation in Byron, and many kinds of doubt in Wordsworth. Indeed, we might best think of most writers of complex language as normally expressive of various discursive paradigms, which sometimes emerge into relative clarity or ideological singleness and at other times do not. Keats may thus be read as the disciple of truth and beauty, but also as a vehicle for bourgeois professional anxiety; Wordsworth as healer of souls but also as disturber of tranquillity; Shelley as both Platonist and skeptic, and so forth.

In order to understand the variety of possible structurings for Romantic self-consciousness it helps to go back to the comprehensively historical explanations of periodization offered by the German Romantic philosophers themselves. In Hegel and Schelling and their kind, we find, indeed, the first "theories" of Romanticism. For them, Romanticism was the essential form of modernity, and modernity itself the result of the displacement of classical and pagan by Christian culture (a less simply positive evolution for Schelling than for Hegel). Because this is a culture of election, of being chosen and choosing, Romanticism is the expression of a division between self and society, and often within the self (body and soul), most of all since the Protestant Reformation, with its rendering of all earthly relations as secondary to the private contact with God. For A. W. Schlegel, heterogeneity (linguistic, cultural, geographic) and not unity is the mode of Romanticism. The equanimity that belonged to the Greeks has gone forever, and the dominant mood is that of "melancholy," because "every thing finite and mortal is lost in the contemplation of infinity...and the first day of our real existence dawns in the world beyond the grave."⁷

In these formulations Romanticism is governed by a sense of the inadequate fit between the real and the apparent, heaven and earth. It is thus governed by struggle (between soul and body, content and form) and by desire (for something always still to come). It imposes not the peace of being or understanding, but the anxiety of becoming and wondering. For Hegel the Greeks produced the best art in the history of civilization, and they could do so precisely because of their relative primitivism, their pagan satisfaction

⁷ Simpson, ed., *The Origins of Modern Critical Thought: German Aesthetic and Literary Criticism from Lessing to Hegel* (Cambridge University Press, 1988), pp. 256, 259, 260.

in the merely worldly life of man in nature, and thus in the adequacy of form to content. Christian (and hence Romantic) art dramatizes its own insufficiency: it can only use what is to hand (the world of things, images) to signify what it cannot represent or speak but feels to be of absolute importance (the next world, the real world). So (in Hegel's distinctly Eurocentric paradigm), as civilization progresses art becomes less satisfying or convincing and less complete, finally surviving only as the repository of recollection (art of the past) or, in its contemporary form, as a fragmented and self-alienating medium. Art must always be somewhat rooted in the sensuous sphere, and that sphere can never meet the needs of a Christian consciousness (which is a cultural rather than a doctrinal condition: it is not confined to Christians but is shared by all modern individuals). Hegel saw the nineteenth century as moving toward the pure thought of philosophic prose and out of the realm of art in general. In the *Phenomenology of Spirit*, he presents Rameau's nephew (a character in Diderot's dialogue of that name) as the type of the late Enlightenment subjectivity whose witty self-undermining "knows everything to be self-alienated" while it also rehearses the knowledge that the "pure self of consciousness" is "absolute."⁸

These bold elucidations about the nature of Romanticism are no less helpful for being so radically simplified. What they make clear, above all, is that the obsession with the self and with self-consciousness (not the same thing) that even casual critics and readers have recognized in their references to Romantic heroes and Romantic egos is to be understood as prone to as many specific determinations as there are specific choices, doctrines and situations. In other words, just as one may (within Christian doctrine) be saved or doomed, chosen or passed over, blessed with the peace of God or tortured with the devil's drives, so there is nothing in self-consciousness *itself* that is either good or bad, humanist or antihumanist, idealist or materialist, affirmative or skeptical. Much of the debate about what Romanticism "is" would disappear if we were to accept that these binaries are not true alternatives (so that to accept the one is to refute the other) but differences of emphasis, whether in criticism or in the writings addressed by criticism, or both.

The skeptical component of Romantic writing, which Mill found so threatening, Coleridge so articulately countered, and Arnold ignored, was not dominant in nineteenth-century interpretations of Romanticism, albeit the German philosophers so clearly prepared the way for its recognition. It

⁸ *Phenomenology of Spirit*, trans. A.V. Miller (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1977), pp. 320, 329. The full argument about the condition of art may be found in Hegel's *Aesthetics*. For a summary, see Simpson, *Origins*, pp. 355–96.

has become more familiar in twentieth-century criticism and theory, though more so in America than in Britain. Irony, the literary trope of skepticism in this instance, was addressed by the Germans and by Kierkegaard, but was largely unnoticed in Britain, as indeed it remains to this day. I pass on now to some account of the critical traditions in twentieth-century Britain and America, respectively, as they have pronounced on the play of our three guiding terms: Romanticism, criticism and theory.

