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RETHINKING ROMANTICISM

BY JEROME MCGANN

I

Until about ten years ago scholars of romanticism generally accepted Rene Wellek's classic modern definition of their subject: "Imagination for the view of poetry, nature for the view of the world, and symbol and myth for poetic style."¹ This formulation represents, on one hand, a synthesis of an originary romantic tradition of thought, and, on the other, the bounding horizon for much of the work on romanticism done between World War II and the early 1980s.

Today that synthesis has collapsed and debate about theory of romanticism is vigorous—from cultural studies, feminist scholarship, even from various types of revived philological investigations. My own work has been much engaged with these revaluations, not least since the publication of *The Romantic Ideology* in 1983. Because these discussions have (inevitably) influenced my own thinking about romanticism, as well as the more general problem of periodization, I want to return to the subject once again.²

Between 1978 and 1983, when I first addressed these issues, I was not concerned with the question of periodization as such. I was more interested in the conceptual representations of romanticism—contemporary representations as well as subsequent scholarly representations. The periodization issue entered my purview obliquely—for example, in relation to the kinds of problems that arise when a clear distinction is not maintained between certain cultural formations (like romanticism, modernism, or postmodernism) and the historical frameworks within which they develop and mutate. So I worked to clarify the distinction between "the romantic period" (that is, a particular historical epoch) and "romanticism" (that is, a set of cultural/ideological formations that came to prominence during the romantic period). The distinction is important not merely because so much of the work of that period is not "romantic," but even more, perhaps, because the period is notable for its many ideological struggles. A romantic ethos achieved dominance through sharp cultural conflict; some of the fier-

est engagements were internecine—the civil wars of the romantic movement itself.

Later I shall try to examine these topics more closely. For now let me summarize the argument I began to elaborate in *The Romantic Ideology*. It seemed to me then, and it still seems to me: first, that Wellek's position flattens out the rough terrain of the cultural formation(s) we call romanticism; and second, that Wellek's position fails to map the phenomena comprehensively because it is a specialized theoretical view derived from a Kantian/Coleridgean line of thought. In other words, between approximately 1945 and 1980 the most influential interpreters of English romanticism examined their material with a historically determinate theory of their subject. To recognize the historicity of the theory is to understand more clearly its limits (as well as the powers). The recognition also helps one toward possible reimaginings of romanticism—to think beyond the conceptual framework of Wellek's synthetic theory.

The limits of that interpretive line pressed themselves upon me because I was much occupied with Byron and his works. A Byronic vantage on the issue of romanticism immediately puts in question Wellek's imagination/nature/symbol tercet. That Byron did not figure importantly in the representations of the romantic period of 1945–80 is not an anomaly, it is a theoretical and ideological fate.

The contrast between the view of romanticism that dominated the period 1945–80 and the nineteenth century's view seemed to me equally startling. Once again Byron loomed as the unevadable locus of the issues. The continental vantage exposes the problems in their most telling form. From Goethe and Pushkin to Baudelaire, Nietzsche, and Lautréamont, Byron seems to stand at the very center of romanticism. The nineteenth-century English view is slightly different. Though Byron remained an important resource for England and the English, he had emerged as a highly problematic figure. From different Victorian points of view Byron's famous "energy" (as it was called) seemed one thing—usually a positive thing—whereas his equally famous critical despair seemed something else altogether—typically, something to be deplored. Nineteenth-century England therefore kept opening and closing its Byron with troubled (ir)regularity.

As Coleridge and Wordsworth gradually came to define the "center" of English romanticism in twentieth-century critical thinking, Byron slipped further from view. Wellek's intervention was a key event because Wellek sought to integrate a European philological view with a correspondent line of English cultural thought. In the romanticism

that emerged from this synthesis, Byron's deviance seemed virtually complete. "Imagination" is explicitly *not* Byron's view of the sources of poetry, "nature" is hardly his "view of the world" (Byron is distinctly a cosmopolitan writer), and his style is predominantly rhetorical and conversational rather than symbolic or mythic. No one would, I think, disagree with this general representation of Byron, any more than one would deny that Wellek's formulation corresponds very closely to Wordsworth's and Coleridge's work. Wellek's triad can of course be traced through Byron's work, especially via a study of Byron's peculiarly antithetical ways of engaging nature, imagination, and myth. When this is done, however—for instance, in the guiding work of an Abrams or a Bloom—what one discovers are precisely traces and differences.³ Observed through a theory of romanticism like Wellek's, Byron appears either a problem or an irrelevance.

The difficulty is at its root a historical one. While Byron does not fit easily into Wellek's criteria for romanticism, he cannot easily be removed from the historical phenomena. In the theoretical (and romantic) line synthesized by Wellek, this Byronic contradiction was negotiated very simply. Although the splendor of Byron's miseries initially seemed an astonishment to many, they came at last to be judged a kind of vulgar theater of romanticism, the debased margin of a complex cultural center: at best perhaps historically interesting, at worst probably factitious. The subject of Byron's late masterpiece *Don Juan* was set aside altogether so far as the question of Byron's romanticism was concerned. For while here one could see, very clearly, a panoramic (dis)play of "romantic irony," Byron's work pursued its ironies in an apparently unsystematic and nontheoretical way. Byron's resistance to theory—famous in its time—troubled the romanticism of his ironic masterpiece. It became a negative cultural sign that his work lacked depth and cultural seriousness. Himself at odds with so much of his age's systematic theorizing—"born for opposition," as he flamboyantly declared—Byron courted marginality and inconsequence from the very center of the romantic fame he had acquired.

