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2.4 | Romanticism

Periodization

There is an awareness in recent studies of Romanticism that the Romantic period “is typically granted representation out of all proportion to its duration” in literary and cultural histories (Chandler 9). To be sure, in the wake of the strictly historicised (and historicizing) focus of Jerome McGann’s critical investigation of *The Romantic Ideology* (1983), the 1980s and ’90s inaugurated an unprecedented **turn in Romantic studies** which—very much in line with the debates about the New Eighteenth Century—took into account the broader contexts of *British Culture, 1776–1832* (thus the subtitle of the seminal *Oxford Companion to the Romantic Age* edited by Iain McCalman in 1999). That an era which had to come to terms with the accumulated effects of the American, French and industrial revolutions, population increase and social unrest as well as the shifting cultural parameters of an increasingly print-based and professionalized public sphere and an emerging consumer society—that such an era should be accessible through the works of a handful of poets, the so-called **Big Six** (see box), seemed increasingly doubtful. Consequently, revision and expansion of the canon was the order of the day and led to the recovery and re-establishment of a number of female writers, while the unified understanding of Romanticism as influentially expounded by René Wellek and M.H. Abrams was questioned in a resurgence of A.O. Lovejoy’s early insistence that “we should learn to use the word ‘Romanticism’ in the plural” (235; see also Ferguson).

More recently, however, the undeniable persistence of the **aesthetic** coordinates established in the Romantic period (as opposed to the many other modernizing impulses of the eighteenth century at large) has motivated a shift back to acknowledging the historical centrality of the aesthetic principles around which Wellek and Abrams built their conceptualisation of Romanticism, focussing on “the

workings [...] of poetic **imagination**, [...] **nature** and its relation to man, and [...] a use of **imagery**, **symbolism**, and **myth** which is clearly distinct from that of eighteenth-century neoclassicism” (Wellek 160–61). In an attempt at resuscitating and historicizing these ideas, the early twenty-first century has seen the emergence of a consensus that one “need[s] to think of Romantic literature not as escapist in the way the term ‘Romantic’ seems sometimes to suggest, but as literature that tries passionately to come to terms with the modern world as it emerges through a series of wrenching changes” (O’Flinn 3). It has become increasingly clear that in the decades at the close of the long eighteenth century “the categories of ‘aesthetics’ and ‘poetics’ both underwent serious transformation in ways that still matter in the early twenty-first century” because the period saw “the emergence of what might be called a cultural idiom, a whole way of being in the world”; what is more, this cultural idiom was framed by the introduction of a new mode of writing which we “still call ‘imaginative literature’” (Chandler 1–2, 5).

2.4.1 | Romanticism as a Cultural Idiom

What exactly is this specifically Romantic way of being in the world? William Wordsworth’s poem “Nutting,” written in the last months of 1798 and first published in the second edition of the *Lyrical Ballads* in 1800, may serve as a point of entry here (cf. Mason 296–98). The poem opens with the following sentence:

It seems a day,
(I speak of one from many singled out)
One of those heavenly days which cannot die,
When forth I sallied from our cottage-door,

Key Authors: Romanticism

The ‘Big Six’:

William Blake (1757–1827)
William Wordsworth (1770–1850)
Samuel Taylor Coleridge (1772–1827)
Percy Bysshe Shelley (1792–1822)
John Keats (1795–1821)
George Gordon Lord Byron (1788–1824)

(Re-)Established Woman Writers:

Mary Shelley (1797–1851)
Charlotte Smith (1749–1806)
Mary Robinson (1757–1800)
Anna Letitia Barbauld (1743–1825)
Joanna Baillie (1762–1852)

And with a wallet o'er my shoulder slung, 5
 A nutting crook in hand, I turned my steps
 Towards the distant woods, a figure quaint,
 Tricked out in proud disguise of beggar's weeds
 Put on for the occasion, by advice
 And exhortation of my frugal Dame. 10

Typically of Wordsworth, the appositional syntax roams freely across the line breaks of the chosen blank verse (i.e. unrhymed iambic pentameter) lines, challenging the reader to follow the poem's argument, which slowly moves from the striking conjectural present-tense of the opening half-line (line 1) through an insistence on 'singling out' one day from many (2) to a claim of that particular day's immortality (3) before finally establishing the past-tense frame for the narrated episode from the speaker's younger days (4, 6). With this opening, the poem hovers somewhat uneasily between imaginative construction (as emphasised in lines 1–3) and detailed (and presumably faithful) remembrance of an episode from the speaker's past. The latter reading is supported by the 1843 note written by Wordsworth for Isabella Fenwick in which he stresses the autobiographical character of "Nutting":