The most commonly invoked theorist among the founding fathers of British university criticism is I. A. Richards, the inventor of "practical criticism." Richards was both an avowed Coleridgean and the proponent of a secular, utilitarian ethics that had no time for Christian or any other doctrine. He took from Coleridge what he might also have taken from Schiller: a belief in the psychologically healthful results of disturbing appearances and dissolving unities in order to recreate or refigure them. Distinctions between good and bad are made on psychological rather than explicitly doctrinal grounds, so that virtue consists in the polymorphous response and in the flexibility of the mental apparatus, while evil is to be expected from dogma and prejudice or fixed opinion. The best poetry can stimulate this free play of the mind, and that is its value for a modern culture all too bound into fantasies of objectivity. Where many in the 1790s had cast "theory" as a fixed entity and regarded it as the rationale for cruelty in the name of law, Richards sought to reinvent (in his *Principles of Literary Criticism*) a theory of poetry that could work against fixed ideas and rigid systems of all kinds.

Richards was too particularistic a critic to take a position for or against something called Romanticism, even as many of his ideas have their sources and analogues in Romantic writings. He recognized that there could be good and bad poetry everywhere (though more in some periods than in others) and that what was most important was what happened for a *reader* as he or she experienced "the feeling of freedom, of relief, of increased competence and sanity, that follows any reading in which more than usual order and coherence has been given to our responses."⁹ His own (arguably "romantic") preoccupation with the importance of process over product, movement of mind over fixed idea, made him skeptical of the value of all abstract and collective nominations, as dangerous in public life as they are imprecise in poetry. But Richards's ideas were somewhat at odds with those of his contemporaries and immediate precursors who celebrated, under the banner of Imagism, the hard, the immutable and the objective. In 1913 Ezra Pound had looked for a poetry that could produce "lasting and unassailable data"

⁹ *Principles of Literary Criticism* (1924; reprinted, London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1967), p. 185.

about man; a bad poem would be bad because it is "false," as a scientific fact can be false.¹⁰ Pound had little time for Romantic phenomenologies. T. S. Eliot located the critical watershed in British culture, the famous "dissociation of sensibility," as occurring about the time of the Puritan revolution, since when nothing had gone quite right. Romanticism especially lacked, for him, the proper synthesis of thought and feeling (though Mill, we recall, had found exactly this in Wordsworth).¹¹ And T. E. Hulme's strident anti-humanism looked forward to a new classicism that would accept and celebrate man's limits rather than his infinite aspirations. Romanticism in particular had blurred the "clear outlines of human experience," so that a properly new poetry would have to have a "dry hardness" and aim at "accurate, precise and definite description." Hulme's preferred attributes are aggressively masculine, and Romanticism is refeminized as vague, confused, and even seductive, like "a drug."¹² At about the same time the American critic Irving Babbitt, while himself in favor of a "critical humanism," echoed Hulme's disapproval of Romanticism and its legacies, and argued against "naturalism" as any properly complete philosophy of life.¹³

Richards's liberal imagination thus had to compete with a trenchantly expressed conservative tradition that saw in Romanticism a negative cultural inheritance whose effects were to be countered at every opportunity. Aesthetically and formally, Pound and Eliot were the radicals among the new poets, while their convictions (and their politics) marked them out as affiliates of what we may loosely call the "right." The most explicitly pro-Romantic British response came from John Middleton Murry, but his commitment to a vocabulary of truth, soul and beauty made little headway in an academy seeking above all to establish its intellectual credentials.¹⁴ Where Richards saw an over-rigidity of thought and feeling as significantly responsible for the disasters of 1914, others opined that vagueness and subjective insecurity and temporality were the guilty parties, and welcomed fixed laws as salutary influences. For Wyndham Lewis, Hulme and others, Romanticism had something to do with political disaster, however they defined the

¹⁰ "The Serious Artist," in *Literary Essays of Ezra Pound*, ed. T. S. Eliot (1954; reprinted, London: Faber and Faber, 1968), pp. 42, 43.

¹¹ Eliot, "The Metaphysical Poets," in *Selected Essays* (New York: Harcourt, Brace and World, 1966), p. 247.

¹² T. E. Hulme, "Romanticism and Classicism," in *Speculations: Essays on Humanism and the Philosophy of Art*, ed. Herbert Read (1924; reprinted, London: Kegan Paul, 1936), pp. 118, 126, 132, 127.

¹³ *Rousseau and Romanticism* (Boston and New York: Houghton Mifflin, 1919), pp. xxi, x.

¹⁴ See, for example, *Defending Romanticism: Selected Essays of John Middleton Murry*, ed. Malcolm Woodfield (Bristol: Bristol Press, 1989), and the bibliography included therein.

disaster. But all these critics, liberal and conservative, shared a distaste for what they took to be the direction of the modern world, whether they thought it too rigid, or not rigid enough.

