

The Romantic Period

1785–1832

- 1787: Establishment of the Society for Effecting the Abolition of the Trade in Slaves
- 1789–1815: Revolutionary and Napoleonic period in France.—1789: Revolution begins with the assembly of the Estates General in May and the storming of the Bastille on July 14.—1793: King Louis XVI executed; England joins the alliance against France.—1793–94: Reign of Terror under Robespierre. 1804: Napoleon crowned emperor.—1815: Napoleon defeated at Waterloo
- 1807: British slave trade outlawed (slavery abolished throughout the empire, the West Indies included, twenty-six years later)
- 1811–20: The Regency—George, Prince of Wales, acts as regent for George III, who has been declared incurably insane
- 1819: Peterloo Massacre
- 1820: Accession of George IV
- 1830: Accession of William IV
- 1832: Passage of the Reform Bill in Parliament

The Romantic period, though by far the shortest, is at least as complex and diverse as any other period in British literary history, and it is, tellingly, demarcated differently than any of the other eras that literary historians and anthologists include in their timelines. By convention, the boundaries delimiting those other epochs are either set by the reigns of monarchs (so that we have the “Elizabethan” and “Victorian” ages named for two long-reigning queens) or conceptualized as coinciding with the openings and closings of centuries (as with the volume of this Norton Anthology titled “The Twentieth and Twenty-First Centuries”). The date usually serving as the terminus of the Romantic age, 1832, represents a

Sir Brooke Boothby, by Joseph Wright. For more information about this image, see the color insert in this volume.

contrast to this pattern, strongly associated as it is with a signal political event, the first major reform of the British Parliament. A diverse range of dates have been identified as marking off the beginning of the Romantic period, but, almost always, each of these too is associated with an event of tremendous political and social impact. As some scholars tell it, the new era began in 1776, the year Americans declared their independence; others single out 1783, when shattering military defeat at the hands of those Americans dealt a blow to the credibility of Britain's ruling elites; and many settle on 1789, the year that launched democratic revolution in France, ushered in decades of fierce political unrest in Britain in its turn, and laid the ground for a war between the British and French Empires and their allies that would envelop an entire generation and take almost the whole of the globe as its theater.

Although politics has often provided a framework for the Romantic period, as such arrangements for periodization suggest, the fascination and provocation that this moment of cultural watershed presents for students of literary history have equally to do with another peculiarity in its construction: the Romantic is also the sole period that is named after a literary form, the romance. A great scholarly achievement of the later eighteenth century had been the recovery from obscurity of the medieval romances, previously ignored by literary historians more concerned with classical influences, and the Romantic period witnessed a reevaluation of those wild verse-tales of adventure, chivalry, and love. Exactly the traits—their barbarous deviations from probability and rationality, their unabashed fictionality, the fantasies they induced in their readers—that once justified medieval romances' fall into oblivion were seen anew, as commentators moved from lauding the room for idealization and visionary imagination that romance had afforded premodern writers to proposing that *modern* literature should follow suit and become, in one sense, more romantic, too. At a moment when real political events themselves seemed to entail improbabilities and impossibilities (for example the common people proclaiming independence from their rulers), that rehabilitation of romance was, in addition, spurred by the period's probing of the relation between what William Godwin in a subtitle to his 1794 novel *Caleb Williams* called "Things as They Are" and the alternative worlds that imagination could summon into being. "What is now proved was once, only imagin'd," William Blake declared in *The Marriage of Heaven and Hell* in 1790. His declaration is imbued with the new sense of power that poets, those professional imaginers, were inclined to claim at this moment, when the literary imagination appeared in new ways both to speak to and to guide historical change, and when political philosophy gained a new authority in and through poetry and fiction.

About a hundred years ago, *The Cambridge History of English Literature* segmented the era that this volume covers into two parts, tidily divvying off the "Period of the French Revolution" (1789–1815) from a subsequent period of "Romance Revival" that filled in the years between the defeat of Napoleonic France and the ascent of Queen Victoria. The messier option of treating the era as a single entity equips us better to do justice to its complex multiplicity. In refraining from the attempt to disentangle romance from history and literary from political change, we can better see how this period, in confronting their entanglement, originated the questions about the relations of art and activism, aesthetics and politics, that trouble us still. We can better see too how the notions of poetic autonomy that were involved in

the rehabilitation of romance's extravagant, untrammelled fictionality were likewise forged under the pressure of political events, and how the reconception of the relation of the present to the past at stake in this recovery of a lost literary tradition often entailed as well imagining a new political future.

Since the days of the old *Cambridge History*, we have likewise begun to engage with a greater range of literary accomplishments, thereby recognizing the centrifugal energies and the eclecticism distinguishing this era, even as its authors firmly believed themselves to be participating in a common temporal period. Recent scholarship has expanded, or reexpanded, a canon formerly centered on introspective lyric poems inspired by poets' encounters with objects in or features of the natural world. Abolitionist songs, ballads and ballad imitations, Turkish tales (favorite forms of Byron's), versified fairy tales (Letitia Landon's "Fairy of the Fountains"), poems in which nature does not prompt a human speaker's meditation but rather speaks itself (John Clare's "Swordy Well"; Anna Barbauld's "Mouse's Petition"), and, in prose, travelogues, "table talk," Gothic novels, and historical romances—all now get numbered among the forms of Romantic literature, a more capacious category than it was in the past. And whereas earlier criticism, especially during the third quarter of the twentieth century, developed accounts of a unified Romanticism by extrapolating from the writings of the six male poets that it had singled out for attention (Blake, Wordsworth, and Coleridge in the first generation, and Byron, Shelley, and Keats in the second), we are readier to stress the friction among these figures, whose poetic and social aspirations divided as well as united them. We are also readier to accept that the work of women writers helped make this exciting period what it was. The conspicuous presence on the literary scene of a new "female literature" and the "poetesses" producing it (to use the quaint phraseology of the male reviewers)—and the fact, more generally, that this was the most prolific age of literary production ever seen in European history—attracted much commentary and some lament. The learned lady or Bluestocking, one critic complained in 1823, "is a creature of modern growth, and capable of existing only in such times as the present."

REVOLUTION AND REACTION

During these times, England was experiencing the ordeal of change from a primarily agricultural society, where wealth and power had been concentrated in the landholding aristocracy, to a modern industrial nation. And this change occurred, as mentioned earlier, in a context of revolution—in America, then France, then Haiti—of counterrevolution, of war, of economic cycles of inflation and depression, and of the constant threat to the social structure from imported revolutionary ideologies to which the ruling classes responded by the repression of traditional liberties.

The early period of the French Revolution, marked by the Declaration of the Rights of Man and the storming of the Bastille, evoked enthusiastic support from English liberals and radicals alike. Three important books epitomize the radical social thinking stimulated by the Revolution. Mary Wollstonecraft's *A Vindication of the Rights of Men* (1790) justified the Revolution against Edmund Burke's attack in his *Reflections on the Revolution in France* (1790). Thomas Paine's *Rights of Man* (1791–92) also advocated

for England a democratic republic that was to be achieved, if lesser pressures failed, by popular revolution. More important as an influence on Wordsworth and Percy Shelley was Godwin's *Enquiry Concerning Political Justice* (1793), which foretold an inevitable but peaceful evolution of society to a final stage in which property would be equally distributed and government would wither away. But English sympathizers dropped off as the Revolution followed its increasingly grim course: the accession to power by Jacobin extremists, intent on purifying their new republic by purging it of its enemies; the "September Massacres" of the imprisoned nobility in 1792, followed by the execution of the king and queen; the new French Republic's invasion of the Rhineland and the Netherlands, which brought England into the war against France; the guillotining of thousands in the Reign of Terror under Robespierre; and, after the execution in their turn of the men who had directed the Terror, the emergence of Napoleon, first as dictator then as emperor of France. As Wordsworth wrote in *The Prelude*,

become Oppressors in their turn,
Frenchmen had changed a war of self-defence
For one of Conquest, losing sight of all
Which they had struggled for. . . . (11.206–09)

Napoleon, the brilliant tactician whose rise through the ranks of the army had seemed to epitomize the egalitarian principles of the Revolution, had become an arch-aggressor, a despot, and would-be founder of a new imperial dynasty. By 1800 liberals found they had no side they could wholeheartedly espouse. Napoleon's defeat at Waterloo in 1815 proved to be the triumph, not of progress and reform, but of reactionary despotisms throughout continental Europe. In this year, accordingly, the debates about the legitimacy of the ruling class and about patrician degeneracy that figures such as Godwin, Paine, and Wollstonecraft had launched in the early 1790s returned with a vengeance.