Written in Germany: intended as part of a poem on my own life, but struck out as not being wanted there. Like most of my school-fellows I was an impassioned nutter. For this pleasure, the vale of Esthwaite, abounding in coppice wood, furnished a very wide range. These verses arose out of the remembrance of feelings I had often had when a boy [...]. (qtd. in Mason 377)

The poem, we learn here, was originally part of, but not included in, Wordsworth's life-long autobiographical poetic project which was only posthumously published as *The Prelude* in 1850, and the oblique and unexplained allusion to 'my frugal Dame' at the end of the first sentence, identified by later editors as "Ann Tyson, Wordsworth's beloved landlady in his schooldays" (Mason 297n), hints at just such a private, autobiographical frame of reference. But then, the opening lines insist that there is more to it, and when Wordsworth introduced classifications of types of poems for his post-*Lyrical Ballads* collections of poetry, "Nutting" did not turn up among the 'Poems Relating to the Period of Childhood' but rather among the 'Poems of the Imagination,' a decision vindicated in the poem's climactic scene in which the conjectural mode established in the opening lines resurfaces (marked in italics in the following):



Wordsworth's "Nutting" is set in the Vale of Esthwaite. Steel engraving ca. 1840

Among the woods,
 And o'er the pathless rocks, I forced my way
 Until, at length, I came to one dear nook 15
 Unvisited, where not a broken bough
 Drooped with its withered leaves, ungracious sign
 Of devastation, but the hazels rose
 Tall and erect, with milk-white clusters hung,
 A virgin scene!—A little while I stood, 20
 Breathing with such suppression of the heart
 As joy delights in; and with wise restraint
 Voluptuous, fearless of a rival, eyed
 The banquet, or beneath the tree I sate
 Among the flowers, and with the flowers I played; 25
 A temper known to those, who, after long
 And weary expectation, have been blessed
 With sudden happiness beyond all hope.
 Perhaps it was a bower beneath whose leaves
 The violets of five seasons re-appear 30
 And fade, unseen by any human eye;
 Where fairy water-breaks do murmur on
 For ever, and I saw the sparkling foam,
 And with my cheek on one of those green stones
 That, fleeced with moss, beneath the shady trees, 35
 Lay round me, scattered like a flock of sheep,
 I heard the murmur and the murmuring sound,
 In that sweet mood when pleasure loves to pay
 Tribute to ease; and, of its joy secure,
 The heart luxuriates with indifferent things, 40
 Wasting its kindness on stocks and stones,
 And on the vacant air.

Here, the initial mode of “**hypothetical reconstruction**” (Mason 296n) or even imaginative construction breaks through the mode of straightforward recollection characteristic of the intervening passages, and it is striking that the poem’s one approximation of rhyme occurs in the context of this backshift into the initial conjectural mode (‘eyed’—‘sate’—‘played,’ lines 23–25). This paves the way for a fully-fledged imaginary abode beyond even the natural run of the four seasons (30; see also ‘For ever,’ 33) which is characterised as “unseen by any human eye” (31). This transcendent vision of oneness with nature is grounded in breathing (21–22), seeing (22–23, 33), touching (34–36), and finally listening (37), when, back in the past-tense mode of recollection from line 33 onwards, the speaker distinguishes between the ‘murmuring sound’ (which can be perceived, 37) and the deeper ‘murmur’ (32, 37) of which the sound is a mere echo. This deeper murmur, the poem suggests, can only be experienced in the unfocused state of being described in the closing lines of the passage (38–42) in the wake of the mystic communion with nature *imagined* earlier (29–33).

After this, it is all the more surprising that the poem does not end on this happy note. Without any transition or explanation, the poem continues:

Then up I rose
And dragged to earth both branch and bough, with crash
And merciless ravage; and the shady nook
Of hazels, and the green and mossy bower, 45
Deformed and sullied, patiently gave up
Their quiet being;

Continuing after a mere semicolon, the speaker suggests that, even in retrospect, he cannot make sense of his act of vandalism and that ever since, he has had mixed feelings about it, oscillating between exultation and pain:

and, *unless I now*
Confound my present feelings with the past,
Even then, when from the bower I turned away
Exulting, rich beyond the wealth of kings, 50
I felt a sense of pain when I beheld
The silent trees and the intruding sky.—

