

# The Romantic Period 1785-1830

- 1789–1815: Revolutionary and Napoleonic period in France. – 1789: The Revolution begins with the assembly of the States-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: The Reign of Terror under Robespierre. 1804: Napoleon crowned emperor. – 1815: Napoleon defeated at Waterloo
- 1807: British slave trade outlawed (slavery abolished throughout the empire, including the West Indies, 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

The Romantic period, though by far the shortest, is at least as complex and diverse as any other period in British literary history. For much of the twentieth century, scholars singled out five poets—Wordsworth, Coleridge, Byron, Percy Shelley, and Keats, adding Blake belatedly to make a sixth—and constructed notions of a unified Romanticism on the basis of their works. But there were problems all along: even the two closest collaborators of the 1790s, Wordsworth and Coleridge, would fit no single definition; Byron despised both Coleridge's philosophical speculations and Wordsworth's poetry; Shelley and Keats were at opposite poles from each other stylistically and philosophically; Blake was not at all like any of the other five.

Nowadays, although the six poets remain, by most measures of canonicity, the principal canonical figures, we recognize a greater range of accomplishments. In 1798, the year of Wordsworth and Coleridge's first *Lyrical Ballads*, neither of the authors had much of a reputation; Wordsworth was not even included among the 1,112 entries in David Rivers's *Literary Memoirs of Living Authors of Great Britain* of that year, and *Lyrical Ballads* was published anonymously because, as Coleridge told the publisher, "Wordsworth's name is nothing—to a large number of people mine *stinks*." Some of the best-regarded poets of the time were women—Anna Barbauld, Charlotte Smith, Mary Robinson—and Wordsworth and Coleridge (junior colleagues of Robinson when she was poetry editor of the *Morning Post* in the late 1790s) looked up to them and learned their craft from them. The rest of the then-established figures were the later eighteenth-century poets who are printed at the end of volume 1 of this anthology—Gray, Collins, Crabbe, and Cowper in particular. Only Byron, among the now-canonical poets, was instantly famous; and Felicia

Hemans and Letitia Landon ran him a close race as best-sellers. The Romantic period had a great many more participants than the six principal male poets and was shaped by a multitude of political, social, and economic changes.

## REVOLUTION AND REACTION

Following a widespread practice of historians of English literature, we use "Romantic period" to refer to the span between the year 1785, the midpoint of the decade in which Samuel Johnson died and Blake, Burns, and Smith published their first poems, and 1830, by which time the major writers of the preceding century were either dead or no longer productive. This was a turbulent period, during which England experienced 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 in a context of revolution—first the American and then the more radical French—and 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 French Revolution against Edmund Burke's attack in his *Reflections on the Revolution in France* (1790). Tom 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 William 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 England this was a period of harsh, repressive measures. Public meetings were prohibited, 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 counter-revolutionary 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 (Barbauld, Robinson, Coleridge, and Wordsworth) 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 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. Since 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 severely injured hundreds more; this was the notorious "Peterloo Massacre," so named with sardonic reference to the Battle of Waterloo, and condemned by Shelley in his poem for the working class "England in 1819."

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. The war that the English waged almost without intermission between 1793 and 1815 was one that in an unprecedented manner 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 publicity, 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. 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: just in the category of poetry, some nine hundred women are listed in J. R. deJ. Jackson's comprehensive bibliography, *Romantic Poetry by Women*. 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. 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, and after unprecedented disorders that threatened to break out into revolution, 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 SPIRIT OF THE AGE"

Writers working in the period 1785–1830 did not think of themselves as "Romantic"; the word was not applied until half a century later, by English historians. Contemporary reviewers treated them as independent individuals, or else grouped them (often maliciously, but with some basis in fact) into a number of separate schools: the "Lake School" of Wordsworth, Coleridge, and Robert Southey; the "Cockney School," a derogatory term for the Londoners Leigh Hunt, William Hazlitt, and associated writers, including Keats; and the "Satanic School" of Percy Shelley, Byron, and their followers.