From start to finish, this was a period of harsh, repressive measures. Public meetings were prohibited in 1795, the right of habeas corpus (the legal principle protecting individuals from arbitrary imprisonment) was suspended for the first time in over a hundred years, and advocates of even moderate political change were charged with treason. Efforts during these war years to repeal the laws that barred Protestants who did not conform to the Anglican Church from the universities and government came to nothing; in the new climate of counterrevolutionary alarm, it was easy to portray even a slight abridgement of the privileges of the established Church as a measure that, validating the Jacobins' campaigns to de-Christianize France, would aid the enemy cause. Another early casualty of this counterrevolution was the movement to abolish the slave trade, a cause supported initially by a wide cross-section of English society. In the 1780s and 1790s numerous writers, both white (Anna Letitia Barbauld, Coleridge, and Hannah More) and black (Ottobah Cugoana and Olaudah Equiano), attacked the greed of the owners of the West Indian sugar plantations and detailed the horrors of the traffic in African flesh that provided them with their labor power. But the bloodshed that accompanied political change in France strengthened the hand of apologists for slavery, by making any manner of reform seem the prelude to violent insurrection. Parliament rejected a bill abolishing the trade in 1791, and sixteen years—marked by slave rebellions and by the planters' brutal reprisals—elapsed before it passed a new version of the bill.

The frustration of the abolitionist cause is an emblematic chapter in the larger story of how a reactionary government sacrificed hopes of reform while it mobilized the nation's resources for war. Yet this was the very time when economic and social changes were creating a desperate need for corresponding changes in political arrangements. For one thing, new classes inside England—manufacturing rather than agricultural—were beginning to demand a voice in government proportionate to their wealth. The "Industrial Revolution"—the shift in manufacturing that resulted from the invention of power-driven machinery to replace hand labor—had begun in the mid-eighteenth century with improvements in machines for processing textiles, and was given immense impetus when James Watt perfected the steam engine in 1765. In the succeeding decades steam replaced wind and water as the primary source of power for all sorts of manufacturing processes, beginning that dynamic of ever-accelerating economic expansion and technological development that we still identify as the hallmark of the modern age. A new laboring population massed in sprawling mill towns such as Manchester, whose population increased by a factor of five in fifty years. In agricultural communities the destruction of home industry was accompanied by the acceleration of the process of enclosing open fields and wastelands (usually, in fact, "commons" that had provided the means of subsistence for entire communities) and incorporating them into larger, privately owned holdings. Enclosure was by and large necessary for the more efficient methods of agriculture required to feed the nation's growing population (although some of the land that the wealthy acquired through parliamentary acts of enclosure they in fact incorporated into their private estates). But enclosure was socially destructive, breaking up villages, creating a landless class who either migrated to the industrial towns or remained as farm laborers, subsisting on starvation wages and the little they could obtain from parish charity. The landscape of England began to take on its modern appearance—the hitherto open rural areas subdivided into a checkerboard of fields enclosed by hedges and stone walls, with the factories of the cities casting a pall of smoke over vast areas of cheaply built houses and slum tenements. Meanwhile, the population was increasingly polarized into what Benjamin Disraeli later called the "Two Nations"—the two classes of capital and labor, the rich and the poor.

No attempt was made to regulate this shift from the old economic world to the new, since even liberal reformers were committed to the philosophy of laissez-faire. This theory of "let alone," set out in Adam Smith's *The Wealth of Nations* in 1776, holds that the general welfare can be ensured only by the free operation of economic laws; the government should maintain a policy of strict noninterference and leave people to pursue, unfettered, their private interests. On the one hand, laissez-faire thinking might have helped pave the way for the long-postponed emancipation of the slave population of the West Indies; by 1833, when Parliament finally ended slavery, the anomaly that their unfree labor represented for the new economic and social orthodoxies evidently had become intolerable. But for the great majority of the laboring class at home, the results of laissez-faire and the "freedom" of contract it secured were inadequate wages and long hours of work under harsh discipline and in sordid conditions. Investigators' reports on the coal mines, where male and female children of ten or even five years of age were harnessed to heavy coal-sledges that they dragged by crawling on their hands and knees, read like scenes from Dante's *Inferno*. With the end of the war in 1815, the nation's workforce was enlarged by demobilized troops at the very

moment when demand for manufactured goods, until now augmented by the needs of the military, fell dramatically. The result was an unemployment crisis that persisted through the 1820s. Because the workers had no vote and were prevented by law from unionizing, their only recourses were petitions, protest meetings, and riots, to which the ruling class responded with even more repressive measures. The introduction of new machinery into the mills resulted in further loss of jobs, provoking sporadic attempts by the displaced workers to destroy the machines. After one such outbreak of "Luddite" machine breaking, the House of Lords—despite Byron's eloquent protest—passed a bill (1812) making death the penalty for destroying the frames used for weaving in the stocking industry. In 1819 hundreds of thousands of workers organized meetings to demand parliamentary reform. In August of that year, a huge but orderly assembly at St. Peter's Fields, Manchester, was charged by saber-wielding troops, who killed nine and injured hundreds more; this was the notorious "Peterloo Massacre," so named with sardonic reference to the Battle of Waterloo.

Suffering was largely confined to the poor, however, while the landed classes and industrialists prospered. So did many merchants, who profited from the new markets opened up as the British Empire expanded aggressively, compensating with victories against the French for the traumatic loss of America in 1783. England's merchants profited, too, thanks to the marketing successes that, over time, converted once-exotic imports from these colonies into everyday fare for the English. In the eighteenth century tea and sugar had been transformed in this way, and in the nineteenth century other commodities followed suit: the Indian muslin, for instance, that was the fabric of choice for gentlemen's cravats and fashionable ladies' gowns, and the laudanum (Indian opium dissolved in alcohol) that so many ailing writers of the period appear to have found irresistible. The West End of London and new seaside resorts like Brighton became in the early nineteenth century consumers' paradises, sites where West Indian planters and nabobs (a Hindi word that entered English as a name for those who owed their fortunes to Indian gain) could be glimpsed displaying their purchasing power in a manner that made them moralists' favorite examples of *nouveau riche* vulgarity. The word *shopping* came into English usage in this era. Luxury villas sprang up in London, and the prince regent, who in 1820 became George IV, built himself palaces and pleasure domes, retreats from his not very onerous public responsibilities.

But even, or especially, in private life at home, the prosperous could not escape being touched by the great events of this period. French revolutionary principles were feared by English conservatives almost as much for their challenge to the "proper" ordering of the relations between men and women as for their challenge to traditional political arrangements. Yet the account of what it meant to be English that developed in reaction to this challenge—an account emphasizing the special virtues of the English sense of home and family—was in its way equally revolutionary. In an unprecedented way, the war that the English waged almost without intermission between 1793 and 1815 had a "home front." The menaced sanctuary of the domestic fireside became the symbol of what the nation's military might was safeguarding. What popularity the monarchy held on to during this turbulent period was thus a function not of the two King Georges' traditional exercise of a monarch's sovereign powers but instead of the public-

ity, tailored to suit this nationalist rhetoric, that emphasized each one's domestic bliss within a "royal family." Conceptions of proper femininity altered as well under the influence of this new idealization and nationalization of the home, this project (as Burke put it) of "binding up the constitution of our country with our dearest domestic ties."

And that alteration both put new pressures on women and granted them new opportunities. As in earlier English history, women in the Romantic period were provided only limited schooling, were subjected to a rigid code of sexual behavior, and (especially after marriage) were bereft of legal rights. In this period women began, as well, to be deluged by books, sermons, and magazine articles that insisted vehemently on the physical and mental differences between the sexes and instructed women that, because of these differences, they should accept that their roles in life involved child rearing, housekeeping, and nothing more. (Of course, in tendering this advice promoters of female domesticity conveniently ignored the definitions of duty that industrialists imposed on the poor women who worked in their mills.) Yet a paradoxical byproduct of the connections that the new nationalist rhetoric forged between the well-being of the state and domestic life was that the identity of the patriot became one a woman might attempt, with some legitimacy, to claim. Within the framework created by the new accounts of English national identity, a woman's private virtues now had a public relevance. They had to be seen as crucial to the nation's welfare. Those virtues might well be manifested in the work of raising patriotic sons, but, as the thousands of women in this period who made their ostensibly natural feminine feelings of pity their alibi for participation in abolitionism demonstrated, they could be turned to nontraditional uses as well.