Here, the spirit of hypothetical reconstruction reasserts itself once again (marked by italics in the quotation), and we have finally reached the **cultural idiom** of Romanticism, the specifically Romantic and thus modern way of being in the

world: the speaker perceives, in spite of his longing for unity, that there is an insurmountable **difference between himself and nature**, a difference which can only be overcome in the imagination, as the seemingly unconnected closing lines of the poem indicate in a faint attempt at re-confirming the earlier vision. The lines are addressed to an as yet unmentioned maiden who is identified in associated manuscripts as the enigmatic and idealized Lucy (Mason 298n), figuring more prominently in Wordsworth’s Lucy poems as the epitome of innocence saved from experience by dying young:

Then, dearest maiden! move along these shades
In gentleness of heart; with gentle hand
Touch—for there is a Spirit in the woods. 55

Quite clearly, this afterthought does not really affect the core of the poem, which has been identified by the critic and writer Gabriel Josipovici as a primal scene of cultural modernity:

The poem is so shocking because we sense that it is not so much the act of violence which is seen as a rape of nature as the very presence of the child; the act merely dramatises what had been latent all along [...]. The paradox for Wordsworth is that only in the midst of nature does he feel fully himself [...], and yet his very presence in nature robs it of precisely that which made it such a source of healing and joy. (54)

Romanticism, then, marks the emergence of a specifically **modern way of perceiving the world** and making sense of the experience, uneasily hovering between experience and expression, between being and representation, between subjectivism and a longing for integration and continuity, between emphatically embracing the world as nature and a retreat into art. Romantic practices have been concerned ever since with the “self and experience in a mediated world” and with the “reinvention of publicness” under these conditions (Thompson 207, 235).

2.4.2 | Theorising Romanticism

The most influential theoretical statement about many of these concerns can be found in the preface William Wordsworth wrote for the second edition of his and Samuel Taylor Coleridge’s *Lyrical Ballads* which had first come out in 1798, and was then revised and expanded largely by Wordsworth

alone for republication in 1800 (among the added poems was “Nutting”). Here, Wordsworth famously, and in direct contrast to neoclassical decorum, twice defined poetry as “the spontaneous overflow of powerful feelings” and has thus been traditionally hailed as the spearhead of the ‘Romantic revolution.’ However, closer inspection has revealed in the meantime that the revolutionary turn towards subjectivity had actually taken place much earlier in the context of a poetics of sensibility (cf. McGann, *Poetics of Sensibility*); Wordsworth and others were, in fact, concerned with the consequences of this revolution: they were trying to find out how the fleeting realm of subjective experience in its highly individualized actual existence could claim any kind of cultural authority. The answer to this question can actually be found in what follows the much-quoted slogan (see box). In Wordsworth’s *complete* definition, poetry is *not* the spontaneous overflow of powerful feelings, but rather a *re-enactment* or *re-presentation* of emotion after recollecting and contemplating it at a later point in time, preferably in tranquillity. In the process of thinking long and deeply, an emotion *similar* to the one originally experienced is gradually produced in the mind, and *this* emotion can then be expressed or embodied in a poem (see, for example, Wordsworth’s “I Wandered Lonely as a Cloud,” also known as “The Daffodils,” of 1804, which provides a very straightforward poetic illustration of the basic assumptions).

What is added here, in spite of Wordsworth’s insistence on the near-identity of the emotions, is the dimension of **reflection**, and it is through this dimension that the raw material of subjective experience is transposed into the realm of culture. Taking into account Wordsworth’s full argument in his preface to the *Lyrical Ballads*, one can see that he is deeply worried about anything that cannot be rationally controlled. He does not want to re-enact and communicate excessive overflows of powerful feelings in his poetry, but to impart only “that quantity of pleasure [...] which a poet may *rationally* endeavour to impart” (my emphasis). To make sure that this is the case, the “language really used by men” which is so central to Wordsworth’s innovative poetic stance has to be “purified [...] from what appear to be its real defects,” and this purification is effected both by selection and through the transposition into metrical composition:

[A] selection of the language really spoken by men [will] wherever it is made with true taste and feeling [...] of itself form a distinct-

Definition

In the preface to *Lyrical Ballads*, → **Wordsworth’s definition of poetry** reads as follows:

“[A]ll good Poetry is the spontaneous overflow of powerful feelings; but though this be true, Poems to which any value can be attached were never produced [...] but by a man who, being possessed of more than usual organic sensibility, had also thought long and deeply. [...] I have said that Poetry is the spontaneous overflow of powerful feelings; it takes its origins from emotion recollected in tranquillity; the emotion is then contemplated till by a species of reaction the tranquillity gradually disappears, and an emotion, kindred to that which was before the subject of contemplation, is gradually produced, and does itself actually exist in the mind.”

tion [...] and entirely separate the composition from the vulgarity and meanness of ordinary life; and, if metre is superadded thereto, [...] a dissimilitude will be produced altogether sufficient for the gratification of the rational mind.