Many writers, however, felt that there was something distinctive about their time—not a shared doctrine or literary quality, but a pervasive intellectual and imaginative climate, which some of them called "the spirit of the age." They had the sense that (as Keats wrote) "Great spirits now on earth are sojourning," and that there was evidence of the experimental boldness that marks a literary renaissance. In his "Defence of Poetry" Shelley claimed that the literature of the age "has arisen as it were from a new birth," and that "an electric life

burns" within the words of its best writers, "less their spirit than the spirit of the age." He explained this spirit as an accompaniment of revolution, and others agreed. Francis Jeffrey, the foremost conservative reviewer of the day, connected "the revolution in our literature" with "the agitations of the French Revolution, and the discussions as well as the hopes and terrors to which it gave occasion." Hazlitt, who devoted a series of essays entitled *The Spirit of the Age* to assessing his contemporaries, maintained that the new poetry of the school of Wordsworth "had its origin in the French Revolution."

The imagination of many Romantic-period writers was preoccupied with revolution, and from that fact and idea they derived the framework that enabled them to think of themselves as inhabiting a distinctive period in history. The deep familiarity that many late-eighteenth-century Englishmen and -women had with the prophetic writings of the Bible contributed from the start to their readiness to attribute a tremendous significance to the political transformations set in motion in 1789. Religious belief predisposed many to view these convulsions as something more than local historical events and to cast them instead as harbingers of a new age in the history of *all* human beings. Seeing the hand of God in the events in France and understanding those events as the fulfillment of prophecies of the coming millennium came easily to figures such as Barbauld, Coleridge, Wollstonecraft, and, above all, Blake: all were affiliated with the traditions of radical Protestant Dissent, in which accounts of the imminence of the Apocalypse and the coming of the Kingdom of God had long been central. A quarter-century later, their millenarian interpretation of the Revolution would be recapitulated by radical writers such as Percy Shelley and Hazlitt, who, though they tended to place their faith in notions of progress and the diffusion of knowledge and tended to identify a rational citizenry and not God as the moving force of history, were just as convinced as their predecessors were that the Revolution had marked humanity's chance to start history over again (a chance that had been lost but was perhaps recoverable).

Another method that writers of this period took when they sought to salvage the millennial hopes that had, for many, been dashed by the bloodshed of the Terror involved granting a crucial role to the creative imagination. Some writers rethought apocalyptic transformation so that it no longer depended on the political action of collective humanity but depended instead (in a shift from the external to the internal) on the individual consciousness. The new heaven and earth promised in the prophecies could, in this account, be gained by the individual who had achieved a new, spiritualized, and visionary way of seeing. An apocalypse of the imagination could liberate the individual from time, from what Blake called the "mind-forg'd manacles" of imprisoning orthodoxies and from what Percy Shelley called "the curse which binds us to be subjected to the accident of surrounding impressions."

Wordsworth, whose formulations of this notion of a revolution in imagination would prove immensely influential, wrote in *The Prelude* the classic description of the spirit of the early 1790s. "Europe at that time was thrilled with joy, / France standing on top of the golden hours, / And human nature seeming born again" (6.340–42). "Not favored spots alone, but the whole earth, / The beauty wore of promise" (6.117–18). Something of this sense of possibility and anticipation of spiritual regeneration (captured in that phrase "born again") survived the disenchantment with politics that Wordsworth experienced later in the decade. His sense of the emancipatory opportunities

brought in by the new historical moment carried over to the year 1797, when, working in tandem, he and Coleridge revolutionized the theory and practice of poetry. The product of their exuberant daily discussions was the *Lyrical Ballads* of 1798.

#### POETIC THEORY AND POETIC PRACTICE

Wordsworth undertook to justify those poems by means of a critical manifesto, or statement of poetic principles, which appeared first as a short Advertisement in the original *Lyrical Ballads* and then as an extended Preface to the second edition in 1800, which he enlarged still further in the third edition of 1802. In it he set himself in opposition to the literary ancien regime, those writers of the eighteenth century who, in his view, had imposed on poetry artificial conventions that distorted its free and natural expression. Many of Wordsworth's later critical writings were attempts to clarify, buttress, or qualify points made in this first declaration. Coleridge said that the Preface was "half a child of my own brain"; and although he developed doubts about some of Wordsworth's unguarded statements, he did not question the Tightness of Wordsworth's attempt to overthrow the reigning tradition. Of course, many writers in eighteenth-century England had anticipated Wordsworth's attempt, as well as the definitions of the "authentic" language of poetry it assumed. Far from unprecedented, efforts to displace the authority of a poet such as Pope can be dated back to only a few years after Pope's death in 1744; by 1800 readers were accustomed to hear, for instance, that Pope's propensities for satire had derailed true poetry by elevating wit over feeling. Moreover, the last half of the eighteenth century, a time when philosophers and moralists highlighted in new ways the role that emotional sensitivity ("sensibility") plays in mental and social life, had seen the emergence of many of the critical concepts, as well as a number of the poetic subjects and forms, that later would be exploited by Wordsworth and his contemporaries.