The outcry against modernity also marked the work of F. R. Leavis, perhaps the most influential of all the British critics on English teaching in the schools as well as in the universities. Leavis was not an anti-Romantic in any declared sense, and he made much of the best of Wordsworth. But the result of his strenuous emphasis on a shared "experience" was to disregard any writing that questioned or undermined the image of consensus. Much Romantic writing obviously did just this. Leavis could find in Wordsworth a "human normality" and a "preoccupation with sanity and spontaneity," thus bringing him into line with the ethic of middle-class decency and common sense that he admired in the nineteenth-century English novel.¹⁵ But the analysis necessarily stops short of responding to what is not normal or consensual in Wordsworth, the problems Coleridge had recognized and that many subsequent critics have found so interesting.

The most important British socialist literary critic, Raymond Williams, had even less to say about the Romantics. His own preferred "experience" was to be traced in the drama and the novel rather than in poetry. Williams could see in Romanticism a critical analysis of the modern condition and a political critique; but he could see little ultimately democratizing potential in writings that appeared to celebrate as much as they regretted the alienation of self from others and of creative from ordinary persons. In Williams's influential *Culture and Society 1780-1850* (1958), the account of the Romantics functions very much as a prelude to the main argument, which is seen as carried out in nineteenth-century fiction and sociological prose. Even in *The Country and the City* (1973), where one might have expected a full engagement with the canonical Romanticism, Williams wrote against the grain. Goldsmith, Crabbe, Cobbett and Clare are more important to his narrative than Wordsworth or Keats or Shelley. This shift of attention has surely had the effect of making Williams's work more ignorable than it deserves to be for those engaged in the investigation of Romanticism.

In British criticism, until relatively recently, the Romantics have thus not tended to appear as at the center of the national interest. Where they have so appeared, as for example in the work of John Barrell and Marilyn Butler, there has been no attempt to propose that criticism as the foundation for anything resembling a *theory*. Theory is, as I have said, antithetical to the British literary temperament at the best of times, and it has proved necess-

¹⁵ Leavis, *Revaluation: Tradition and Development in English Poetry* (1934; reprinted, Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1967), pp. 137-8.

arily so to a criticism whose declared ambition is historical specificity. In Britain, it seems fair to say, the link between Romanticism and literary theory has remained generally weak, not least because literary theory itself is such an uncommon commodity.

In the United States things have been very different. Whether because the first generations of American (rather than colonial) writers were themselves contemporary with the European Romanticisms, or because the mythology of the American national character still relies heavily upon ideals of individuality and expressivity, of the sort that Romantic writers have been said to endorse, Romanticism has been an important source for twentieth-century critics and theorists. The New Criticism developed by Cleanth Brooks and others shared many of the priorities of Richards's practical criticism, but it worked much more conventionally through the thorough exposition of chosen texts. And even as it sought to affirm the scientificity of literary criticism it kept open a place for the writers whom Eliot and his kind had pronounced most visibly unintellectual: the Romantics. In *Modern Poetry and the Tradition* (1939), Brooks pronounced that modern poetry was seriously putting into question the assumed importance of Romanticism in literary history and declared Shelley to be too resistant to irony to function as a model for a new poetics. But he had good things to say of Keats and Coleridge, and never rejected Romanticism in general. In Brooks's later books, moreover, the poems of Keats and Wordsworth continued to figure as objects of sustained attention.

The New Criticism aside, the most important American criticism of Romanticism has been a comparatist criticism; that is, it has gone beyond the bounds of a national literature and of the anglophone tradition. Here Rousseau, Hegel and Hölderlin have figured almost as regularly as Blake and Byron. Lovejoy, Wellek, Wasserman, Hartman, Abrams, Bloom, de Man and their peers, perhaps because they are themselves multilingual and/or *émigrés*, have pursued the study of Romanticism as a European rather than a merely British phenomenon. This internationalism perhaps of itself calls forth the question of theory, for it becomes natural to ask what if anything there is in common between British, French, German and other literatures at the turn of the nineteenth century. Theory, in its propositional and universalist ambitions, has always been cosmopolitan; that is one of the reasons it was deemed so threatening to a "British" national character. Add to this the specifically professionalized subculture of literary criticism in America (as compared with Britain) and the conditions for the pursuit of theory become very favorable. Lovejoy, in 1929, wrote a famous article called "On the Discrimination of Romanticisms" in which he said that we

should theorize a European Romanticism only with the greatest circumspection, observing national chronologies and distinctions as stringently as possible. But he did admit common components, even as attitudes to them differed. In 1949 René Wellek argued on the other side for a "system of norms" that we can reasonably compose into a common Romanticism: imagination, nature, symbol and myth. Wellek found these items so fundamental that he suggested that we could predict their occurrence even in literatures of the period we had not read (e.g. Swedish, Polish, Czech).¹⁶