Whenever there is the danger of “excitement [...] carried beyond its proper bounds,” Wordsworth insists that “the co-presence of something regular [...] cannot but have great efficacy in tempering and restraining the passion.” All this is far from the traditional idea that the Romantic revolution opened up modern culture for an unmediated influx of subjectivity and emotion, and Wordsworth’s frequent invocations of rationality indicate that it is too simplistic to describe Romanticism as being in direct and unequivocal opposition to Enlightenment concerns. Instead, it can be described as the Enlightenment’s twin or shadow, trying to come to terms with those aspects of modernity which are elided in the project(s) of Enlightenment but nevertheless intransigent, such as the unavoidable cultural dimensions of subjectivity on the one hand and language and media opacity on the other.

What Romanticism is concerned with, then, is the **transposition of subjective experience into cultural relevance and authority**, and the latter can only be gained through expressing and communicating experience. Throughout the preface, Wordsworth is searching for a genuine mode of existence and experience which has apparently been overwhelmed by recent cultural developments, as a highly prescient passage of cultural criticism suggests:

For a multitude of causes, unknown to former times, are now acting with a combined force to blunt the discriminating powers of

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the mind and [...] to reduce it to a state of almost savage torpor. The most effective of these causes are the great national events which are daily taking place, and the increasing accumulation of men in cities, where the uniformity of their occupations produces a craving for extraordinary incident, which the rapid communication of intelligence hourly gratifies.

Poetry, Wordsworth insists, is one possible medium for recovering the discriminating powers of the mind and a less alienated existence and experience, but the problem is that poetry is already at a remove from experience, separated from it, as we have seen, by retrospective reflection and, what is more, the inscription of the recollected experience into the media of writing, print and poetic form. There is no way back from the realm of representation to the realm of existence, or from experience to innocence, as **William Blake** showed in his programmatic introductory poem to his *Songs of Innocence* (1789) even before he supplemented the collection with his *Songs of Experience* (1793) (see box).

Wordsworth, we have seen, is similarly aware of this, as the bout of frustration barely contained by the poem “Nutting” illustrates. In this sense, “Nutting” provides an interesting example of what

John Keats called, in an influential formulation which intriguingly covers the potential of art and poetry *and* the predicament of the modern condition, “*Negative Capability*, that is when man is capable of being in uncertainties, Mysteries, doubts, without any irritable reaching after fact & reason” (Letter to George and Thomas Keats, Dec 21, 1817). However, “Nutting” is not very typical of Wordsworth, who tends to focus on the successful poetic re-enactment of harmonious experiences in nature and to sublimate his awareness of difference into poetic meditations rather than ecological vandalism. Samuel Taylor Coleridge, on the other hand, in an equally influential formulation, was aware of the fact that what he called the “primary **IMAGINATION**,” i.e. “the living power and prime agent of all human perception [...] as a repetition in the finite mind of the eternal act of creation in the infinite I AM” is only accessible to human beings as an “echo [...] coexisting with the conscious will” which he called “secondary [imagination],” but which still “dissolves, diffuses, dissipates in order to recreate [and] struggles to idealize and to unify”; mere “**FANCY**,” on the contrary, has no other counters to play with but fixities and

Interpretation

William Blake, *Songs of Innocence*

In his “Introduction” to his *Songs of Innocence* (1789), the poet, painter and engraver William Blake reflects upon the gap between being and representation by introducing the figure of a piper whose art moves from the realm of innocent involvement to the realm of representation. Interestingly, this fall from grace is inaugurated by a child who urges the piper to broaden the functional potential of his art by enriching first its affective and then, in a move from pure music to singing and writing, its semantic and representational potential:

Piping down the valleys wild
Piping songs of pleasant glee
On a cloud I saw a child,
And he laughing said to me;

“Pipe a song about a lamb”;
So I piped with merry cheer.
“Piper, pipe that song again—”
So I piped, he wept to hear.

5

“Drop thy pipe, thy happy pipe,
Sing thy songs of happy cheer.” 10
So I sung the same again
While he wept with joy to hear.