Wordsworth's Preface nevertheless deserves its reputation as a turning point in literary history, for Wordsworth gathered up isolated ideas, organized them into a coherent theory, and made them the rationale for his own achievements. We can safely use concepts in the Preface as points of departure for a survey of some of the distinctive elements in the poetry of the Romantic period—especially if we bear in mind that during this era of revolution definitions of good poetry, like definitions of the good society, were sure to create as much contention as consensus.

##### *The Concept 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 the shift Wordsworth registered when in the Preface he located the source of a poem not in outer nature but in the psychology of the individual poet, and specified that the essential materials of a poem were not the external people and events it

represented but the inner feelings of the author, or external objects only after these have been transformed by the author's feelings. Wordsworth in 1802 described all good poetry as, at the moment of composition, "the spontaneous overflow of powerful feelings." Other Romantic theories concurred by referring to the mind, emotions, and imagination of the poet for the origin, content, and defining attributes of a poem. Using a metaphor that parallels Wordsworth's "overflow," and that Wordsworth would revive in a late poem, Mary Robinson and Coleridge identified some of their key poems of the 1790s as "effusions"—ardent outpourings of feeling. Coleridge subsequently drew on German precedents and introduced into English criticism an account of the organic form of literary works; in this account the work is conceptualized as a self-originating and self-organizing process, parallel to the growth of a plant, that begins with a seedlike idea in the poet's imagination, grows by assimilating both the poet's feelings and the materials of sensory experience, and evolves into an organic whole in which the parts are integrally related to each other and to the whole.

In keeping with the view that poetry expresses the poet's feelings, the lyric poem written in the first person, which for much of literary history was regarded as a minor kind, became a major Romantic 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 and the personal confessions in the poet's letters and journals. 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 the 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 Shelley, intimated darkly that the introspective tendency and emotional sensitivity that made someone a poet 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 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.

*The Prelude* exemplifies two other important tendencies. Like Blake, Coleridge in early poems, and later on Shelley, Wordsworth presents himself as, in his words, "a chosen son" or "Bard." That is, he assumes the persona of a poet-prophet, a composite figure modeled on Milton, the biblical prophets, and figures of a national music, the harp-playing patriots, Celtic or Anglo-Saxon, whom eighteenth-century poets and antiquarians had located in a legendary Dark Ages Britain. Adopting this bardic guise, Wordsworth puts himself forward as a spokesman for civilization at a time of crisis—a time, as Wordsworth said in *The Prelude*, of the "melancholy waste of hopes o'erthrown." (Spokesman is appropriate here: almost always, the bardic poet-prophet was a distinctively male persona.) *The Prelude* is also an instance of a central literary form of English, as of European, Romanticism—a long work about the crisis and renewal of the self, recounted as the story of an interior journey taken in quest of one's true identity and destined spiritual home and vocation. Blake's *Milton*, Keats's *Endymion* and *Fall of Hyperion*, and, in Victorian poetry, Elizabeth Barrett Browning's *Aurora Leigh* also exemplify this form. Late in the period there are equivalent developments in prose: spiritual autobiographies (Coleridge's *Biographia Literaria*, Thomas De Quincey's *Confessions of an English Opium Eater*) undergo a revival, at the same time that Lamb and Hazlitt rediscover the essay as a medium of self-revelation.

#### *Spontaneity and the Impulses of Feeling*

Wordsworth defined good poetry not merely as the overflow but as the "spontaneous overflow" of feelings. In traditional poetics, poetry had been regarded as supremely an art—an art that in modern times is practiced by poets who have assimilated classical precedents, are aware of the "rules" governing the kind of poem they are writing, and (except for the happy touches that, as Pope said, are "beyond the reach of art") deliberately employ tested means to achieve premeditated effects on an audience. But to Wordsworth, 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—arising from impulse 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."