The new idea that, as the historian Linda Colley has put it, a woman's place was not simply in the home but also in the nation could also justify or at least extenuate the affront to proper feminine modesty represented by publication—by a woman's entry into the public sphere of authorship. "Bluestockings"—educated women—remained targets of masculine scorn, as we have seen. This became, nonetheless, the first era in literary history in which women writers began to compete with men in their numbers, sales, and literary reputations. These female authors had to tread carefully, to be sure, to avoid suggesting that (as one male critic fulminated) they wished the nation's "affectionate wives, kind mothers, and lovely daughters" to be metamorphosed into "studious philosophers" and "busy politicians." And figures like Wollstonecraft, who in the *Vindication of the Rights of Woman* grafted a radical proposal about gender equality onto a more orthodox argument about the education women needed to be proper mothers, remained exceptional. Later women writers tended cautiously to either ignore her example or define themselves against it.

Only in the Victorian period would Wollstonecraft's cause of women's rights rally enough support for substantial legal reform to begin, and that process would not be completed until the twentieth century. In the early nineteenth century the pressures for political reform focused on the rights of men, as distinct from women. From 1785 on, the year in which Prime Minister William Pitt (who would soon shift his political allegiances) proposed in vain a bill for parliamentary reform, middle-class and working-class men, entering into strategic and short-lived alliances, made the restructuring of the British electoral system their common cause. Finally, at a time of acute

economic distress, the first Reform Bill was passed in 1832. It did away with the rotten boroughs (depopulated areas whose seats in the House of Commons were at the disposal of a few noblemen), redistributed parliamentary representation to include the industrial cities, and extended the franchise. Although about half the middle class, almost all the working class, and all women remained without a vote, the principle of the peaceful adjustment of conflicting interests by parliamentary majority had been firmly established. Reform was to go on, by stages, until Britain acquired universal adult suffrage in 1928.

THE NEW POETRIES: THEORY AND PRACTICE

Writers working in this period, from 1785 to 1832, did not think of themselves as constituting a group of “Romantic” authors. It was Victorian critics who first wrote of the previous generation as the Romantics and promoted the term as a description for a period of recent, modern rather than premodern, history. Contemporaries, by contrast, treated these writers as independent individuals or else grouped them (usually maliciously, but with some basis in fact) into a number of separate “schools” or “sects”: the “Lake School” of Wordsworth, Coleridge, and Robert Southey (a “sect of poets,” the critic Francis Jeffrey sniped, determined to be “*dissenters* from the established systems in poetry and criticism” and valuing themselves highly “for having broken loose from the bondage of ancient authority”); the “Cockney School,” a derogatory term for vulgar Londoners Leigh Hunt, William Hazlitt, and associated writers who had pretensions beyond their station, including Keats; and the impious “Satanic School” of Leigh Hunt (again), Percy Shelley, and Byron. At the start of the period, the satirist Richard Polwhele also practiced this name-calling as he cataloged the sphere of “female literature”: the aim of his 1797 *The Unsex'd Females* was, by naming and shaming, to firmly distinguish the virtuous lady writers of his moment from the “Amazonian band” formed by Wollstonecraft and her followers, a group who, so Polwhele complained, had sacrificed their feminine charms for lead roles in revolutionary polemicizing.

The proliferation of schools and sects suggests the fault lines running through this fractious literary world. Where agreement could be found was around the proposition that this was a watershed moment in literary history. “Literature, well or ill conducted,” the satirist Thomas James Mathias proclaimed in the book that inspired Polwhele’s, “is the great engine by which . . . all civilized states must ultimately be supported or overthrown.” Radicals concurred with conservatives like Mathias in this conviction that literature was where the action was—that literature in effect *was* action—even as they disagreed on the meaning to be ascribed to that very term (a term formerly synonymous with learning in general, only in this period did *literature* begin to settle down into that modern meaning that confines it exclusively to artistic expression, works of the imagination particularly). Introducing *The New Cambridge History of the English Romantic Period*, James Chandler highlights, as a defining characteristic of the Romantic age, how often this era’s most talented men gravitated to poetry in particular. They confirmed poetry’s elevated cultural status by abandoning other careers, the ministry in Coleridge’s case, the law in Sir Walter Scott’s, medicine in Keats’s. Even George Canning, Tory leader of Britain’s House of Commons, published in 1823 a *Collected Poems*. In his 1802 Preface to *Lyrical Ballads* Wordsworth

unfavorably contrasted what the “Man of Science” could do as a benefactor of humanity with what the “Poet” could, whose vocation it was to “bind together by passion and knowledge the vast empire of human society, as it is spread over the whole earth and over all time.” “The most unfailing herald, companion, and follower of the awakening of a great people to work a beneficial change in opinion or institution, is Poetry,” Percy Shelley declared.

The “most eccentric feature of this entire culture,” literary historian Stuart Curran suggests, was that it was “simply mad for poetry.” To a degree inconceivable in the twenty-first century, poetry back then penetrated everyday life, as something appearing in daily papers alongside news stories and notices of bankruptcies, deaths, and marriages, and as something to be memorized, sung, transcribed into commonplace books, and made the basis of parlor games on long winters’ evenings. The calling of poet beckoned to many: among those hordes of devoted readers, many were eager—too eager, their reviewers complained—to become authors in turn, imagining that verse might provide their springboard to fame. If those enthusiasms laid the ground for confident declarations like Shelley’s and Wordsworth’s, they also, inevitably, generated a backlash, the more so as the new poetics of the Romantic period rode to this cultural prominence on the back of a media culture that at this moment was reaching increasing numbers of readers more quickly than ever before. Indeed, as Mathias’s word *engine* suggests, with the expansion of modern publishing, it had begun to appear as though modern writing, too, had started to conform to the accelerated production rhythms of the Industrial Revolution. (The nervousness aroused by these developments, anticipations of the twentieth century’s mass culture, is also registered in Wordsworth’s Preface, which proposes as one cause of the “almost savage torpor” found among Wordsworth’s countrymen and women, city-dwellers especially, the “rapid communication of intelligence” provided by the new popular press.) The spectacle of new sorts of people enlisting as authors and the multiplication of new venues for their writings generated gloomy warnings about overproduction and an accompanying debasement of artistic standards.

The genius poet was therefore shadowed throughout the Romantic period’s literary discussion by a less admirable double, the Grub Street hack. *Poet* could in this era designate the visionary and universal benefactor profiled in Wordsworth’s Preface and Shelley’s *Defence of Poetry*, but it also evoked an impoverished and pretentious truant from a more honest trade, a misguided *romantic scribbler*. (That last phrase, often bandied about in this era, reminds us that even as the term *romantic* became synonymous with an admirable responsiveness to the promptings of imagination, it never completely shed its association with a deplorable and impractical deviation from common sense.) As Mary Robinson mischievously pointed out, it was a mistake to equate “the airy throne/ Of bold imagination, rapture fraught/ Above the herds of mortals” with a desolate mountaintop or isolated green dell, even though the period’s poetic speakers tended to picture themselves in such sublime settings. The poet’s haunt was in mundane reality likely to be a shabby, low-rent attic. Many motives drove the poets who in this era tried to make poetry new by reviving what was old and who thereby contrived to bypass the eighteenth-century poets whose heirs they were supposed to be: their medievalisms and primitivisms were, for a start, reactions against the neoclassical canons of good taste, as well as expressions of a new nationalism. But certainly ideas about the literary past’s exemption from the commercial pressures of the present also helped make the outmoded old romances a radically new source

of inspiration for this period, precisely because of rather than despite their historical distance. The energy invested at this moment in the scholarly investigation and poetic imitation of the ballads being sung or chanted by common people in the streets and fields suggests something similar. It registers the fascination that the participants in literate culture who listened in on these performances were inclined to ascribe to a cultural form whose origins predated the invention of the printing press and the advent of a print market. The ballad was transmitted by word of mouth and not by commercial exchange.