“Piper sit thee down and write
In a book that all may read—” 15
So he vanished from my sight.
And I plucked a hollow reed,

And I made a rural pen,
And I stain’d the water clear,
And I wrote my happy songs
Every child may joy to hear. 20

In the course of the poem, the fall from grace is clearly depicted as a **fall into language** which has the capacity to add joy to the world (lines 12, 20) but lets the world vanish from sight (15). Writing about the world is necessarily at a distance from the world, it “stain[s]” (18) its original being. In Blake’s frontispiece for the collection, the piper/writer is depicted in the act of stepping out of the world of original being into experience.



definites" (*Biographia Literaria*, ch. 13). Thus, human creativity is grounded in imagination as the highest good, but it will always remain at a remove from the world in its totality because anyone who says 'I' will of necessity impose a difference on the world.

2.4.3 | Modes of Romantic Poetry

Against this background, **two basic orientations** of Romantic poetry can be identified:

Processes of Naturalization: Voice. On the one hand, Romantic poetry pursues the project of validating the cultural relevance and authority of subjective experience by integrating it into a larger framework which transposes Romantic notions of nature into the cultural realm and establishes a new understanding of culture as 'folk culture,' 'the people's culture,' and 'national culture' in the process, an understanding which marks a clear contrast to the cosmopolitan culture of the educated elites on which neoclassicism was built. This strand of poetry avoids all artistic ostentation and retains just a bare minimum of poetic form in order to culturally domesticate and validate its staged (or represented) voices along the lines suggested in Wordsworth's preface to the *Lyrical Ballads*. As the title of this influential collection indicates, these poems try to combine the folk culture credibility of formerly oral ballad and song traditions with the subjective imaginative potential of the lyric. Characteristically, this new type of poem adapts the forms which can be found in these traditions:

- the **ballad stanza**: quatrains in alternate four- and three-stressed iambic lines with at times irregular unstressed syllables added, rhyming abcb;
- the **common metre** (or common measure) drawn from hymns, which is basically similar to the ballad stanza but more regular and rhymes abab;
- the **long metre**: iambic tetrameter, abab, as in Blake's "Introduction" (see box on p. 50).

In addition to narrative poems (i.e. ballads such as Coleridge's "The Rime of the Ancient Mariner" or Wordsworth's "Goody Blake, and Harry Gill," both in the 1798 *Lyrical Ballads*) and lyric song-like poems (such as Blake's *Songs of Innocence and of Experience* 1793 or Wordsworth's Lucy poems (1798–1801), there is also a more individualized and

situational mode of poetry in blank verse such as, for example, Wordsworth's "Nutting" as analyzed above. In extended form, such poems trace an individual speaker's reflections in what Coleridge has termed '**conversation poems**' (when there is an addressee for the speaker's ruminations as in his "The Eolian Harp," 1796, and "Frost at Midnight," 1798) or in highly subjective free-form variants of the ode (such as, for example, Wordsworth's "Lines Written A Few Miles Above Tintern Abbey," 1798, and "Ode: Intimations of Immortality," 1804). Between them, these latter modes of poetry have influentially been identified as the specifically Romantic genre of the 'Greater Romantic Lyric' (cf. Abrams, "Structure and Style"). The 'Greater Romantic Lyric' shares with ballads and songs its prioritization of voice as opposed to poetic form. But as opposed to the more collective framing of ballad and song forms, the Greater Romantic Lyric provides an opening for an individualization of voice which, when taken to its logical conclusions, could also entail an individualization of poetic form. And this is, in fact, the second basic orientation of Romantic poetry.

Processes of Individualization: Poetic Form. As opposed to the processes of naturalization outlined above, Romantic poetry also pursues the project of validating the cultural relevance and authority of subjective experience by emphatically embracing individuality and transforming it into an emphatic understanding of (modern) art and literature as an autonomous realm which provides an opening for the highest form of individuality, **genius**. Genius, one could say, transcends individuality into universality by taking it to extremes *without* losing relevance. As the hallmark of genius is originality which had to be detectable in the works themselves, this turn towards heightened individuality instigated a dynamics of formal innovation which in the long run resulted in the modernist alienation of poetry from the common reader. In the Romantic period itself, however, this was held at bay by the very processes of naturalization described above, and Wordsworth's ideal of "man speaking to man" (preface to the *Lyrical Ballads*) is part of this project.