(Let me say in parenthesis that the recent "return of the Byronic repressed" does not simply reflect the editorial scholarship that has restored his texts to us during the past fifteen years or so. At least as important has been the emergence of postmodernism, with its Deridean concern for textual play and instability and its Foucauldian pressure to recover salient but neglected historicalities.⁴)

Working from the antinomy of Byron, then, *The Romantic Ideology* drew out a dialectical critique of Wellek's ideological synthesis. Once

begun, such a move lays bare a whole array of similar deviances concealed within the synthetic structure. For example, if romanticism takes “nature” for its view of the world, then Blake falls out of the synthesis. “Nature” corresponds to a romantic *Weltanschauung* as a scene of fundamental innocence and sympathy; conceptually opposed to the urban and the artificial, romantic nature is the locus of what Wordsworth paradigmatically called “feeling.” As an artistic resource it generates a constellation of anti-Enlightenment cultural formations that are critically recollected in phrases like “the meddling intellect,” and romantically transformed in phrases like “the philosophic mind.” Because Blake also attacked key Enlightenment positions, one may overlook or set aside the manifest differences that separate his view of nature from, say, Wordsworth’s or Coleridge’s. But the fact is that Blake does not take “nature as his view of the world” any more than Byron does, though the antinaturalisms of Blake and Byron are also noncongruent with each other.

A close investigation of the ideas that particular romantic writers had about imagination, nature, and symbol or myth will disclose a series of similar fundamental differences. I recently tried to illustrate what might be demonstrated along these lines by tracing important distinctions between different romantic ideas of imagination.⁵ Memory is so important to the theories of Wordsworth and Coleridge, for instance, that their views deviate radically from Blake’s. Imagination is a conscious activity for Coleridge, subject to the will, whereas for Shelley it is a faculty precisely distinguished by its total freedom from willful control. Keats evolved from Wordsworth a sensationalist theory of imagination that stands quite at odds with Shelley’s more idealistic views. For that matter, Wordsworth’s work is so deeply in debt to associationist theories of imagination that Coleridge himself wrote *Biographia Literaria* in large part to demonstrate the crucial differences that separated his aesthetic ideas from those of his early friend. (In doing so, curiously, he aligned himself closely with the criticisms initially raised by Wordsworth’s most famous antagonist, Francis Jeffrey.)

Now it might be objected that this general line of critique against Wellek’s synthetic representation of romanticism simply returns us to a neo-Lovejoyan skepticism. Differences are so elaborated and insisted upon that we effectively abandon all hope of theorizing the phenomena. Instead we atomize, discriminating ever more particular forms within an enclafed but finally featureless romantic flood.

To the extent that *The Romantic Ideology* was written as a critical polemic against what I took to be a false consciousness of romanticism,

its arguments might be used to bolster such a pyrrhonist approach. My own view, however, is very different, as might perhaps be seen from more recent critical projects. These projects have not been specifically addressed to the question of romanticism or to the problem of its periodization. I have been trying rather to develop a general set of research and teaching protocols for the historical study of literary work, regardless of “period.” This more general aim grows from investigations into the changing relations of language and textuality, and particularly the changing relations of language and the textuality of literary or poetical work.⁶

From this perspective, romanticism is inadequately characterized by a synthesis like Wellek’s because the synthesis is too abstract and conceptual. The best work to utilize this synthesis has tried to resist that conceptual framework, to preserve the dynamism of the phenomena even as a continual resort is made to terms like imagination, nature, and symbol, with their fateful positivist inertias. Nor can we, nor should we, dispense with those terms, which are primary philological data of the originary historical efforts to forge romantic experiences of the world.

What we have to bear clearly in mind, however, is the heuristic and constructivist character of those terms and the ideas they generate and pursue. “Imagination,” especially as it was deployed in romantic discourse, is a radically dialogical term. When Coleridge or Shelley, say, use the term in prescriptive and ideological frameworks, they try to limit the dialogism of the word, to set it within a defined conceptual position. The same is true with regard, let us say, to Wordsworth’s or Byron’s or Blake’s expositions of terms like “imagination” and “nature.” So we can speak of different (romantic) “theories” of nature or imagination, and we can separate these different theories from each other. However, to the extent that romanticism is executed not as a prescriptive but as a poetical economy—a dynamic scene of evolving tensions and relationships, as in a family—its primal terms and data cannot lapse into systematic rectitude. Romantic poetry, in short, constructs a theater for the conflicts and interactions of the ideologies of romanticism.