Other Romantics voiced similar declarations of artistic independence from inherited precepts, sometimes in a manner involving, paradoxically, a turn from the here-and-now toward a remote, preliterate, and primitive past. If the ancient bard was a charismatic figure for many Romantics, this was in part because imagining the songs he might have sung made it easier to think about an alternative to the mundane language of modernity—about a natural, oral poetry, blissfully unconscious of modern decorums. (Though they chafed against this expectation, writers from the rural working class—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 Waterloo, writers like Byron, Hunt, and the Shelleys 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. One of the writers who praised and emulated that rhapsodic spontaneity, Percy Shelley, thought it "an error to assert that the finest passages of poetry are produced by labor 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 the spontaneous activity of the imagination is linked to a belief (which links the Romantics' literary productions to the poetry and fiction of sensibility written earlier in the eighteenth century) in the essential role of passion, whether in the province of art, philosophy, or morality. 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."

*Romantic "Nature Poetry"*

Wordsworth identified *Lyrical Ballads* as his effort to counteract the degradation in taste that had resulted from "the increasing accumulation of men in cities": the revolution in style he proposed in the Preface was meant in part to undo the harmful effects of urbanization. Because he and many fellow writers kept their distance from city life, and because natural scenes so often provide the occasions for their writing, Romantic poetry for present-day readers has become almost synonymous with "nature poetry." In the Essay that supplements his Preface, Wordsworth portrays himself as remedying the failings of predecessors who, he argues, were unable truthfully to depict natural phenomena such as a moonlit sky: from Dryden to Pope, he asserts, there are almost no images of external nature "from which it can be inferred that the eye of the Poet had been steadily fixed upon his object." Neither Romantic theory nor practice, however, justifies the opinion that Romantic poets valued description for its own sake, though many poems of the period are almost unmatched in their ability to capture the sensuous nuances of the natural scene, and the writers participated enthusiastically in the touring of picturesque scenery that was a new leisure activity of their age. But in the Essay Supplementary to the Preface, Wordsworth's complaint against eighteenth-century poetic imagery continues: take an image from an early-eighteenth-century poem, and it will show no signs either, he says, that the Poet's "feelings had urged him to work upon it in the spirit of genuine imagination." For Wordsworth the ability to observe objects accurately is a necessary but not sufficient condition for poetry, "as its exercise supposes all the higher qualities of the mind to be passive, and in a state of subjection to external objects." And while many of the great Romantic lyrics—Wordsworth's "Tintern Abbey," Coleridge's "Frost at Midnight," Keats's "Nightingale," Smith's *Beachy Head*—remark on an aspect or a change of aspect in the natural scene, this serves only as stimulus to the most characteristic human activity, that of thinking. The longer Romantic "nature poems" are in fact usually meditative, using the presented scene to suggest a personal crisis; the organizing principle of the poem involves that crisis's development and resolution.

In addition, Romantic poems habitually endow the landscape with human life, passion, and expressiveness. Many poets respond to the outer universe as a vital entity that participates in the feelings of the observer (an idea of sym-

pathetic exchange between nature and humanity that Mary Shelley, however, would probe fiercely in her novel *The Last Man*). James Thomson and other descriptive poets of the eighteenth century had depicted the created universe as giving direct access to the deity. In "Tintern Abbey" and other poems, Wordsworth not only exhibits toward the landscape attitudes and sentiments that human beings had earlier felt for God; he also loves it in the way human beings love a father, a mother, or a beloved. Still, there was a competing sense, evident especially in the poetry of Blake and Percy Shelley, that natural objects were meaningful primarily for the correspondences linking them to an inner or spiritual world. In their poems a rose, a sunflower, a cloud, or a mountain is presented not as something to be observed and imaged but as an object imbued with a significance beyond itself. "I always seek in what I see," Shelley said, "the likeness of something beyond the present and tangible object." And by Blake, mere nature, as perceived by the physical eye, was spurned "as the dust upon my feet, no part of me." Annotating a copy of Wordsworth's 1815 *Poems*, Blake deplored what he perceived as Wordsworth's commitment to unspiritualized observation: "Natural objects always did, and now do, weaken, deaden, and obliterate imagination in men."