The double image of the poet—product of an era that both idealized poetry and fretted over its standing in modern, commercial society—is an important context for the questions centering Wordsworth's 1802 Preface, his retroactive statement of the principles guiding him in the poems he contributed to *Lyrical Ballads*. "What is meant by the word Poet? What is a Poet?" The questions were the more urgent because in a fractious period, there was increased pressure on the aesthetic sphere to act as a site in which human beings could rediscover the commonalities linking them as humans, as Wordsworth's definition of the poet as a figure of unification, "bind[ing] together . . . the vast empire of human society," suggests. One way to approach the period's new poetries and isolate some of the distinctive trends that were precipitated out of a welter of reforms and radical innovations is to start by tracing the shifting conceptions of poet and poetry that emerged then. If by taking this approach we take our cue from Wordsworth's Preface, we should also acknowledge that his manifesto for a new poetics can be deemed representative only to a limited extent. Wordsworth would have wished it otherwise, but



Contrasting views of the Romantic poet. On the left, Henry Fuseli, "The Poet's Vision," unused design for frontispiece to William Cowper's *Poems* (1807). On the right, Henry Heath, "Fine Arts, Pt. 1: Poetry," published August 8, 1826.

during this era of revolution definitions of good poetry, like definitions of the good society, were sure to create as much contention as consensus.

Concepts of the Poet and the Poem

Seeking a stable foundation on which social institutions might be constructed, eighteenth-century British philosophers had devoted much energy to demonstrating that human nature must be everywhere the same, because it everywhere derived from individuals' shared sensory experience of an external world that could be objectively represented. As the century went on, however, philosophers began emphasizing—and poets began developing a new language for—individual variations in perception and the capacity the receptive consciousness has to filter and to re-create reality. This was a shift Wordsworth registered when in his Preface he located the source of a poem not in outer nature but in the psychology of the individual poet. What distinguished the poems of *Lyrical Ballads* from the popular poetry of the day Wordsworth declared, vindicating his own departures from those norms, is that "[t]he feeling therein developed gives importance to the action and situation, and not the action and situation to the feeling." Wordsworth maintained, in continuation, that "[A]ll good poetry," was, at the moment of composition, "the spontaneous overflow of powerful feelings." Other contemporary discussions of poetry concurred with this account by referring likewise to the mind, emotions, and imagination of the poet for the origin, content, and defining attributes of a poem. "The poet, the man of strong feelings, gives us only an image of his mind, . . . marking the impression which nature had made on his own heart," Wollstonecraft wrote in an essay that appeared in the *Monthly Magazine* the year before the first edition of *Lyrical Ballads*. Though Romantic poetry is interchangeable for many modern readers with "nature poetry" (an equation that William Godwin, her widower, endorsed when he reprinted Wollstonecraft's essay under a new title, "On Poetry, and Our Relish for the Beauties of Nature"), this characterization of Romantic poetics risks downplaying the poets' emphatic attention to the operations of consciousness. Certainly, many poets participated enthusiastically in the touring of picturesque scenery that was a new leisure activity of their age. Wordsworth, Coleridge, and Southey, the Lake School, even set up their households in the midst of that scenery, announcing in their residential arrangements as well as their works their antipathy to "the increasing accumulation of men in cities" and faith in the restorative powers of a benevolent Nature. Even so, it is fair to say that when the great Romantic lyrics—Smith's *Beachy Head*, Wordsworth's "Tintern Abbey," Coleridge's "Frost at Midnight," Keats's "Nightingale"—remark on an aspect in the natural scene, this attention to the external world serves only as stimulus to the most characteristic human activity, that of thinking.

Infused with this emphasis, the lyric poem written in the first person, which for much of literary history was regarded as a minor kind, thus became for many among the Romantics a major form and was often described as the most essentially poetic of all the genres. And in most Romantic lyrics the "I" is no longer a conventionally typical lyric speaker, such as the Petrarchan lover or Cavalier gallant of Elizabethan and seventeenth-century love poems, but one who shares recognizable traits with the poet. The experiences and states of mind expressed by the lyric speaker often accord closely with the known facts of the poet's life.

This reinvention of the lyric complicated established understandings of the gender of authorship. It may not be an accident, some critics suggest, that Wordsworth in his Preface defines poetry as “the real language of men” and the Poet as a “man speaking to men”: Wordsworth, who began to publish when women such as Robinson and Charlotte Smith occupied the vanguard of the new personal poetry, might have decided that to establish the distinctiveness of his project he needed to counterbalance his emphasis on his feelings with an emphasis on those feelings’ “manly” dignity. This is not to say that women writers’ relationship to the new ideas about poetry was straightforward either. In one of her prefaces Smith says that she anticipates being criticized for “bringing forward ‘with querulous egotism,’ the mention of myself.” For many female poets the other challenge those ideas about poetry posed might have consisted in their potential to reinforce the old, prejudicial idea that their sex—traditionally seen as creatures of feeling rather than intellect—wrote about their own experiences because they were capable of nothing else. For male poets the risks of poetic self-revelation were different—and in some measure they were actively seized by those who, like Coleridge and Percy Shelley, intimated darkly that the introspective tendency and emotional sensitivity that made someone a poetic genius could also lead him to melancholy and madness.

It was not only the lyric that registered these new accounts of the poet. Byron confounded his contemporaries’ expectations about which poetic genre was best suited to self-revelation by inviting his audience to equate the heroes of *Childe Harold*, *Manfred*, and *Don Juan* with their author, and to see these fictional protagonists’ experiences as disclosing the deep truths of his secret self. Wordsworth’s *Prelude* represents an extreme instance of this tendency to self-reference. Though the poem, half a century in the making, is of epic length and seriousness, its subject is not, as is customary in an epic, history on a world-changing scale but the growth of the poet’s mind: “a thing unprecedented in Literary history that a man should talk so much about himself,” Wordsworth admitted.

Spontaneity and the Impulses of Feeling

In traditional poetics, poetry had been regarded as supremely an art—an art that in modern times was practiced by poets who had assimilated classical precedents, were aware of the “rules” governing the kind of poem they are writing, and (except for the happy touches that, as Alexander Pope said, are “beyond the reach of art”) deliberately employed tested means to achieve premeditated effects on an audience. But in her 1797 *Monthly Magazine* essay, Wollstonecraft foretold a shift in aesthetic doctrine when she wrote that “[t]he silken wings of fancy are shrivelled by rules,” and that “a desire of attaining elegance of diction occasions an attention to words, incompatible with sublime, impassioned thoughts.” In Wordsworth’s account in the Preface, although the composition of a poem originates from “emotion recollected in tranquillity” and may be preceded and followed by reflection, the immediate act of composition must be spontaneous—impulsive, artless, and free from rules. Keats listed as an “axiom” a similar proposition—that “if poetry comes not as naturally as the leaves to a tree it had better not come at all.”

On occasion in this period’s discussions of poetics, this interest in a poetry that came naturally could act in concert with that nostalgia, already discussed, which abandoned the prosaic here-and-now for the more roman-

tic possibilities housed in a remote, preliterate past. For instance, for many poets of the period, the ancient bard, a composite figure resembling at once the biblical prophets, Homer, Milton, and the harp-playing patriots whom eighteenth-century antiquarians had located in a legendary Dark Ages Britain, was a charismatic role model. Imagining the songs a bard might have sung in long-ago times made it easier to conceive an alternative to the mundane language of modernity—a natural, oral poetry, blissfully unconscious of modern decorums and artificial conventions and sublimely irreducible to rule or measure. (Though they chafed against this expectation, writers from the rural working class—Robert Burns and later John Clare—could be expected, by virtue of their perceived distance from the restraint and refinement of civilized discourse, to play a comparable role inside modern culture, that of peasant poet or natural genius.) When, after the end of the Napoleonic war, writers like Byron and Percy and Mary Shelley traveled to Italy, taking these bardic ideals with them, they became enthralled with the arts of the improvisatore and improvisatrice, men and women whose electrifying oral performances of poetry involved no texts but those of immediate inspiration.



The Bard. Frontispiece by Thomas Rowlandson for Edward Jones, *The Bardic Museum of Primitive British Literature* (1802), a collection of traditional Welsh melodies. Rowlandson pictures the bard as a figure unifying his community.