In this sense, to define romanticism with Wellek’s tercet of keywords is not wrong so much as it is abstract and preliminary. If our critical point of departure is poetry and art rather than culture and society, we have to begin the study of romanticism at least from a Bakhtinian vantage, as a disputatious scene whose internal tensions re-present the strife of historical differentials and ideological conflict. The period

is notable, as I have said, for its various cultural/theoretical controversies, and in particular for the emergence of the manifesto as a distinct literary subgenre. The cultural forms of romanticism are famously volatile and shape-changing because they typically hold their ideas and projects open to transformation—even to the point, as I shall try to show, of their own self-destruction.

A book like *The Romantic Ideology*, it has been argued, implicitly reifies this kind of romantic dynamism as a transcendent aesthetic form or set of procedures. The charge is that *The Romantic Ideology* at times simply replaces Wellek's tripartite structural representation with a dialectical view that is, finally, no less conceptual, for all its appeal to dynamic forms. I have come to think this criticism a just one.⁷ I also think it an important criticism, for it exposes a residual investment in a type of interpretive thought that I was explicitly trying to avoid.

As I see it, criticism should be seeking a dialectical philology that is not bound by the conceptual forms it studies and generates.⁸ The paradox of such a philology is that its freedom would be secured only when it accepts the historical limits of its own forms of thought. It is not bound by its theoretical forms because it holds itself open to the boundary conditions established by other conceptual forms. This is a theory imagined not as a conceptual structure but as a set of investigative practices—and a set of practices that play themselves out under a horizon of falsifiability.⁹

II

If we take such an approach to a topic like “the romantic period,” then, our object will not be to “define” the period but to sketch its dynamic possibilities. In this frame of reference it helps to remember that “periodization” is itself a critical tool fashioned in historicity as such. Periodization is a possible form of historical thinking that has been realized under specific socio-historical conditions of the European Enlightenment. We do not, after all, *have* to think in such terms. A current world-historical perspective will not sweep off the periodic table “Medieval, Renaissance, Enlightenment, Romanticism, Modernism,” but it will certainly execute radical and across-the-board changes and options of meaning.

Modern historical method is a tool for bringing order—I would rather call it “possible order”—to cultural change and cultural difference. We want therefore to bear in mind the historicity of the method in order to hold it open to the full range of its possibilities, which necessarily entail the limits it is perpetually constructing and discov-

ering. When we focus attention on a topic like the romantic period, we may willingly (though perhaps not consciously) suspend our disbelief in the period as such, and hence take our studies in the period for pursuits of an *Urphänomen*. This is, in effect, what we observe in Wellek's approach to romanticism and the romantic period. The problem with Wellek's formulation is not so much that it is a limited view—all views are limited—but that it holds out against the possibilities of its own limitations. It does not invite a “suspension of disbelief *for the moment*” but for good and aye.

At issue here is how we pursue a historical method of literary investigation. Because historical method is strictly a form of comparative studies, its goal is not the recovery of some lost originary cultural whole. The presumption must rather be that the object of study is volatile and dynamic—not merely that it (in this case, “the romantic period”) *was* an unstable and conflicted phenomenon, but that it continues to mutate as it is subjected to further study; indeed, that its later changes are the effects of such studies. (This situation explains why the basic form of historical studies is not positivist but radically dialogical.)

Thus the standard dates for the romantic period—let us say, 1798–1824—cannot be read as a mere statement of fact. Scholars of course understand the signifying mechanism involved here. “1798” stands for the coming of *Lyrical Ballads*, and “1824” stands for the death of Byron. But those events merely define the critical materials in terms of a simple historical allegory. Most scholars are also aware that the dates could be shifted—typical shifts at the *terminus a quo* are “1789,” “1792,” and “1800,” while at the *terminus ad quem* the dates “1830,” “1832,” and “1837” (among others) are common enough. All signify some event that is implicitly being asked to carry important cultural meanings. The “facts” come legend-laden through the forest of history. We have to translate those legends, but we also have to realize what is implicit in *the fact of the legends*: that a historical moment (so-called) can and will be (re)constructed in different ways.

That realization should not be left to fend for itself, as it were. We want to get beyond assenting to “the play of difference,” beyond describing instances of that play. A fully developed historical method ought to encourage the exploration of alterities. That goal would entail, however—to borrow a thought from Shelley—*imagining* what we know: constructing and deploying forms that will be equal to the pursuit of differential attention. We shall not advance the knowledge we desire, therefore, by continuing to work almost exclusively within the most

traditional generic conventions of academic discourse. These forms, after all, evolved from nineteenth-century historicist philology and hermeneutics. As such, they are structurally committed to holistic accounts of history and integrated, self-consistent acts of interpretation.

Derrida has been a great spur (so to speak) to new kinds of critical in(ter)ventions. (The use of dialectal forms that give momentary exposure to language's differential possibilities is now common.) But the academy's turn in the past twenty-five years towards various philosophies of differential attention has remained largely conceptual. Not many critics or scholars have tried to translate these commitments into equivalent generic forms. The most innovative work here has come from extramural writers. Scholars could learn much from the criticism of contemporary poets like Susan Howe and Charles Bernstein.¹⁰ Howe's exploration of *My Emily Dickinson*, for example, is an astonishingly inventive work of historical scholarship. The book's collage format permits her to deploy and then explore a series of nonlinear historical relations. Pivoting about a close reading of a single poem ("My Life had stood—a Loaded Gun"), the book slowly explores multiple intersections of public event and private life—intersections *in* the past as well as *between* the past and its possible futures.