Nevertheless, a turn towards formal innovation can be observed in the Romantic **sonnet revival**, which was inaugurated by Charlotte Smith with her *Elegiac Sonnets* (first edition 1784, nine further, continuously growing editions until 1811). Smith picked up an early modern tradition of poetic self-examination and self-stylization that ran

The Greater Romantic Lyric

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John Keats in an 1828 oil painting by T. Sampson, based on the 1816 mask of the poet made by Keats's friend, Benjamin Robert Haydon

from the Petrarchism of Wyatt, Surrey, Spenser and Sidney through Shakespeare's individualization of the form in his *Sonnets* (publ. 1609) to the metaphysical poets and Milton, but was then interrupted by the neo-classicists' aversion to poetic subjectivity in the earlier eighteenth century, and she used the sonnet form as a medium for hypothetically reconstructing and imaginatively constructing autobiographical material in order to project a public persona of herself. In Smith's wake, Romantic poets like Wordsworth and Coleridge were creatively engaging the double tradition of established formal conventions (fourteen lines, iambic pentameter, rhyme scheme abba abba [turn] cde cde [or cdc dcd] in the Italian tradition or abab cdcd efef [turn] gg in the English tradition), but it took some time until fully individualized sonnets emerged, such as, for example, Percy Bysshe Shelley's "Ozymandias" (1818) or John Keats's poetological sonnet "If by dull rhymes our English must be chain'd" (1819).

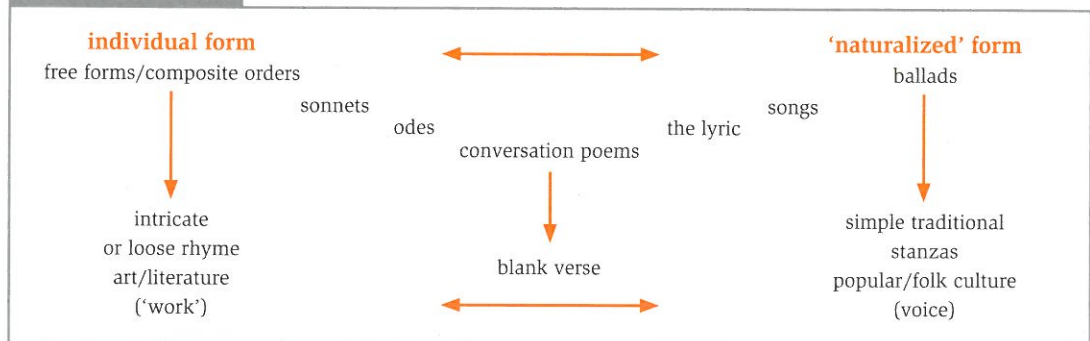
If by dull rhymes our English must be chain'd,
 And, like Andromeda, the Sonnet sweet
 Fetter'd, in spite of pained loveliness;
 Let us find out, if we must be constrain'd,
 Sandals more interwoven and complete 5
 To fit the naked foot of Poesy;
 Let us inspect the Lyre, and weigh the stress
 Of every chord, and see what may be gain'd
 By ear industrious, and attention meet;
 Misers of sound and syllable, no less 10
 Than Midas of his coinage, let us be
 Jealous of dead leaves in the bay wreath crown,
 So, if we may not let the Muse be free,
 She will be bound with garlands of her own.

The sonnet establishes its very own formal principle of semantically charged, not fully regularly

correlated rhyme chains (a: lines 1, 4, 8 "chain'd/constrain'd/gain'd"; b: 2, 5, 9 "sweet/complete/meet"; c: 3, 7, 10 "loveliness/weigh the stress/no less"). It is certainly no accident that the central message of the poem emanates from the deviation from emerging regularity in line 6, and pronounces "Poesy/be/free" in chain d (6, 11, 13), while the final chain e (12, 14) remains incomplete and impure ("crown/own").

A sonnet like this amounts to a declaration of formal independence, and many highly innovative and individualized forms begin to emerge, among them highly elaborate bound-form variants of the **ode** (such as, for example, Keats's famous "Ode on a Grecian Urn," 1819) and the dazzling combination of *terza rima* lines in ~~four~~ sonnets (aba bcb cdc ded ee) in Shelley's "Ode to the West Wind" (1819). The latter is actually a good example of what Stuart Curran, following Wordsworth, has called "composite orders" (cf. Curran, *Poetic Form* 180–203), i.e. highly experimental forms trying to bring together, for example, the lyric and the epic as in Wordsworth's autobiographical *The Prelude*, written in blank verse and posthumously published in 1850, or the satirical and the epic as in Byron's never-ending *Don Juan* (1819–1824), written, in a dazzling display of formal craftsmanship and wit, in highly irreverent *ottava rima* stanzas (iambic pentameter, abababcc). The high degree of formal innovation and reflexivity indicated by these texts actually reaches its climax in the elaborate meta-commentary on all available discursive forms of the period formulated in Charlotte Smith's long blank verse meditation *Beachy Head* (1807), which has, after a long period of neglect, re-emerged as one of the most important texts of the revised and expanded canon of Romantic writing in recent years, shedding interesting light on the time-honoured classics in the field and standing next to Coleridge's "Kubla Khan"