One writer who praised and emulated that rhapsodic spontaneity, Percy Shelley, thought it "an error to assert that the finest passages of poetry are produced by labour and study." He suggested instead that these were the products of an unconscious creativity: "A great statue or picture grows under the power of the artist as a child in the mother's womb."

The emphasis in this period on unlabored art and on the spontaneous activity of the imagination producing it, and the premium placed on the immediacy of the relationship between author and poem, are linked to a belief in the essential role of passion. According to this view (which connects the literary productions of the Romantic period to the poetry and fiction of sensibility written earlier in the eighteenth century), the intuitive feelings of "the heart" had to supplement the judgments of the purely logical faculty, "the head." "Deep thinking," Coleridge wrote, "is attainable only by a man of deep feeling"; hence, "a metaphysical solution that does not tell you something in the heart is grievously to be suspected as apocryphal."

Glorification of the Ordinary

In the lecture he gave "On the Living Poets" in 1818 Hazlitt declared the poetry of the Lake school, with Wordsworth at its head, to be the literary equivalent of the French Revolution, a translation of political change into poetical experiment. "Kings and queens were dethroned from their rank and station in legitimate tragedy or epic poetry, as they were decapitated elsewhere. . . . The paradox [these poets] set out with was that all things are by nature, equally fit subjects for poetry; or that if there is any preference to give, those that are the meanest [i.e., most humble] and most unpromising are the best." Furthermore, as Hazlitt pointed out, the Lake School had done more than take the subjects of serious poems from the lives of humble country folk; it overtly elicited a genteel audience's sympathies for the disgraced, outcast, and delinquent—"convicts, female vagrants, gypsies . . . idiot boys and mad mothers," in Hazlitt's list. To some extent Hazlitt's analogizing between poetic and political experiments suggests more about him than the living poets he discusses: an avid youthful reader of Jean-Jacques Rousseau, he sounds as though he took to heart the Swiss-French philosopher's advocacy of a simplicity of manners against aristocratic corruption. Still, Hazlitt would have found support for his characterization of the Lake School from Wordsworth's statement in the Preface that his aim in *Lyrical Ballads* was "to choose incidents and situations from common life." For Wordsworth's polemical purposes, it was in "humble and rustic life" that a natural language—"a language really spoken by men" and "incorporated with the beautiful and permanent forms of nature"—was to be found, and the speech of rustics was in the Preface promoted as a cure for the ailments of the overcivilized.

Hazlitt would have known as well that later-eighteenth-century writers had already experimented with the simple treatment of simple subjects. Burns had with great success represented "the rural scenes and rural pleasures of [his] natal Soil," and in a language aiming to be true to the rhythms of the Scots language. Women poets, too—Barbauld, Robinson—assimilated to their poems the subject matter of everyday life. Many later eighteenth-century writers had taken their cue from the stark simplicity of the popular ballad: the ballad's appeal for an up-market, metropolitan readership, capitalized on by eighteenth-century collections like Percy's *Reliques of Ancient*

English Poetry, was in a part a function of the contrast between primitive plainness and outright crudity of these song traditions and the tame, elaborate poetic diction defining poetry's modern milieu.

Once it had arrived on this scene Wordsworth's Preface of 1802 underwrote such poetic practice with a theory that inverted the traditional hierarchy of poetic genres, subjects, and styles. It elevated humble life and the plain style, which in earlier theory were appropriate only for the pastoral, the genre at the bottom of the traditional hierarchy, into the principal subject and medium for poetry in general. Byron reacted with scorn to this poetic program and facetiously summoned ghosts from the eighteenth century to help him protest against what *he* perceived as Wordsworth's bathos:

"Peddlers," and "Boats," and "Wagons"! Oh! ye shades
Of Pope and Dryden, are we come to this?

Yet Wordsworth's project was not simply to represent the world as it is but, as he explained in his Preface, to throw over "situations from common life . . . a certain coloring of imagination, whereby ordinary things should be presented to the mind in an unusual aspect." No one can read his poems without noticing the reverence with which he invests words that for earlier writers had been derogatory—words such as *common*, *ordinary*, *everyday*, *humble*. Wordsworth's aim was to shatter the lethargy of custom so as to refresh our sense of wonder in the everyday and the lowly.

In the eighteenth century Samuel Johnson had said that "wonder is a pause of reason"—"the effect of novelty upon ignorance." But for many Romantics, to arouse in the sophisticated mind that sense of wonder presumed to be felt by the ignorant and the innocent—to renew the universe, Percy Shelley wrote, "after it has been blunted by reiteration"—was a major function of poetry. Commenting on the imaginative quality of Wordsworth's early verse, Coleridge remarked in *Biographia Literaria*: "To combine the child's sense of wonder and novelty with the appearances, which every day for perhaps forty years had rendered familiar . . . this is the character and privilege of genius." Contributing to this poetry of the child's-eye view, Barbauld wrote a poem centered on an observer's effort to imagine the unknowable perspective of a being for whom thought and sensation are not yet begun—a "little invisible being who is expected soon to become visible" but is still in its mother's womb.

The Supernatural, the Romance, and Psychological Extremes

There was a counterpoint to this poetry devoted to reviving the wonder of the familiar—"characters and incidents such as will be found in every village and its vicinity"—and proposing the authenticity of that local knowledge that long familiarity brings: a poetry that instead was founded on frank violation of natural laws and the ordinary course of events and that thereby cultivated the romantic in the understanding of that term that was to the forefront during the Romantic period itself. Coleridge contrasts these two sorts of poem when in *Biographia Literaria* he describes the division of labor organizing his collaboration with Wordsworth on *Lyrical Ballads*: his responsibility was poetry in which "the incidents and agents were to be, in part at least, supernatural, or at least romantic." Stories of bewitchings, hauntings, and possession—shaped by antiquated treatises on demonology, folklore,

and Gothic novels—supplied Coleridge in poems such as *Rime of the Ancient Mariner*, *Christabel*, and “Kubla Khan” with the means of impressing on readers a sense of occult powers and unknown modes of being.

Poems like these, as Coleridge’s epithet “romantic” suggests, were often grouped together by contemporaries under the medievalizing rubric “romance.” On the one hand romances were writings that turned, in their quest for settings conducive to supernatural happenings, to distant pasts, faraway, exotic places, or both—Keats’s “perilous seas, in faery lands forlorn” or the China of “Kubla Khan.” On the other hand romance also named a homegrown, native tradition of literature, made unfamiliar and alien by the passage of time. For many authors, starting with Horace Walpole, whose *Castle of Otranto* (1764) began the tradition of Gothic fiction, writing under the banner of romance meant reclaiming their national birthright: a literature of imagination—associated, above all, with Spenser and the Shakespeare of fairy magic and witchcraft—that had been forced underground by the Enlightenment’s emphasis on reason. Byron negotiated between romance’s two sets of associations in *Childe Harold*, having his hero travel in far-off Albania and become entranced by the inhabitants’ savage songs, but also giving the poem the subtitle “A Romaunt” (an archaic spelling of romance) and writing it in Spenserian stanzas. This was the same stanzaic form, neglected for much of the eighteenth century, that Keats drew on for *The Eve of St. Agnes*, the poem in which he proved himself a master of that Romantic mode that establishes a medieval setting for events violating our sense of realistic probability. The Romantic period’s “medieval revival” was also promoted by women: Robinson, for instance (author of “Old English,” “Monkish,” and “Gothic” Tales), as well as Letitia Landon, Felicia Hemans, and others, women who often matched the arch-medievalist Sir Walter Scott in the historical learning they brought to their compositions.

The “addition of strangeness to beauty” that Walter Pater near the end of the nineteenth century would identify as a key Romantic tendency is seen not only in this concern with the exotic and archaic landscapes of romance but also in an interest in the mysteries of mental life and determination to investigate psychological extremes. Coleridge and Thomas De Quincey shared an interest in dreams and nightmares and in the altered consciousness they experienced under their addiction to opium. In his odes, as in the quasi-medieval “ballad” “La Belle Dame sans Merci,” Keats recorded strange mixtures of pleasure and pain with extraordinary sensitivity, pondering the destructive aspects of sexuality and the erotic quality of the longing for death. And Byron made repeated use of the fascination of the forbidden and the appeal of the terrifying yet seductive Satanic hero.