When academics have tried to escape the limitations of traditional critical forms, response tends to be at best interested and wary, and at worst hostile or indifferent. In Renaissance studies one thinks immediately of Randall McLeod, perhaps the most innovative textual scholar of our time (in any period of work.)¹¹ In the romantic period I would instance the recent work of Jeffrey Robinson, or Donald Ault's struggles (they recall McLeod's work) to force the physical medium of the text to become a critical tool and form of expression.¹² In my own criticism, especially during the past five years, I have been exploring the resources of dialogue as a mode of scholarly investigation.¹³

One thinks as well of the important *New History of French Literature*, which has made a deliberate effort to surmount the limits of narrativized history by subordinating narrative form to an incipient dialectic licensed by the discontinuous chronicle organization of the materials.¹⁴ The *New History* does not seek a synthetic historical account of French Literature. On one hand the work underscores the limits of historical vision by emphasizing the extreme particularity of various accounts. On the other it tries to induce imaginations of new sets of historical relations between different and competing views of the material.

Implicit here is a general critical idea that has great power: to display

the constructed and non-natural status of historical information. Insofar as narrative history aspires to a finished account, its rhetoric tends to represent the past as completed—a complex set of “facts” that require thorough research and fair disclosure. The *New History* is an index of a contrary view: that history is a continuous process, and that the past itself is, like the future, a serious possibility. The *New History* subordinates narrative (closure) to dialectic (engagement).

Its general procedures, however, can sometimes be as well or perhaps even better pursued in other expository modes. Consider the critical possibilities of the anthology form. These first became apparent to me in Yeats’s great *Oxford Book of Modern Verse, 1892–1935* (1936). By opening his collection in 1892 with a (re)constructed text of Pater’s prose, Yeats announced the arbitrary and polemical character of his work. At that point I began to realize the virtues to be gained by “writing” literary history in the editorial structure of the anthology. Several years later, when I was asked to edit *The New Oxford Book of Verse of the Romantic Period*, I seized the opportunity. Concealed within this project was the chance to give a practical demonstration of certain theoretical ideas about history, on one hand, and literary form on the other.

An anthology of this kind necessarily constructs a literary history, but the historical synthesis is subordinated in the formalities of the collection. The anthology focuses one’s attention on local units of order—individual poems and groups of poems. As a consequence, these units tend to splinter the synthetic inertia of the work-as-a-whole into an interactive and dialogical scene. Possibilities of order appear at different scalar levels because the center of the work is not so much a totalized form as a dynamically emergent set of constructible hypotheses of historical relations. Built into the anthology form are what topological mathematicians might call “basins” of contradiction: orderly, expository, and linear arrangements that stand at a perpetual brink of Chaotic transformation.

As I began studying the anthology form more closely, I was struck by one of its dominant modern conventions. Since *Tottel’s Miscellany* (1557) literary anthologies—even when they are trying to display some more or less comprehensive historical order—tend to arrange themselves by author. Palgrave’s *Golden Treasury* (1861) might seem a great exception to this rule, but it isn’t. Although poems by different authors are scattered through each of the anthology’s four great books, Palgrave’s Introduction makes its author-centered form very clear. The four “Books” of the *Golden Treasury* locate the four great periods of

what Palgrave calls “the natural growth and evolution of our Poetry.” The periods roughly correspond to the sixteenth, seventeenth, eighteenth, and early nineteenth centuries. For Palgrave, however, each of these four evolutionary phases have unfolded under the sign of a single dominant author “who more or less give[s] each [phase] its distinctive character.”¹⁵ Consequently, Palgrave tells us that each of the four books of his anthology “might be called the Books of Shakespeare, Milton, Gray, and Wordsworth” respectively.

Yet even as Palgrave’s great anthology connects its romantic-evolutionary account of English literary history to certain epochal figures, it deploys two interesting and antithetical forms of order. First, the anthology is formatted into four abstractly arranged “Books.” Each book carries no heading other than “Book First,” “Book Second,” etc., without historical labels of any kind. Second, no effort is made within each book to foreground a local evolutionary cycle, or—for that matter—to isolate individual authors, not even the epochal authors. Each poem comes forward under a title and the author’s name is tagged at the end. Neither are an individual author’s works grouped into a subunit within the horizon of a particular “Book.” The poems are arranged, so far as one can tell, by random and personal choice—Palgrave says simply that he has avoided “a rigidly chronological sequence” in order to pursue what he calls “the wisdom which comes through pleasure.” That idiosyncratic remark underscores the anthology’s deep commitment to a principle of subjectivity: “Within each book,” Palgrave adds, “the pieces have . . . been arranged in gradations of feeling or subject.”