Focus on Poetic Form



(1797/98, pub. 1816) as another possible candidate for the highly productive genre of the “Romantic Fragment Poem” (cf. Levinson) which indicates how great the newly-won formal freedom was, even making incompleteness and open-endedness acceptable (cf. Schmitt).

2.4.4 | Other Genres

While the genre of poetry was busy establishing the new paradigm of imaginative literature with a pronounced **emphasis on aesthetic autonomy**, it took some time for the genres of fiction and drama with their stronger social and institutional embedding and their less pronounced personal and subjective dimensions to find their place in the new regime. Accordingly, they occupy a seemingly less central place in the field of English Romantic Literature, and the following remarks will indicate why this is the case and how fiction and drama can be related to the conceptualisation of Romanticism outlined in this chapter.

Fiction. In contrast to Germany, where the moniker ‘the Romantic novel’ designates a clearly identifiable set of texts and where the centrality of the novel as a genre for the new Romantic understanding of what (modern) literature should be about has been theoretically expounded at a very early stage by Friedrich Schlegel, there is no such thing as ‘the Romantic novel’ in England. Traditionally, the history of English fiction has been written as a history of **realist fiction**. When held against this norm, the second half of the eighteenth century has been perceived as an interruption in the emergence of the classic realism of the nineteenth century from its early eighteenth-century predecessors. While fictional genres and types of novels proliferated—among the most prominent period designations were sentimental fiction, Gothic novel, oriental tale, moral tale, Jacobin novel, society novel—there was little sense of a coherent synthesis which could be retrospectively integrated into smooth accounts of the history of the English novel. Against the background of the understanding of Romanticism put forward here, however, the two most prominent genres of fiction in the second half of the eighteenth century, the **Gothic novel** and **sentimental fiction**, can be clearly identified as being part of the subjective revolution of sensibility (cf. McGann, *Poetics of Sensibility*) which preceded Romanticism. Both were very much con-

cerned with the subjective dimensions of feeling even to the point of irrationality, and it is interesting to note that both genres were to a certain extent relegated to the sphere of popular culture when realism re-asserted itself as a means of domesticating subjective experience very much along Wordsworthian lines in the novels of Jane Austen and Sir Walter Scott.

The Gothic novel was inaugurated by Horace Walpole with the publication of *The Castle of Otranto* in 1764. Ever since the Renaissance, the term ‘Gothic’ had been associated with a medieval and thus distinctly non-classical ‘Northern’ past, and in the eighteenth century this meaning was extended to cover anti-Enlightenment connotations. Walpole drew on these connotations in suggesting (in his preface to the second edition 1765) that he was trying to resuscitate the imaginative potential of the old type of romance which had been replaced by the realist novel in order to be able to get at the undomesticated, irrational aspects of human experience and desire. In this design, the supernatural serves as a pretext for an engagement with the unspoken and sometimes extreme thoughts and feelings of individuals; it is, in a sense, an artificial and imaginative replacement for nature in Edmund Burke’s aesthetic programme of the awe-inspiring and potentially cathartic Sublime, and it is meant to work accordingly. And it did—*The Castle of Otranto* was a spectacular success which inspired numerous successors such as Clara Reeve’s *The Old English Baron* (1777), Anne Radcliffe’s *The Mysteries of Udolpho* (1794), and Matthew Lewis’s *The Monk* (1796). By the end of the century, the genre had become so formulaic that a reviewer in *The Spirit of the Public Journals for 1797* offered a satirical recipe:

Take—An old castle, half of it ruinous.

A long gallery, with a great many doors, some secret ones.

Three murdered bodies, quite fresh.

[...]

Mix them together, in the form of three volumes, to be taken at any of the watering places, before going to bed.

(qtd. in Greenblatt 602)

With Mary Shelley’s *Frankenstein* (1818) marking a prominent exception, the Gothic novel had become a medium of entertainment rather than literature by the end of the eighteenth century, and the same applies to the varieties of **sentimental fiction**. The emerging larger reading public for fiction was by no means acknowledged as an adequate

Gothic novels were highly popular at the time.