*The Glorification of the Ordinary*

Also discussing Wordsworth, Hazlitt declared his school of poetry the literary equivalent of the French Revolution, which translated 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." Hazlitt had in mind Wordsworth's statement that the aim of *Lyrical Ballads* was "to choose incidents and situations from common life" and to use a "language really spoken by men": for Wordsworth's polemical purposes, it is in "humble and rustic life" that this language is found. Later eighteenth-century writers had already experimented with the simple treatment of simple subjects. Burns—like the young Wordsworth, a sympathizer with the Revolution—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 his regional Scots dialect. Women poets especially—Barbauld, Bobinson, Baillie—assimilated to their poems the subject matter of everyday life. But Wordsworth underwrote his 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. And in his practice, as Hazlitt also noted, Wordsworth went further and turned for the subjects of serious poems not only to humble country folk but to the disgraced, outcast, and delinquent—"convicts, female vagrants, gypsies . . . idiot boys and mad mothers." Hence the scorn of Lord Byron, who facetiously summoned ghosts from the eighteenth century to help him demonstrate that Wordsworth's innovations had been taking literature in the wrong direction:

"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 announced 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, the trivial, 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 special imaginative quality of Wordsworth's early verse, Coleridge remarked: "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, Baillie and Barbauld wrote poems centered on an observer's effort to imagine the unknowable perspective of beings for whom thought and sensation are new or not begun—in Baillie's case, a "waking infant," in Barbauld's, 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*

In most of his poems, Coleridge, like Wordsworth, dealt with everyday things, and in "Frost at Midnight" he showed how well he too could achieve the effect of wonder in the familiar. But Coleridge tells us in *Biographia Literaria* that, according to the division of labor that organized their collaboration on *Lyrical Ballads*, his assignment was to achieve wonder by a frank violation of natural laws and of the ordinary course of events: in his poems "the incidents and agents were to be, in part at least, supernatural." And in *The Rime of the Ancient Mariner*, *Christabel*, and "Kubla Khan," Coleridge opened up to modern poetry a realm of mystery and magic. Stories of bewitchings, hauntings, and possession—shaped by antiquated treatises on demonology, folklore, and Gothic novels—supplied him with the means of impressing upon readers a sense of occult powers and unknown modes of being.

Materials like these were often grouped together under the rubric "romance," a term that would some time after the fact give the "Romantic" period its name. On the one hand romances were writings that turned, in their quest for settings conducive to supernatural happenings, to "strange fits of passion" and strange adventures, to distant pasts, faraway 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 untrammelled 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 and refinement. 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 that violate our sense of realism and the natural order. 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, Joanna Baillie, 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 the Romantic interest in the mysteries of mental life and determination to investigate psychological extremes. Wordsworth explored visionary states of consciousness that are common among children but violate the categories of adult judgment. Coleridge and 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 women, who, given accounts of their sex as especially susceptible to the delusions of 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 "impassioned 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 that links even 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 here (a questioning that he carries on in part by enacting his own reliance on others and supplementing his words with Shakespeare's) was, however, central to the celebrations of creativity occupying many Romantic-period writers:

indeed, in the Preface to *Lyrical Ballads*, Wordsworth (as if anticipating and preemptively defying Hazlitt) had already characterized his poetic experimentation 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 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 "Doth, like an Agent of the one great Mind, / Create, 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 and powers.

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 (Coleridge's "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*. Blake went furthest: the composite art of word and image and "illuminated printing" he created for his poems daringly reinvented the concept of the book.

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 pervasiveness of nature poetry in 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, unploughed 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 words "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 novels following *Frankenstein*, 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 and Landon especially were 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 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 audience 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 England's population of fourteen million) would be less qualified to judge or understand what it read. Beginning in 1780, 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. 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 glamor 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. Distributed by clubs of workers who pooled money for this purpose, read aloud in alehouses or as listeners worked in the fields, those copies reached a total audience that was much more numerous still.

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 Robert Southey, the Poet Laureate, was embarrassed to find his insurrectionary drama of 1794, *Wat Tyler*, republished without his permission. There was no chance, Southey learned, that the thieves who had filched his

intellectual property and put this souvenir of his youthful radicalism back into circulation would be punished: the judiciary ruled that copyright law was for the law-abiding and did not apply to "sedition."

## 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 Addison and 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, 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 prize-fighting. 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 personal and 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 stagestruck, 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*, Shelley's *Prometheus Unbound*, and most of 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 Jane 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*, the philosopher William Godwin (husband of Mary Wollstonecraft and 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 perse-

cutions 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:

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, prerational 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, Anna 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.

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