What most strikes one about Palgrave’s anthology, therefore, is not its rather (in)famous Arnoldian determination toward “the best original Lyrical pieces and Songs in our language.” Rather, it is the book’s complex structure. Palgrave puts into play several competing and even antithetical forms of order and attention. While the implicit conflict of these forms does not overthrow the book’s ultimately Hegelian organization, it allows the reader recurrent waylayings from Palgrave’s imperious instruction in his version of a “great tradition.” For Palgrave’s own project is built upon internal conflict and self-contradiction. On one hand he tells us that local randomness comes from a poetical desire towards “the wisdom that comes through pleasure.” On the other hand he associates the “poetical” experience with total form. “In the arrangement,” he says, “the most poetically-effective order has been attempted”—by which he means, explicitly, an evolutionary wholeness that he equates with and calls “the sense of Beauty.”

And it is hoped that the contents of this Anthology will thus be found to present a certain unity, "as episodes," in the noble language of Shelley, "to that great poem which all poets, like the co-operating thoughts of one great mind, have built up since the beginning of the world."

Rereading Palgrave made me understand that the differential order achieved (perhaps not altogether consciously) in his book might be deliberately essayed in my *New Oxford Book of Verse of the Romantic Period*. I have therefore made several important departures from the conventional format of a "New Oxford Book" anthology. The most significant departure involves the collection's general historical horizon. The historical scene is more atomized than it is cumulative or developmental: as it were, thirteen ways of looking at the romantic period (or, in this case, forty-seven ways). Not unlike the *New History of French Literature*, the anthology follows a simple chronicle organization, year by year from 1785 to 1832. Within each year the poems are also arranged by elementary chronological sequence.

As a consequence, different authors appear recurrently rather than as coherent authorial units. Wordsworth and his poetry, for example, continually reemerge in new and perhaps unexpected sets of relations. Narrativizing literary events, by contrast, tends to rationalize such historical intersections under the laws of an expository grammar. Similarly, by making individual poems the base units of a "literary history"—as it were the "words" of its "language"—the *New Oxford Book* anthology cuts across what Palgrave called the "certain unity" of literary history. Tracing a historical course by spots of poetical time (rather than by unfolding expository sequence) entails a necessary fall from the grace of one great Mind into the local world of the poem, where contradiction—the ceaseless dialectic of "opposite and discordant qualities"—holds paramount sway.

The anthology pursues this dialectic in one other important respect. It takes a consciously antithetical point of view on the materials to be included. At the outset of this essay I mentioned the sharp difference between Wellek's synthetic view of romanticism and various earlier views. The anthology reflects that differential in three principal ways. First, it includes a good deal of poetry—some of it, like Crabbe's, among the best writing of the period—that is not romantic. Second, it gives a prominent place to work that was famous in its time but that later fell from sight. Third, it represents two key transitional moments of the romantic period—the decades (roughly speaking) of the 1790s and the 1820s—more completely, and hence more problematically,

than is done in narrative literary histories or anthologies of the period.

Synthetic historians tends to view their worlds in great sweeps. The romantic period thus typically comes to us through a gradual “pre-romantic” evolution mapped by now familiar signs (for instance, Gray, Collins, Chatterton, Macpherson, and perhaps Cowper). Nor do I mean at all to disparage such a view. But it *is* only a way of seeing things. One gets a very different vision from a tighter focus. At least as important so far as 1790s writers were concerned, for example, was the immediate impact of Sir William Jones’s annotated translations of Persian poetry and the spectacular onset of the Della Cruscan movement. By foregrounding Jones’s work and the Della Cruscans the *New Oxford Book of Verse of the Romantic Period* invites some alternative imaginings of our historical evidence and understandings.

Because a sense of historicity is so closely connected to causal models, early or precursive materials have always occupied the attention of critics. So romanticism’s relation to the late eighteenth-century, if still inadequately treated, is a scene of deep scholarship compared with what we think about the 1820s. The anthology intervenes by printing a good deal of poetry that once occupied the center of cultural attention in the 1820s. These texts represent a small but serious effort toward a great need: the reconstruction of what was being written and read up to the passage of the first Reform Bill and the publication of Tennyson’s 1832 *Poems*.

Situating the romantic period and its literary works firmly within the latter perspective affords some startling views and insights. What do we think we see when we look at the 1820s and its cultural work in England? The years following the restoration of the thrones of Europe—a settlement orchestrated by England—have all but sunk from sight so far as English cultural consciousness is concerned. If remembered at all, they commonly define a dismal point of contrast with the earlier phases of triumphant romanticism. At best we track a series of wounded beasts—the failures or madneses of Darley, Beddoes, Clare. For the rest, critics simply shut the book of a romanticism that seemed to translate itself into a commercialized nightmare: the new craze for Gift Books and Annuals like *Friendship’s Offering*, *The Keepsake*, *Foreget-Me-Not*. Literary history averts its gaze from this spectacle—there is scarcely a better word for the scene—because culture cannot easily capitalize its values. It seems an elegant dumpheap of factitious and overpriced trash—poor imitations of the life of the great romantics.¹⁶

That aversion is a negative sign of a version of literary history—what Benjamin called the victor’s version. It is the version that wants to distinguish sharply between documents of civilization—High Romanticism, so called—and documents of barbarism—the gilded poetry and silver fork novels of the 20s and 30s. But suppose one were to read the literature of the 20s as a critical reflection on its romantic inheritance. Writers like Hemans, Clare, Landon, Beddoes, Stoddart—to name a few representative figures—might tell a story of the death of the beauty that romanticism created. Romantic nature is a cultural account of the biological order of things. The “meaning” it ascribes to this order is perpetual development and growth: in Wordsworth’s classic formulation, “something evermore about to be.” Such a vision translates “death” back into a phase or moment of a benevolent or splendid process of life.