There has been a strong element of what the Germans call *Geistesgeschichte* – the history of spirit or mentality – about these debates, though they have not in the United States tended to take the form of social-political or Marxist analyses of the kind mounted by György Lukács and Lucien Goldmann.¹⁷ Anglophone critical categories have remained dominantly formal or formally historical. Or perhaps one should say "liberal historical" or "religious historical." Northrop Frye, one of the most innovative among twentieth-century literary critics, proposed toward the end of his magisterial study of Blake, *Fearful Symmetry* (1947), a commonality between Romantics and moderns whereby we are entering "once again a great mythopoetic age" and again seeking "some kind of fitting together" by way of "archetypal symbolism." Like Arnold and Mill, though with a quite different spin, Frye saw in Romanticism a healing energy or, as he said many years later, "a conception of creativity that could unify the mental elements in the creative process."¹⁸ This kind of assumption of continuity between Romanticism and the present is quite common in American criticism, even among critics of quite different methods and intentions, and quite rare in Britain. Lionel Trilling, for instance, saw the "modern period" as beginning in the late eighteenth century and reaching its "apogee" in the early twentieth, and found that "we still do continue the direction," albeit with diminished energies.¹⁹ This direction he identified as the liberation of the individual from the tyranny of collective culture, a topic he subjected to sustained analysis in his last major book, *Sincerity and Authenticity*. Where Frye found

¹⁶ "The Concept of 'Romanticism' in Literary History," in *Comparative Literature* 1 (1949): 2, 147, 170.

¹⁷ For an intriguing recent example, see Robert Sayre and Michael Lowy, "Figures of Romantic Anti-Capitalism," in Rosso and Watkins, eds., *Spirits of Fire: English Romantic Writers and Contemporary Historical Methods* (Rutherford, New Jersey: Fairleigh Dickinson University Press, 1990), pp. 23–68.

¹⁸ *Fearful Symmetry: A Study of William Blake* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1962), pp. 423, 425, 427; "The Survival of Eros in Poetry," in Eaves and Fischer, eds., *Romanticism and Contemporary Criticism* (Ithaca and London: Cornell University Press, 1986), p. 32.

¹⁹ *Beyond Culture: Essays in Literature and Learning* (New York: Viking, 1965), p. xiii.

in Romanticism a healing mythopoeia, Trilling found a compulsion to a dignified alienation; both projected historical continuity. Harold Bloom has also seen the origins of modernity in Romanticism: "Modern poetry, in English, is the invention of Blake and Wordsworth." For Bloom, as with Trilling, this means the obligation to a strenuous counter-cultural individuality, out of step with nature as well as with culture. Bloom's Romanticism is not so much against reason itself as against its instrumental, socialized forms: "compulsion" and "ideology." And the Romantic alienation remains healing: one feels better for feeling unique, by way of "a therapy in which consciousness heals itself by a complex act of invention."²⁰ Bloom monumentalizes Blake's dismissal of the "Idiot Questioner" and thus signals his own preference for a Romanticism in which irony and skepticism are subordinate impulses. He would cheer up Rameau's nephew, offering him the consolations of authenticity in isolation. For Bloom the erotic and the imaginal remain intact as worthy compensations for the loss of social function and consensus. Anxiety remains an oddly comfortable condition.

For the other critics and theorists associated with Bloom in what came to be known in the 1970s as the "Yale School," things were not quite so comforting. The nomination is not very precise, except insofar as it describes critics working in the same place at the same time, none of whom are Protestant Anglo-Americans, and all of whom share a sense of the importance of Romanticism and of a comparative method. Otherwise, the relation between Bloom and de Man, for instance, is largely an antithetical one. Romantic alienation for de Man is melancholic rather than liberating. In his important essay of 1960, "Intentional Structure of the Romantic Image," de Man presented the nineteenth century as engaged in the compulsive repetition of a doomed project. Accepting the "ontological primacy of the natural object," as de Man thought they did, Romantic poets could only chronicle over and over again a regret at the failure of a bond between word and thing. Where epiphanies do occur, they occur only in language, and are merely "an act of consciousness," in the light of which there always remains a "nostalgia for the object." Romanticism is here prophetic of an abysmal modernity that leaves poetry operating "under a steady threat of extinction" even as it is the only available vehicle of a certain kind of hope.²¹

²⁰ "The Internalization of Quest Romance," and "To Reason with a Later Reason": Romanticism and the Rational," in *The Ringers in the Tower: Studies in the Romance Tradition* (1968; reprinted, Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, 1971), pp. 17, 324, 337, 325.

²¹ "Intentional Structure of the Romantic Image," in *The Rhetoric of Romanticism* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1984), pp. 7, 6, 7, 17.