There were, of course, writers who resisted these poetic engagements with fantasized landscapes and strange passions. Significant dissent came from some women writers, who, given accounts of their sex as especially susceptible to the delusions or romantic love, had particular reason to continue the Enlightenment program and promote the rational regulation of emotion. Barbauld wrote a poem gently advising the young Coleridge not to prolong his stay in the “fairy bower” of romance but to engage actively with the world as it is. Often satirical when she assesses characters who imagine themselves the pitiable victims of their own powerful feelings, Jane Austen had her heroine in *Persuasion*, while conversing with a melancholy, Byron-reading young man, caution him against overindulgence in Byron’s “impas-

sioned descriptions of hopeless agony” and “prescribe” to him a “larger allowance of prose in his daily study.” And yet this heroine, having “been forced into prudence in her youth,” has “learned romance as she grew older.” The reversal of the sequence that usually orders the story line of female socialization suggests a receptivity to romance’s allure—the allure of the improbable—that links Austen to the spirit of the age.

Individualism and Alienation

Another feature of Byron’s poetry that attracted notice and, in some quarters, censure was its insistence on his or his hero’s self-sufficiency. Hazlitt, for instance, borrowed lines from Shakespeare’s *Coriolanus* to object to Byron’s habit of spurning human connection “[a]s if a man were author of himself, / And owned no other kin.” The audacious individualism that Hazlitt questions in this passage from *The Spirit of the Age* was, however, central to the celebrations of creativity occupying many Romantic-period writers. Indeed, in the Preface, Wordsworth had already characterized his poetic experimentation in *Lyrical Ballads* as an exercise in artistic self-sufficiency. The Preface has been read as a document in which Wordsworth, proving himself a self-made man, arranges for his disinheritance—arranges to cut himself off, he says, “from a large portion of the phrases and figures of speech which from father to son have long been regarded as the common inheritance of Poets.” The German philosophers who generated many of the characteristic ideas of European Romanticism had likewise developed an account of how individuals might author and create themselves. In the work of Immanuel Kant and others, the human mind was described as creating the universe it perceived and so creating its own experience. Mind is “not passive,” Kant’s admirer Coleridge wrote, but “made in God’s image, and that too in the sublimest sense—the Image of the Creator.” And Wordsworth declared in *The Prelude* that the individual mind “Even as an agent of the one great mind, / creates, creator and receiver both.” The Romantic period, the epoch of free enterprise, imperial expansion, and boundless revolutionary hope, was also an epoch of individualism in which philosophers and poets alike put an extraordinarily high estimate on human potentialities.

In representing this expanded scope for individual initiative, much poetry of the period redefined heroism and made a ceaseless striving for the unattainable its crucial element. Viewed by moralists of previous ages as sin or lamentable error, longings that can never be satisfied—in Percy Shelley’s phrase, “the desire of the moth for a star”—came to be revalued as the glory of human nature. “Less than everything,” Blake announced, “cannot satisfy man.” Discussions of the nature of art developed similarly. The German philosopher Friedrich Schlegel’s proposal that poetry “should forever be becoming and never be perfected” supplied a way to understand the unfinished, “fragment” poems of the period (“Kubla Khan” most famously) not as failures but instead as confirmations that the most poetic poetry was defined as much by what was absent as by what was present: the poem, in this understanding, was a fragmentary trace of an original conception that was too grand ever to be fully realized. This defiant attitude toward limits also made many writers impatient with the conceptions of literary genre they inherited from the past. The result was that, creating new genres from old, they produced an astonishing variety of hybrid forms constructed on fresh principles of organization and style: “elegiac sonnets,” “lyrical ballads,” the poetic

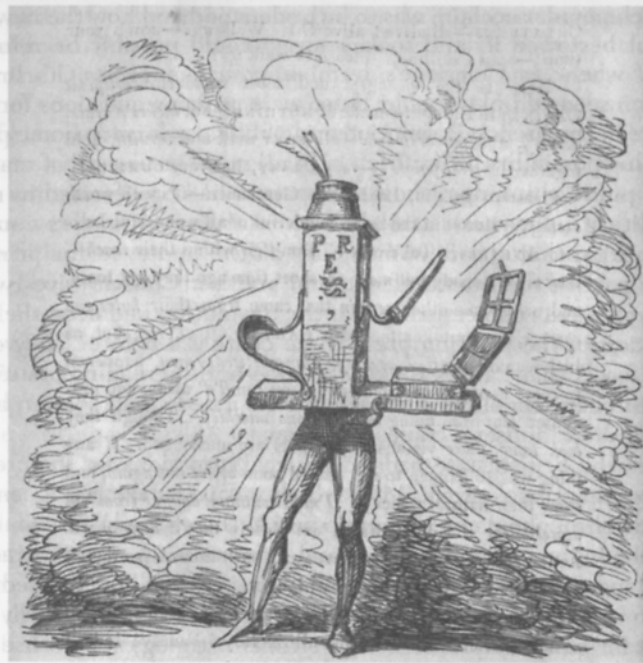
autobiography of *The Prelude*, Percy Shelley's "lyric drama" of cosmic reach, *Prometheus Unbound*, and (in the field of prose) the "historical novels" of Scott and the complex interweaving of letters, reported oral confessions, and interpolated tales that is Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein*.

In this context many writers' choice to portray poetry as a product of solitude and poets as loners might be understood as a means of reinforcing the individuality of their vision. (The sociability of the extroverted narrator of *Don Juan*, who is forever buttonholing "the gentle reader," is exceptional—Byron's way of harkening back to the satire of the eighteenth century.) And the appeal that nature poetry had for many writers of the period can be attributed to a determination to idealize the natural scene as a site where the individual could find freedom from social laws, an idealization that was easier to sustain when nature was, as often in the era, represented not as cultivated fields but as uninhabitable wild wastes, unplowed uplands, caves, and chasms. Rural *community*, threatened by the enclosures that were breaking up village life, was a tenuous presence in poetry as well.

Wordsworth's imagination is typically released, for instance, by the sudden apparition of a single figure, stark and solitary against a natural background; the terms *solitary*, *by one self*, *alone* sound through his poems. In the poetry of Coleridge, Shelley, and Byron (before *Don Juan* launched Byron's own satire on Byronism), the desolate landscapes are often the haunts of disillusioned visionaries and accursed outlaws, figures whose thwarted ambitions and torments connect them, variously, to Cain, the Wandering Jew, Satan, and even Napoleon. A variant of this figure is Prometheus, the hero of classical mythology, who is Satan-like in setting himself in opposition to God, but who, unlike Satan, is the champion rather than the enemy of the human race. Mary Shelley subjected this hero, central to her husband's mythmaking, to ironic rewriting in *Frankenstein*: Victor Frankenstein, a "Modern Prometheus," is far from championing humankind. For other women writers of the period, and for Shelley in her later novels, the equivalent to these half-charismatic, half-condemnable figures of alienation is the woman of "genius." In a world in which—as Wollstonecraft complained in the *Rights of Woman*—"all women are to be levelled by meekness and docility, into one character of . . . gentle compliance," the woman who in "unfeminine" fashion claimed a distinctive individuality did not gain authority but risked ostracism. As for the woman of genius, in writings by Robinson, Hemans, and Landon particularly, her story was often told as a modern variation on ancient legends of the Greek Sappho, the ill-fated female poet who had triumphed in poetry but died of love. Pressured by the emergent Victorianism of the 1820s and playing it safe, Hemans especially was careful to associate genius with self-inflicted sorrow and happiness with a woman's embrace of her domestic calling.