The period of the 1820s presents a serious problem for (romantic) literary history just because it appears to violate, in historical fact, this deep cultural myth of romanticism. A romantic agony begins when things of beauty do not appear joys forever—when no “abundant recompense” appears to balance the costs of romantic commitments. Keats, Wordsworth’s immediate inheritor, reveals and undergoes that agony. Of course he does so completely against his will, as it were. He wants nothing more than the joys of beauty and the realms of gold. What he keeps discovering, however, are pale kings and beautiful, merciless ladies: death that is deathless, true, but terrible for that very reason—death that is hardly endurable, and ranged with a beauty that must die not in a benevolent order of nature but in the gorgeous palaces of art, as *Lamia* shows.

In “The Fall of Hyperion” Keats announces this death in speciously heroic tones: “deathwards progressing / To no death was that visage.” “Beyond that” shattered splendor with its pale vision of “the lily and the snow,” Keats says simply, “I must not think.” Beyond it lies the one story no romantic poet wants to tell: the story of the death of art and culture. But the poets of the 1820s followed Keats (and Byron) to explore this “latest dream” dreamt on the cold hillsides of romanticism. In Tennyson’s 1832 book of *Poems*—and perhaps most memorably in works like “The Lady of Shalott” and “The Palace of Art”—this romantic death appears to discover a new mode of expression, a form in which the death of art could itself be laid to rest. And at that point a corner had been turned. A Victorian corner.

I hope I shall not be misunderstood. *The Romantic Ideology* was read and criticized by some as a kind of debunking maneuver because of its antithetical readings of celebrated romantic passages and works.¹⁷ To the extent that such texts had been turned into idols of a romantic cave, it might have appeared that I was trying to write them off the cultural scene. But the move was strictly a dialectical one—ultimately, an effort at a historical reimagining of romanticism through an exposure of its concealed, sometimes even repressed, dialogical discourse. We do not debunk “Tintern Abbey” by sketching its sublimely egotistical projection of a sibling relationship; that relationship, cruel and benevolent at once, is one of the most powerful vehicles for the poem’s structure of feelings.

Traditional critics have executed similar “debunkings” of romanticism’s celebrated works—most famously, I suppose, of Byron’s “Fare Thee Well!” Nor is it entirely mistaken to argue, as Wordsworth and others would do, that Byron’s poem to his wife is maudlin doggerel. Byron’s poem is no less riven by contradictions than Wordsworth’s, only in Byron’s case the poem’s cruelty is being carried by a deliberate *mask* of benevolence. Its doggerel, so-called, is merely the clearest stylistic signal of the poem’s masquerade. Unlike Wordsworth, who pursues a style of sincerity and—in “Tintern Abbey”—comes (forward) to believe in his own benevolence toward his sister, Byron in “Fare Thee Well!” writes a rhetorical and quite *insincere* poem. The work is self-conscious and duplicitous just where Wordsworth’s poem is honest and unself-conscious. The ultimate (and untranscended) contradiction of Byron’s poem is that its own awareness of contradiction does not entail an intellectual or moral *Aufhebung*—either for Byron as poet or for his readers. Byron’s poem offers up to view—for those who have eyes to see and ears to hear—a vision of ultimate contradiction. The paradoxical result gives yet another turn to the screw of romantic contradiction: Byron’s Faustian discovery that truth is unredemptive. In Manfred’s famous lament: “The Tree of Knowledge is not that of Life.”¹⁸

* * * *

Anne Mack. Beauty as death, truth as insecure. You tell a bleak story.

Jay Rome. Perhaps it seems bleak because we so often take for truth what is actually romantic hypothesis: that poetry, or art, will fill the void left by the previous hypothesis of Enlightenment. Romanticism is the battery of tests that the movement applied to its own ideological positions. Tennyson appears the sign of a new epoch because of the way he responded to the famous challenge put to him by his friend Trench: “Tennyson, we cannot live in art.”

Anne Mack. Well, he responded—for example in “The Palace of Art”—by arguing that beauty and deep feeling could not substitute for faith—any more than reason and enlightenment could. The Victorians are obsessed with the question of faith, religious as well as secular. Aesthetically absorbed, lacking either “honest doubt” or religious commitment, the Soul presiding in the Palace of Art is weighed and found wanting. Nonetheless, Tennyson’s poem does not repudiate beauty and its palace:

Yet pull not down my palace towers, that are
So lightly, beautifully built.
Perchance I may return with others there
When I have purged my guilt.