Later in his career de Man modified this specification of nostalgia and melancholy by a technological-linguistic vocabulary that never reneged on these emotive origins but made them acceptable to a professional avant-garde in the American academy. By 1969, with the even more important essay "The Rhetoric of Temporality," he had found a formal-historical language for describing the inevitable failures of humanist self-adjustment adumbrated by Romanticism. Reaffirming the importance of the allegorical as against the canonization of the symbolic mode as the central Romantic act of representation, de Man proposed allegory as the signature of temporality, secularity, and inevitable difference. He argued for artifice behind the postulate of nature and for confusion beneath the appearance of calm. For those who took up this insight, the guiding trope of Romanticism became, once and for all, that of irony, an irony built around "distance and difference" and allowing "for no end, for no totality."²²

The most detailed literary-critical (rather than theoretical) analogue of these insights was already being worked out by Geoffrey Hartman, whose *Wordsworth's Poetry, 1787-1814*, published in 1964, brought about a definitive and exhaustively demonstrated break with the tradition of Wordsworth as healer, and of poet as organic subject. In "Romanticism and Anti-Self Consciousness" Hartman had already argued for the understanding of a "problematical self-consciousness" and a "division in the self" in British Romanticism.²³ In his study of Wordsworth he was far more interested in error and disjunction than in cosmic harmonies or in the pieties of humanist self-fashioning so often associated with the poet. Hartman saw both the "visionary feelings" and an "anxious self-scrutiny of Puritan proportions," and he explored the play between them. Like Frye and M. H. Abrams (of whom more below), Hartman has proved one of the most learned of Romanticists, and in this sense alone has provided a density of reference for Romantic writing that has been original in itself. His criticism has consistently exposed the layers of tradition, convention and genre behind the appearance of Romantic spontaneity.²⁴ The "Yale School," for all its internal diversities, has created a Romanticism that can no longer be read as a

²² "The Rhetoric of Temporality," in *Blindness and Insight: Essays in the Rhetoric of Contemporary Criticism* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1983), pp. 208-9, 222. My own *Irony and Authority in Romantic Poetry* must be read as after de Man, though I did not see the correspondences so clearly at the time.

²³ "Romanticism and Anti-Self Consciousness," in *Beyond Formalism: Literary Essays, 1958-1970* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1970), pp. 300, 303.

²⁴ *Wordsworth's Poetry, 1787-1814* (1964; reprinted, New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1977), p. xvi; see, additionally, in this respect, "Wordsworth, Inscriptions, and Romantic Nature Poetry," in *Beyond Formalism*, pp. 206-30.

mere exhortation to and emblem of wise passiveness, oneness with nature, and bringer of peace to an otherwise tortured modern individual. Even Bloom, the most conventionally affirmative of these three critics, is far from simply a celebrant: the vitalism is too hyperbolic, the claims too recklessly cosmic, and the disjunctions always too incipient to allow for mental or moral relaxation on his reader's part.

All these critics, Bloom, Hartman and de Man, stand in various kinds of opposition to M. H. Abrams, who has functioned as exemplary antagonist for a whole range of alternative criticisms. Abrams has stood throughout his career for an affirmative Romanticism, one that confirms us in the notion of what it is to be most admirably "human." He too holds to the image of Romanticism as representing the decisive shift into the "modern critical mind." *The Mirror and the Lamp* (1953) both summarized a long tradition of assumptions about Romanticism and adapted that tradition into the language of literary theory. Like Wellek, Abrams saw "one distinctively romantic criticism" whose varieties he saw as held together by "a persistent recourse to the poet to explain the nature and criteria of poetry." In pronouncing romantic art "expressive" rather than "mimetic" or "pragmatic," Abrams diminished its function as representative of a reality (whether objective or social) or as aspiring to persuade us of anything.²⁵ Abrams has been the major exponent of what Jerome McGann has called "the Romantic ideology," which has advertised the Romantic consciousness as "a good and happy place."²⁶ According to Abrams's work since *The Mirror and the Lamp*, this happiness is brought about by the substitution of imaginary for political satisfaction and of a secular ethics of imagination for the ungenerous restrictions of particular religious doctrines. In an essay published in 1963, Abrams came up with the phrase "apocalypse of the imagination" to describe the particular achievement of Romantic writing.²⁷ Few would dispute this as a critical component of that writing; but Abrams claimed it as the *best* part of the canon, and this is a claim he has never qualified. As late as 1986, fifteen years after his second major book, *Natural Supernaturalism*, he made the point even more clearly: "I think it is a good thing that many major Romantic poets turned from their early faith in a chiliastic recovery of Eden by bloody violence to a belief in an imaginative transformation of the self that would

²⁵ *The Mirror and the Lamp: Romantic Theory and the Critical Tradition* (1953; reprinted, New York: Norton, 1958), pp. v, 7, 8–29.

²⁶ McGann, *The Romantic Ideology: A Critical Investigation* (Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, 1983), p. 27.