WRITING IN THE MARKETPLACE AND THE LAW COURTS

Even Romantics who wished to associate literature with isolated poets holding mute converse with their souls had to acknowledge that in real life the writer did not dwell in solitude but confronted, and was accountable to, a crowd. For many commentators the most revolutionary aspect of the age was the spread of literacy and the dramatic expansion of the potential audi-



Printing Press. George Cruikshank's image of a printing press in human form, superhero and harbinger of modern liberty, opens William Hone's satiric pamphlet *The Political Showman—At Home!* (1821).

ence for literature. This revolution, like the Revolution in France, occasioned a conservative reaction: the worry, frequently expressed as books ceased to be written exclusively for an elite, that this bigger audience (by 1830, about half of England's population of fourteen million) would be less qualified to judge or understand what it read. Beginning in the 1780s, more members of the working classes had learned to read as a result of lessons provided in Sunday schools (informal sites for the education of the poor that long antedated state-supported schools). At the same time reading matter became more plentiful and cheaper, thanks to innovations in retailing—the cut-rate sales of remaindered books and the spread of circulating libraries where volumes could be "rented"—and thanks to technological developments. By the end of the period, printing presses were driven by steam engines, and the manufacture of paper had been mechanized; publishers had mastered publicity, the art (as it was called) of "the puff." Surveying the consequences of these changes, Coleridge muttered darkly about that "misgrowth," "a Reading Public," making it sound like something freakish and pathological. Books had become a big business, one enrolling increasing numbers of individuals who found it possible to do without the assistance of wealthy patrons and who, accordingly, looked to this public for their hopes of survival. A few writers became celebrities, invested with a glamour that formerly had been reserved for royalty and that we nowadays save for movie stars. This was the case for the best-selling Byron, particularly, whose enthusiastic public could by the 1830s purchase dinner services imprinted with illustrations from his life and works.

How such popular acclaim was to be understood and how the new reading public that bestowed it (and took it away) could possibly be reformed or monitored when, as Coleridge's term *misgrowth* suggests, its limits and composition seemed unknowable: these were pressing questions for the age. Opponents of the French Revolution and political reform at home pondered a frightening possibility: if "events . . . [had] made us a world of readers" (as Coleridge put it, thinking of how newspapers had proliferated in response to the political upheavals), it might also be true that readers could *make* events in turn, that the new members of the audience for print would demand a part in the drama of national politics. Conservatives were well aware of arguments conjecturing that the Revolution had been the result of the invention of the printing press three centuries before. They certainly could not forget that Paine's *Rights of Man*—not the reading matter for the poor the Sunday-school movement had envisioned—had sold an astonishing two hundred thousand copies in a year.

However, the British state had lacked legal provisions for the prepublication censorship of books since 1695, which was when the last Licensing Act had lapsed. Throughout the Romantic period therefore the Crown tried out other methods for policing reading and criminalizing certain practices of authoring and publishing. Paine was in absentia found guilty of sedition, for instance, and in 1817 the radical publisher William Hone narrowly escaped conviction for blasphemy. Another government strategy was to use taxes to inflate the prices of printed matter and so keep political information out of the hands of the poor without exactly violating the freedom of the press. In the meantime worries about how the nation would fare now that "the people" read were matched by worries about how to regulate the reading done by women. In 1807 the bowdlerized edition was born, as the Reverend Thomas Bowdler and his sister Henrietta produced *The Family Shakespeare*, concocting a Bard who, his indelicacies expurgated, could be sanctioned family fare.

Commentators who condemned the publishing industry as a scene of criminality also cited the frequency with which, during this chaotic time, best-selling books ended up republished in unauthorized, "pirated" editions. Novels were the pirates' favorite targets. But the radical underground of London's printing industry also appropriated one of the most politically daring works of Percy Shelley, *Queen Mab*, and by keeping it in print, and accessible in cheap editions, thwarted attempts to posthumously sanitize the poet's reputation. And in 1817 Southey, by then a Tory and the Kingdom's Poet Laureate, was embarrassed to find his insurrectionary drama of 1794, *Wat Tyler*, published without his permission. There was no chance, Southey learned, that the publishers who had filched his play and put this souvenir of his youthful radicalism into circulation would be punished. The court refused to grant an injunction, citing the precedent that there could be no protection for publications deemed injurious to the public.

OTHER LITERARY FORMS

Prose

Although we now know the Romantic period as an age of poetry, centered on works of imagination, nonfiction prose forms—essays, reviews, political pamphlets—flourished during the epoch, as writers seized the opportunity

to speak to and for the era's new audiences. In eighteenth-century England, prose, particularly in the urbane, accessible style that writers such as Joseph Addison and David Hume cultivated in their essays, had been valued as the medium of sociable exchange that could integrate different points of view and unify the public space known as the "republic of letters." That ideal of civil discussion came under pressure in the Romantic period, however, since by then many intellectuals were uncertain whether a republic of letters could survive the arrival of those new readers, "the people," and whether in this age of class awareness such a thing as a unified public culture was even possible. Those uncertainties are never far from the surface in the masterpieces of Romantic prose—a category that ranges from the pamphleteering that drew Burke, Wollstonecraft, and Paine into the Revolution controversy of the 1790s, to the periodical essays, with suggestive titles like *The Watchman* and *The Friend*, in which Coleridge turned controversialist, to the magazine writing of Hazlitt, Charles Lamb, and De Quincey in the 1820s.

The issue of how the writer should relate to audience—as watchman or friend?—was especially tricky, because this period, when so many more people defined themselves as readers, saw the emergence of a new species of specialist reader. This was the critic, who, perhaps problematically, was empowered to tell all the others what to read. Following the establishment in 1802 of the *Edinburgh Review* and in 1809 of the *Quarterly Review*, a new professionalized breed of book reviewer claimed a degree of cultural authority to which eighteenth-century critics had never aspired. Whereas later-eighteenth-century periodicals such as the *Monthly Review* and *Critical Review* had aimed to notice almost everything in print, the *Edinburgh* and *Quarterly* limited themselves to about fifteen books per issue. The selectivity enabled them to make decisive statements about what would count as culture and what would fall beyond the pale. They also conceptualized criticism as a space of discipline, in which the reputations of the writers under review were as likely to be marred as they were to be made. The stern Latin motto of the *Edinburgh* (founded by lawyers) translates as "the judge is condemned when the guilty go free." The continuing tension in the relations between criticism and literature and doubt about whether critical prose can be literature—whether it can have artistic value as well as social utility—are legacies from the Romantic era. Hazlitt wondered self-consciously in an essay on criticism whether his was not in fact a critical rather than a poetical age and whether "no great works of genius appear, because so much is said and written about them."

Hazlitt participated importantly in another development. In 1820 the founding editor of the *London Magazine* gathered a group of writers, Hazlitt, Lamb, and De Quincey, who in the *London's* pages collectively developed the Romantic form known as the familiar essay: intimate-feeling commentaries, often presented as if prompted by incidents in the authors' private lives, on an eclectic range of topics, from pork to prizefighting. In some of his essays, Hazlitt modeled an account of the individual's response to works of art as most important not for how, for instance, it prepares that person for public citizenship, but for what it helps him discover about his personality. For their essays Lamb and De Quincey developed a style that harkened back to writers who flourished before the republic of letters and who had more idiosyncratic eccentricities than eighteenth-century decorum would have allowed. Though these essayists were very differently circumstanced from

the Romantic poets who were their friends—paid by the page and writing to a deadline, for a start—their works thus parallel the poets' in also turning toward the subjective. One consequence of the essayists' cultivation of intimacy and preference for the impressionistic over the systematic is that, when we track the history of prose to the 1820s, we see it end up in a place very different from the one it occupies at the start of the Romantic period. Participants in the Revolution controversy of the 1790s had claimed to speak for all England. By the close of the period the achievement of the familiar essay was to have brought the medium of prose within the category of "the literary"—but by distancing it from public life.

Drama

Whether the plays composed during the Romantic period can qualify as literature has been, by contrast, more of a puzzle. England throughout this period had a vibrant theatrical culture. Theater criticism, practiced with flair by Hazlitt and Lamb, emerged as a new prose genre; actors like Sarah Siddons and Edmund Kean numbered the poets among their admirers and found their way into Romantic poetry; Mary Robinson was known as an actor before she was known as an author. But there were many restrictions limiting what could be staged in England and many calls for reform. As places where crowds gathered, theaters were always closely watched by suspicious government officials. The English had habitually extolled their theater as a site of social mixing—a mirror to the political order in that it supplied all the classes in the nation (those who, depending on how their tickets were priced, frequented the box, the pit, or the gallery) with another sort of representative assembly. But during this era disorder seemed the rule: riots broke out at Covent Garden in 1792 and 1809. The link between drama and disorder was one reason that new dramas had to meet the approval of a censor before they could be performed, a rule in place since 1737. Another restriction was that only the Theaters Royal (in London, Drury Lane, and Covent Garden) had the legal right to produce "legitimate" (spoken word) drama, leaving the other stages limited to entertainments—pantomimes and melodramas mainly—in which dialogue was by regulation always combined with music. An evening's entertainment focused on legitimate drama would not have been so different. The stages and auditoriums of the two theaters royal were huge spaces, which encouraged their managers to favor grandiose spectacles or, more precisely, multimedia experiences, involving musicians, dancers, and artists who designed scenery, besides players and playwrights.