(293–96)¹⁹

That final play on the word “guilt” tells it all. The problem lies not in beauty and splendor as such but in the Soul’s impurity. This poem stands exactly in the Keatsian tradition we glimpsed earlier—the line that passes into the “lightly, beautifully built” silver and gilded writing of the 1820s. If Tennyson turns a corner on romanticism, it is a backward turning, an effort to recover a purified and “purged” ideal.

Jay Rome. True, but that program of correction transforms romanticism into something entirely new. We see this change clearly, I think, at the end of “The Lady of Shalott” when Lancelot muses over the lady’s dead body. The poem is famous as an allegory of the death of romantic imagination. Paradoxically, however, nothing becomes this lady’s life like the leaving it. Hers is an active death (“Singing in her song she died”), a deliberate move to terminate her ineffectually angelic life. Never had her social agency been more powerful than at the moment her corpse was carried into the heart of Camelot. “Knight and burgher, lord and dame” are terrified that a glory has passed from the earth. For his part, Lancelot reads the scene more calmly.

He said, "She has a lovely face;
God in his mercy lend her grace,
The Lady of Shalott."

At their simplest—which is not their least important—level, the lines make an explicit plea for a grace beyond the reach of art. The prayer to God stands as an objective sign that this is a religious grace, something available through faith alone, not works. Also important is the logic (as it were) of Lancelot's thought. His prayer comes as if the lady's beauty were in need of God's mercy and grace. Her loveliness therefore suggests as well a kind of "fatal gift," the sign of something problematic lying at the heart of her poetical character.

Anne Mack. And yet Tennyson's poem is not savage or tense like equivalent texts in Keats and Byron, or mordantly devalued like the poetry of Landon or Stoddart.

Jay Rome. The flat tone is unmistakable Tennyson—the sign of poetry affecting an absence of anxiety. The general populace reads the lady's face with fear, but Lancelot, the text's point of departure, remains undisturbed. Tennyson has unburdened his poem of the romantic task of salvation. That task is returned to God. Beauty therefore emerges here as a device for clarifying vision. It makes no gestures toward an equivalent truth we might imagine it to symbolize. The poem is allegorical and decorative from the outset. As a result, the meaning of the poem, like the meaning of the lady's death, becomes, as it were, what you will. The poem is not imagined as a deep source from which we might draw life or faith. Romantic poems are organized in those ways, Tennyson's poem is different. Like the Lady of Shalott herself, it looks outward to its readers, without whom it cannot live or imagine living. It is, in short, a consciously social poem. It is Victorian.

The poem's ornamentality therefore marks its distance from a romantic mode of address, where sincerity and personal feeling are paramount. Flaunting its artifice, Tennyson's poetry wears mortality on its face. Such annunciations of beauty, as Keats and Byron predicted, retreat from imaginations of transcendence. Beauty appears the sign of what is mortal. Gendered female, as in the poetry of Landon, such beauty and artifice come as figures of deceit and betrayal. Tennyson studied Landon and her immediate precursors, Keats and Byron, in order to reimagine those dangerous fatalities of beauty. But Tennyson takes his poetry's decorative forms to an extreme, paradoxically, in order to lower the temperature of the verse. The lady of Shalott's face

is “lovely” and that is all. It has not launched a thousand ships or burnt the topless towers of Ilium. The citizens of Camelot are needlessly frightened. The poetry invites the reader to approach the poetry as Lancelot approaches the body of the lady: not struck with fear or wonder, but bearing a blessing that clarifies the situation by restoring its ethical and religious dimensions.

Anne Mack. To me that placid surface is little more than a seductive deception. After all, this is *Lancelot* commenting on her beauty. If the death of this lady does not forecast the destruction of Camelot, that ruin appears in the depthless eyes of her beholder. The word “grace,” in Lancelot’s young mouth, is a sexist—indeed, a necrophiliac—word. Lancelot ultimately blasphemes with the word since his usage translates it into a purely formal and decorative meaning.

You’re seduced by Lancelot and by Tennyson’s beguiling surfaces, and you’re even making us forget our real subject, the problem of periodization. When I cut through all this talk of Tennyson I find you arguing a position far removed from those dialogical modes of literary history you were celebrating a little while ago.

Jay Rome. Not so far removed. When I was talking about the poetry of the 1820s and the *New Oxford Book of Verse of the Romantic Period*, my thoughts inevitably went to Tennyson. His early work reflects and responds to the writing of the 20s. The last two poems in the *New Oxford Book* will be “The Lady of Shalott” and “The Palace of Art.”

Anne Mack. Exactly. You end the collection with an editorial move that constructs a mastering (and worse still, a secret) historical narrative about romanticism. So much for all that talk about a dialogical literary history.

Jay Rome. Where’s the secret? I’m talking about it now, and it’s explicitly present in the Introduction to the collection. It’s not a *secret* simply because it’s represented in a non-narrativized form. As I said before, we know how to read the grammar of anthologies.

Anne Mack. Alright, let’s call it an oblique rather than a secret history.

Jay Rome. Fine. Tell the truth but tell it slant.