²⁷ "English Romanticism: The Spirit of the Age," in Bloom, ed., *Romanticism and Consciousness: Essays in Criticism* (New York: Norton, 1970), p. 107.

make one see the old world in a new way, and to act accordingly." This is what made their "best poetry."²⁸

Abrams is here recirculating exactly the image of the French Revolution put about by the conservatives of the 1790s; and it would be hard to find many British radicals, let alone poets, who truly or consistently believed in bloody violence as the way back to Eden. Correspondingly and unsurprisingly, Abrams has also been resistant to the kind of "theory" that goes beyond the formal-historical categories of *The Mirror and the Lamp*. In this sense at least, McGann's case for the ongoing career of a "Romantic ideology" (for which critics are at least as responsible as Romantic writers, if not more so) seems credible.

So much, then, for the main currents of British and American criticism and theory generated up to about 1970 by an engagement with the Romantics. My account has necessarily been selective, but may serve as an introduction to more precise explorations like Jonathan Arac's *Critical Genealogies*. Other traditions and determinations could have been considered at length: the origins of psychoanalytic criticism, and of psychoanalysis itself, for instance, may be attributed to Romanticism in the sense that the psychoanalytic model is both a symptom of and a solution to the dramas of subjectivity and self-consciousness that figure so prominently in Romantic writing. Developments since 1970 are harder to describe. Feminist and cultural materialist criticisms, with their attentions to hitherto ignored or excluded components of literature, reflect the shifts apparent in the study of the humanities as a whole, and are proving as formative of a new "Romanticism" as they are of other objects of study.

Elements of earlier traditions still, however, persist. Wordsworth's plain speaking had in Britain a legacy among practicing poets – one thinks of Hardy, Larkin and Davie – but very little critical-theoretical influence. The Wordsworthian and Romantic imaginations took a hard knock from the theorists of high modernism who proved much more appealing to the academic enterprise as it has mostly defined itself. American critics, as we have seen, have found something more complex and by no means always affirmative in the Romantic heritage. The tone was set, or at least refined, in Lionel Trilling's 1950 essay "Wordsworth and the Rabbis." Here, Trilling made the (surely then extraordinary) suggestion that there was something "Judaic" about Wordsworth in his sense of the normality of mysticism, his indifference to the "idea of evil," and his "acceptance of cosmic contradic-

²⁸ "Construing and Deconstructing," in Eaves and Fischer, eds., *Romanticism and Contemporary Criticism*, p. 167.

tion.”²⁹ Other major Jewish-American critics like Bloom and Hartman have developed these parallels, demonstrating the degree to which all American critics are freed from the implicit obligation to understand Wordsworth (or any other British writer) as part of a *national* heritage. British writers are thus available both for a comparatist attention (they can be compared to Rousseau and Hegel) and for a theoretical generalization. The cosmopolitan element of theory has always defied localism; it looks for the broadest possible basis on which different things may be compared. British critics have tended to be more interested in the Englishness of English art, even where the purpose is counter-cultural or political. Each approach has its virtues, but they are different. One may reasonably suspect that the difference is one that might have resided in the creative consciousness of the Romantics themselves. For the British critic, we may suggest an undervaluation of the internationalist dimension of Romanticism and an attendant lack of curiosity about theory. The American critic, reciprocally, has been thought deficient in the attention to local-historical detail, though not at all lacking in awareness of a strictly literary history.

The astute reader will have noticed that I have been using the term *theory* rather loosely, and in at least two different (though related) senses. On the one hand, I have been calling any effort to generalize a syndrome or set of syndromes as “Romanticism” a *theory*. A theory of Romanticism, in this sense, is an attempt to pull together various differences into a common formal and historical paradigm. But I have also spoken of theory itself as describing any effort at systematic thought, whether or not related to an analysis of Romanticism. The British tradition has been relatively uninterested in either activity, while the American tradition has been engaged in both. Theories as diverse as those of Bloom, Frye and de Man have a visible base in a reading of Romanticism, but their function as theories *of* Romanticism has been assimilated into their claims as theories of literature or creativity in general.

But this same astute reader, if he or she is still with me, may have sensed the aroma of an apparent paradox, or at least an obscurity. How is it that the same Romanticism that was, I have argued, so visibly available for its arguments *against* theory, has been enthusiastically made the basis of these various theories of literature? The contradiction disappears when we realize that there has never been a single entity called “Romanticism,” and – to move to a conclusion by picking up some themes left implicit earlier in this essay – this very knowledge may be read out of the Romantic writings

²⁹ “Wordsworth and the Rabbis,” in *The Opposing Self: Nine Essays in Criticism* (New York: Viking, 1959), pp. 123, 143, 149–50.

themselves. Without making a strong claim for their absolute originality, it is apparent to us that in the writings of the late eighteenth century there is an unusually widespread preoccupation with the problem of knowledge. There is a concern about whether objectivity and accuracy are possible in perception and description, about whether we can ever know anything wholly. All specifications of what “is” come to be accompanied by concerns about “who’s asking,” and why. Past, present, self and other, rather than being accepted points of beginning or ending, now become mobile elements in a game where each chases another’s tail. One may say “here I stand,” but one never stands in the same place twice.