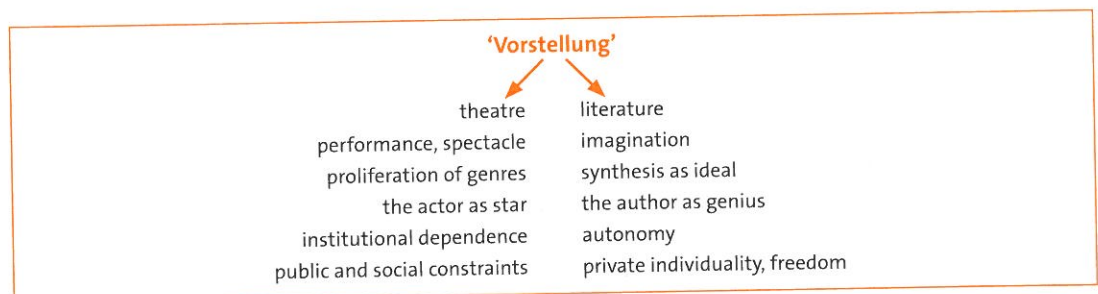
audience for the new literature. As Coleridge witheringly comments retrospectively in his *Biographia Literaria* (1817): “For as to the devotees of the circulating libraries, I dare not compliment their *pass-time*, or rather *kill-time* with the name of *reading*” (ch. 3; emphasis in original). With this, Coleridge picks up where Wordsworth left off 17 years earlier, when he complained in his preface to the *Lyrical Ballads* that the “invaluable works of our elder Writers [...] are driven into neglect by frantic novels, sickly and stupid German tragedies, and deluges of idle and extravagant stories in verse.” It is against these developments that the ‘invaluable works’ of newer writers like Wordsworth and Coleridge are trying to carve out their cultural niche through claims of universal relevance—and while poetry is the medium of choice, fiction and drama seem to be part of the problem rather than answers to it.

Drama. While fiction was at least in its principal coordinates of communication comparable to poetry—both are based on texts written by individuals and then distributed in print and read privately by individuals again—, drama was suspicious to many Romantic writers because of its public institutional framing. This fault-line can be nicely illustrated with the help of the German word ‘*Vorstellung*,’ which covers both ‘**performance**’ and ‘**imagination**’: Quite clearly, drama did not easily fit the emergent paradigm of modern literature with its ideological preferences as indicated in the chart below, and the rich theatre scene of the eighteenth century with its emphasis on spectacle did not easily accommodate the interiority-oriented priorities of Romantic writers. The perceived gap between dramatists and literary writers in the new sense was never fully bridged, and while some Romantic writers wrote successfully for the stage—most notably Elizabeth Inchbald with the farces *Appearance Is Against Them* (1785) and *A Mogul Tale* (1788) and the comedies *I’ll Tell You What* (1786), *Such*

Things Are (1788) and *Everyone Has His Fault* (1793), as well as Joanna Baillie with her huge cycle of *Plays on the Passions* (1798–1812)—their works did not really make it into the canon of literature while the dramatic works of posthumously famous Romantic poets such as Wordsworth’s *The Borderers* (1796–1799) or Coleridge’s *Remorse* (1813) were not successful on the stage and remain marginal to their oeuvre. Nevertheless, Romantic writers were fascinated or even obsessed with the theatre, but many of their dramatically oriented or inspired works remained safely in the imaginative realm of either **dramatic poetry** or **closet drama** (i.e. drama for reading rather than performance) such as, famously, Byron’s *Manfred: A Dramatic Poem* (1816/17) or Shelley’s *Prometheus Unbound* (1820).

2.4.5 | Historicising Romanticism

It remains the challenging task of Romantic studies to integrate this varied field of literary practice with related fields of artistic practice (such as painting and music) and other cultural realms (such as science, politics, and popular culture) in a way which no longer imposes the ideological predispositions of Romanticism itself on the historical complexity of the period in question. In this respect, the study of Romanticism is clearly part of, as well as a continuation of, the larger project of establishing a **New Eighteenth Century**. At the same time, and in clear contrast to the aesthetic self-descriptions of the Augustan Age which have clearly become obsolete, it is crucial to acknowledge the formative effect that the cultural idiom of Romanticism has had on aesthetic and cultural practices ever since, so that all attempts at historicising Romanticism and the aesthetic are inevitably caught up in a certain degree of cultural complicity with their object of study.



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