This theatrical culture's demotion of *words* might explain why the poets of the era, however stage-struck, found drama uncongenial. Nonetheless, almost all tried their hands at the form, tempted by the knowledge that the plays of certain of their (now less esteemed) contemporaries—Hannah Cowley and Charles Maturin, for example—had met with immense acclaim. Some of the poets' plays were composed to be read rather than performed: "closet dramas," such as Byron's *Manfred*, Percy Shelley's *Prometheus Unbound*, and most of Joanna Baillie's *Plays on the Passions*, permitted experimentation with topic and form. Others were written expressly for the stage, but their authors were hampered by their inexperience and tendency, exacerbated by the censorship that encouraged them to seek safe subject matter in the past, to imitate the style of Elizabethan and Jacobean drama. There were exceptions to this discouraging record. Coleridge's tragedy *Remorse*, for

instance, was a minor hit and ran for twenty nights in 1813. The most capable dramatist among the poets was, surprisingly, Percy Shelley. His powerful tragedy *The Cenci* (1820), the story of a monstrous father who rapes his daughter and is murdered by her in turn, was deemed unstageable on political rather than artistic or technical grounds. It had no chance of getting by the Examiner of Plays; indeed, by thematizing the unspeakable topic of incest, Shelley predicted his own censoring.

The Novel

Novels at the start of the Romantic period were immensely popular but—as far as critics and some of the form's half-ashamed practitioners were concerned—not quite respectable. Loose in structure, they seemed to require fewer skills than other literary genres. This genre lacked the classic pedigree claimed by poetry and drama. It attracted (or so detractors declared) an undue proportion of readers who were women, and who, by consuming its escapist stories of romantic love, risked developing false ideas of life. It likewise attracted (so some of these same critics complained) too many *writers* who were women. (By the 1780s women were publishing as many novels as men.) Because of its popularity, the form also focused commentators' anxieties about the expansion of the book market and commercialization of literature: hence late-eighteenth-century reviewers of new novels often sarcastically described them as mass-produced commodities, not authored exactly, but instead stamped out automatically in "novel-mills." Matters changed decisively, however, starting around 1814. Reviews of Scott's *Waverley* series of historical novels and then a review that Scott wrote of Austen's *Emma* declared a renaissance—"a new style of novel." By this time, too, the genre had its historians, who delineated the novel's origins and rise and in this manner established its particularity against the more reputable literary forms. It was having a canon created for it too; figures like Barbauld and Scott compiled and introduced collections of the best novels. So equipped, the novel began to endanger poetry's long-held monopoly on literary prestige.

There had in fact been earlier signs of these new ambitions for the genre, although reviewers did not then know what to make of them. The last decade of the eighteenth century saw bold experiments with novels' form and subject matter—in particular, new ways of linking fiction with philosophy and history. Rather than, as one reviewer put it, contentedly remaining in a "region of their own," some novels showed signs of having designs on the real world. The writers now known as the Jacobin novelists used the form to test political theories and represent the political upheavals of the age. Thus in *Caleb Williams, or, Things as They Are*, William Godwin (husband of Mary Wollstonecraft, father of Mary Shelley) set out, he said, to "write a tale, that shall constitute an epoch in the mind of the reader, that no one, after he had read it, shall ever be exactly the same": the result was a chilling novel of surveillance and entrapment in which a servant recounts the persecutions he suffers at the hands of the master whose secret past he has detected. (The disturbing cat-and-mouse game between the two gets rewritten two decades later as the conclusion to *Frankenstein*, a novel that, among many other things, represents Shelley's tribute to the philosophical fictions of her parents.) Loyalists attacked the Jacobins with their own weapons and, in making novels their ammunition, contributed in turn to enhancing the genre's cultural presence.



The Novel. Illustration from 1787 by James Northcote of a scene in William Hayley's didactic poem *The Triumphs of Temper* (1781): the heroine's maiden aunt has just caught her in possession of a novel and seized the book as "filthy trash"—while secretly intending to keep it for herself.

Another innovation in novel writing took shape, strangely enough, as a recovery of what was old. Writers whom we now describe as the Gothic novelists revisited the romance, the genre identified as the primitive forerunner of the modern novel, looking to a medieval (i.e., "Gothic") Europe that they pictured as a place of gloomy castles, devious Catholic monks, and stealthy ghosts. These authors—first Walpole, followed by Clara Reeve, Sophia Lee, Matthew Lewis, and the hugely popular Ann Radcliffe—developed for the novel a repertory of settings and story lines meant to purvey to readers the pleasurable terror of regression to a premodern, pre-rational state. This Gothic turn was another instance of the period's "romance revival," another variation on the effort to renew the literature of the present by reworking the past. Gothic fiction was thus promoted in terms running parallel to those in accounts of the powers of poetry: when novels break with humdrum reality, Barbauld explained, "our imagination, darting forth, explores with rapture the new world which is laid open to its view, and rejoices in the expansion of its powers."

Possibly this "new world" was meant to supply Romantic-period readers with an escape route from the present and from what Godwin called "things as they are." Certainly, the pasts that Gothic novelists conjure up are conceived of in fanciful, freewheeling ways; it is comical just how often a Radcliffe heroine who is supposed to inhabit sixteenth-century France can act like a proper English girl on the marriage market in the 1790s. But even that example of anachronism might suggest that some Gothic novelists were inviting readers to assess their stories as engaging the questions of the day. Gothic horrors gave many writers a language in which to examine the nature of power—the elements of sadism and masochism in the relations between men

and women, for instance. And frequently the Gothic novelists probe the very ideas of historical accuracy and legitimacy that critics use against them, and meditate on who is authorized to tell the story of the past and who is not.

The ascendancy of the novel in the early nineteenth century is in many ways a function of fiction writers' new self-consciousness about their relation to works of history. By 1814 the novelist and historian encroached on each other's territory more than ever. This was not exactly because nineteenth-century novelists were renewing their commitment to probability and realism (although, defining themselves against the critically reviled Gothic novelists, many were) but rather because the nature of things historical was also being reinvented. In light of the Revolution, history's traditional emphasis on public affairs and great men had begun to give way to an emphasis on beliefs, customs, everyday habits—the approach we now identify with social history. Novelists pursued similar interests: in works like *Castle Rackrent*, Maria Edgeworth, for instance, provides an almost anthropological account of the way of life of a bygone Ireland. The only novelist before Scott whom the influential *Edinburgh Review* took seriously, Edgeworth builds into her "national tales" details about local practices that demonstrate how people's ways of seeing are rooted in the particularities of their native places. Scott learned from her, incorporating her regionalism into his new style of historical novels, in which, with deeply moving results, he also portrayed the past as a place of adventure, pageantry, and grandeur.

Scott and Edgeworth establish the master theme of the early-nineteenth-century novel: the question of how the individual consciousness intermeshes with larger social structures, of how far character is the product of history and how far it is not. Jane Austen's brilliance as a satirist of the English leisure class often prompts literary historians to compare her works to witty Restoration and eighteenth-century comedies. But she too helped bring this theme to the forefront of novel writing, devising new ways of articulating the relationship between the psychological history of the individual and the history of society and, with unsurpassed psychological insight, creating unforgettable heroines who live in time and change. As with other Romantics, Austen's topic is revolution—revolutions of the mind. The momentous event in her fictions, which resemble Wordsworth's poetry in finding out the extraordinary in the everyday, is the change of mind that creates the possibility of love. Contrasting his own "big bow-wow strain" with Austen's nuance, Scott wrote that Austen "had a talent for describing the involvements and feelings and characters of ordinary life, which is to me the most wonderful I ever met with." Nineteenth-century reviewers of his triumphant *Waverley* series were certain that Scott's example foretold the future of novel writing. He, however, recognized the extent to which Austen had also changed the genre in which she worked, by developing a new novelistic language for the workings of the mind in flux.