But the academy has by no means accepted these insights as absolute convictions. The so-called “new historicism,” which took on its exemplary form in Renaissance studies, is not a very precise definition of any critical method, but in its elementary and most influential incarnations it is visibly antitheoretical, and very much concerned to avoid the hermeneutical anxieties attending the paradigm I have just described. New historicism tends to propose the contingent conjunction of isolated items – texts, persons, institutions – as critical historical instances and agencies, thus eliding any problems of mediation and denying any role for the grand totalities traditionally (though no longer inevitably) associated with theory. This elementary new historicism has not much appeared in its pure form in Romantic studies, partly because there are so many more items in the Romantic archive competing for attention, making it harder to get away with making the one stand for the many. The anecdote and the luminous instance do not work so well for a field still perplexed by how much there is yet to read and make sense of.

The new historicism, then, at its purest, can be said to propose or assume (for it does not declare the problem as such) that there is no “theoretical” problem of knowledge of the kind that Romantic writing, I am arguing, can make unignorable for us. Insofar as it seeks to return us to the immediacy of a historical milieu, and to impart a sense of *being there*, new historicism (whose foundational identity is probably in the work of Stephen Greenblatt) promises to satisfy the desire for presence – the very desire so radically disturbed by the skeptical dimension of Romantic writing. Sometimes this emphasis on the problem of knowledge is attributed to the Enlightenment, as it was by Max Horkheimer, who found in that culture a project of demystification so thorough that it could only end by discrediting the entire project of objective reason itself.³⁰ But the question of clear and distinct origins need not be decided in order to accept a similar syndrome at work in Romantic

³⁰ See Horkheimer, *Eclipse of Reason* (1947; reprinted, New York: Continuum, 1974).

writing. Not a little of the long- and short-term failure of the rationalist project of the 1790s, as argued by Paine, Godwin and others, must be explained in reference to the sheer anachronism, then and since, of proposing to defend a model of objectivity so much at odds with other besetting contemporary convictions. In his important *The Order of Things* Michel Foucault described the emergence in the late eighteenth century of what he called the “analytic of finitude,” wherein the human being appears simultaneously and ambiguously as “an object of knowledge and as a subject that knows.”³¹ Biology, economics, and philology are for Foucault all symptoms of a shift in emphasis whereby the presence of a knower must be reckoned into all assertions about knowledge; they are all discourses committed to temporality, with its inevitable ironies and insecurities. In the limited terms of our topic here, this understanding requires that all ideas about Romanticism, whether they call themselves theories or not, must address the question of whether an objective knowledge is possible. As long as theory conceives itself in the old way, as aspiring to such knowledge, it must then question its own credibility. Hence what many lay persons as well as specialists recognize as theory today is in fact in the business of calling into question the possibility of theory itself. Few of us are comfortable with the claim that we have real knowledge of real things, and the problems and frustrations generated by this admission explain some of the feathers that have flown in the debate about deconstruction in the last twenty years.

It is then not a surprise so much as it seems a necessary condition that a theory of Romanticism should bring with it a theorization of the problems of the theoretical enterprise. Foucault’s construal of the modern condition helps explain this syndrome, as does the equally influential theoretical work of Jacques Derrida. In *Of Grammatology* Derrida predicted the collapse of a “linear model” of consciousness that had been steadily eroded for “over a century.” This model, as he described it, assumed a clear evolution from beginnings to endings, as evident in the “vulgar and mundane concept of temporality.” Foucault saw this being disturbed by the superimposition of the problem of the subject upon the contemplation of the object; Derrida by an awareness of the “problem of writing” as it threatens the mythology of self-presence he saw to be implicit in the fetishization of speech and of the voice.³² For Derrida the problem of writing was both perceived and resisted by Rousseau, and thus by what we may think of as Romanticism, which again

³¹ *The Order of Things: An Archaeology of the Human Sciences* (New York: Vintage, 1973), pp. 312. See pp. 303–43 generally.

³² *Of Grammatology*, trans. Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak (Baltimore and London: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1976), pp. 87, 86, 98.

becomes the site of critical conflict. Although Derrida is not at all committed to a linear-historical paradigm, and indeed declares himself against it, there is a definite emphasis on the late eighteenth century as the articulation of a critical interaction between speech and writing, presence and absence.

Derrida’s famous statement that “there is nothing outside of the text” and his rendering of textuality as an “indefinitely multiplied structure” unsettles all assumptions about being, presence and the pre-textual, and may be read as an analogue to Foucault’s inscription of the analytic of finitude: it is what happens when the idea of coherence becomes rewritten within a logic of temporality.³³ The method of deconstruction proposes that the text can never be fully deconstructed, not least because the terms of that deconstruction change with the productions of time. The image of an identical, repeatable deconstructive procedure was less Derrida’s than de Man’s. In a crucial essay de Man took issue with Derrida’s reading of Rousseau, disputing what he saw as the suggestion of a ruse of history operating without Rousseau’s own knowledge. For de Man Rousseau was already fully aware (at least in the textual and perhaps in the conscious sense) of the paradoxes and tensions Derrida purported to discover: “what happens in Rousseau is exactly what happens in Derrida.” De Man renders Derrida’s “historical scheme” even more thoroughly a mere “narrative convention.”³⁴ This flattening of the historical sequence is fundamental to de Man’s own enterprise and to his case for the definitional self-dramatization and self-ironization of what he calls “literature.” But it may be that in thus proposing an ahistorical identity for that syndrome de Man is replicating a *Romantic* writing as typical of the literary in general. In this sense, and with the universalization and formalization of categories drawn exclusively from Romantic writing, de Man’s work may represent a high point in the Romanticization of theory, whereby a theory of Romanticism passes as a theory of literature.³⁵

It remains a hitherto unworked and – for reasons that will now be clear – very difficult question whether these theorists, Derrida, Foucault and de Man, are operating under the rubric of a Romanticism whose signature they do not recognize, even as they claim precisely that recognition. For all of them, in different ways, recognition is not solution: that is, to know where one stands does not allow one to choose to stand elsewhere. The much

³³ *Ibid.*, pp. 160, 163.

³⁴ “The Rhetoric of Blindness: Jacques Derrida’s Reading of Rousseau,” in *Blindness and Insight*, p. 138.

³⁵ Compare Derrida’s remarks on the literary as offering “structures of resistance” to “philosophical conceptuality” in *Positions*, trans. Alan Bass (1968; reprinted, University of Chicago Press, 1982), p. 69. This proposed relation between literature and theory (conceptuality) is, as we have seen, a very traditional one.

debated relation between all these hermeneutically self-conscious theories and the impulse to activism, engagement and reform (theorized or not) is organized around this particular stand-off. Derrida's constant and determined revision of terminologies and his insistence on the unfinality of deconstruction can be taken to suggest a commitment to a historically permeable analysis that searches not for "truth" but for a pertinent place from which to have an effect. De Man was more prone to claiming a "truth," and hence the most prone to accusations of reification and formalization. But to speak of any of these theorists as simply or merely late Romantics would of course be to reify both Romanticism, which I have continually preferred to translate as *Romantic writing* (that is, as a conglomerate whose totality is always to be questioned and never assumed), and the culture of the present within which that Romanticism is always being rewritten and reconstructed. Romantic writing is full of references to God, nature, truth, beauty, and the soul; it is also replete with irony, and with dramatizations of intentionality, temporality, and hermeneutic instability. These tensions still appear in the language of the participants in the debates about the curriculum, about multiculturalism, and about theory itself. Criticism, in the sense in which I have used the word here, has in recent years been wandering uncomfortably between Romanticism(s) and theory, still seeking but never quite convincing itself that it has a language "of its own." Time will tell; or, at least, so we find ourselves believing.

2 Romanticism and Enlightenment

The new age proclaims itself to be fleet of foot, with wings on its soles; the dawn has put on seven-league boots – Long has lightning flashed on the horizon of poetry; the heavens have collected their stormy might into a powerful cloud; now the thunder has resounded mightily, now it has retreated and flashed only in the distance, now it has returned yet more fearsomely: but soon we shall speak not of a single storm, but the entire sky will break out into flame, and then all your petty lightning rods will avail no longer. Then the nineteenth century begins in earnest. . . . Then there will be readers who can read.

Schlegel, "Über die Unverständlichkeit"

I Romanticisms and Enlightenment

THE readers of this volume will find Lovejoy's famous essay "On the Discrimination of Romanticisms" amply confirmed: Romanticism cannot be defined. To include an essay called "Romanticism and Enlightenment" seems to be an impossibility compounded. On any reasonably comprehensive view the eighteenth century was not dramatically more uniform than the early nineteenth. Indeed, in one crucial respect it was less so, for no fact so inescapably galvanized the Enlightenment mind as that of revolution did the mind of Romanticism. There are many versions of Enlightenment – aristocratic and bourgeois, rationalist and empiricist, modernist and classicist, mercantilist and *laissez-faire*, urban and pastoral, religious and secular. Properly speaking, this chapter should be entitled "Romanticisms and Enlightenment," a multiplicity that leaves the student no hook except the little word "and" to hang a hat on.

That is what I propose to do. Though we may not be able to define either Enlightenment or Romanticism, we may succeed better at defining their relationship. The historical sensibility was more fully developed in the Romantic period than earlier, and this means that *how* the present relates to the past can be more important than *what* that past was. We may be able to