Anne Mack. Secret, oblique, slant—whatever. It's a master narrative, isn't it? You begin and end your collection in a certain way, like Yeats in his *Oxford Book of Modern Verse*. Those beginnings and endings constrain the material to particular historical meanings. When you stop your collection with those two Tennyson poems, you want us to imagine the end of romanticism at that point, don't you? And you organize the anthology so that those two poems will come in with maximum effect in terms of the historical tale you're telling. "Obliquely," and so for maximum effect.

Jay Rome. Yes, that's true. But those two final poems have an authority of their own. They don't have to mean what I take them to mean. I might even change my mind about them. And didn't you just fling your different readings in my face a moment ago? Poems don't have to follow party lines.

Besides, you're discounting the formal inertia of the anthology, which is a collection of materials—in this case, evidence of what took place in the romantic period. The evidence is organized to construct an argument for a certain narrative. But it's not a narrative itself. It's more like a building, or a picture.

Anne Mack. And all sorts of evidence is left out.

Jay Rome. Of course, the book has its limits. What most attracts me to the anthology form—I speak from a literary historical point of view—is the *prima facie* character of those limits. "Heard melodies are sweet but those unheard / Are sweeter still." Isn't that always the case? An anthology is the very emblem of Derrida's "supplement of reading." It solicits revision, supplementation—it solicits your critique.

Anne Mack. The devil can quote scripture to his own purpose.

Jay Rome. Who's the devil here, me or you? At any rate, you're the one playing the devil's advocate. If I'm the devil, it's you who take my part. I like spirits of negation. They're really just angels in dark clothes, aren't they?

Anne Mack. You can't seriously want the negation or disproof of your own views.

Jay Rome. You're wrong, I really will settle for nothing less. Because I can't negate my views myself. I want to see the other side of my world. How did Tennyson put it:

To follow knowledge like a sinking star,
Beyond the utmost bounds of human thought.

(31–32)

The second voyage of Ulysses, that's what I want. But I can't go by myself. So can you take me there? Do you know a way?

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NOTES

¹ Rene Wellek, "The Concept of Romanticism in Literary Scholarship," in *Concepts of Criticism* (New Haven: Yale Univ. Press, 1963), 161 (originally printed in *Comparative Literature* 1 [1949]: 1–23, 147–72).

² For good surveys of these events see Jon Klancher, "English Romanticism and Cultural Production," in *The New Historicism*, ed. H. Aram Veeser (London: Routledge, 1989), 77–88; and Marjorie Levinson's two essays in *Rethinking Historicism*, "Introduction," and "Rethinking Historicism: Back to the Future" (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1989), 1–17, 18–63. For this essay I have adapted the title of Levinson's collection.

³ See, for example, M. H. Abrams, *Natural Supernaturalism* (New York: W. W. Norton, 1971); and Harold Bloom, *The Visionary Company* (Garden City: Doubleday, 1961).

⁴ Though the work of various recent critics might be instanced here, I cite particularly Peter W. Graham, *Don Juan and Regency England* (Charlottesville: Univ. Press of Virginia, 1990) and the recent work of Peter Manning (see the essays on Byron collected in his *Reading Romantics. Texts and Contexts* [New York: Oxford Univ. Press, 1990], especially "Don Juan and Byron's Imperceptiveness to the English Word," 115–44). Jerome Christensen has been writing superbly on Byron for several years, and his work is being gathered in the soon to be published *Lord Byron's Strength: Romantic Writing and Commercial Society* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins Univ. Press, 1992). Susan Wolfson's studies of Byron are also important and relevant to the present discussion: see "'Their She Condition': Cross-Dressing and the Politics of Gender in *Don Juan*," *ELH* 54 (1987): 595–617, and "'A Problem Few Dare Imitate': *Sardanapalus* and 'Effeminate Character,'" *ELH* 58 (1991): 867–902. Some of my own recent work on Byron has run along similar lines (for example, "'My Brain in Feminine': Byron and the Poetry of Deception," in *Byron: Augustan and Romantic*, ed. Andrew Rutherford [Basingstoke: Macmillan, 1990], 26–51; "Lord Byron's Twin Opposites of Truth," in *Towards a Literature Knowledge* [Chicago: Univ. of Chicago Press, 1989], 38–64; "Byron and 'The Truth in Masquerade,'" forthcoming in *Romantic Revisions*, ed. Tony Brinkley and Keith Hanley [Cambridge: Cambridge Univ. Press, 1992]). Two key points of departure for recent feminist work in romanticism are *Romanticism and Feminism*, ed. Anne K. Mellor (Bloomington: Indiana Univ. Press, 1988) and Marlon Ross, *The Contours of Masculine Desire* (New York: Oxford Univ. Press, 1989).

⁵ See my "The *Biographia Literaria* and the Contentions of English Romanticism," in *Coleridge's Biographia Literaria: Text and Meaning*, ed. Frederick Burwick (Columbus: Ohio State Univ. Press, 1989), 233–54.

⁶ The most recent of these studies is in *The Textual Condition* (Princeton: Princeton Univ. Press, 1991).

⁷ The first to suggest this critique was Marjorie Levinson, in a series of intense conversations and letter-exchanges shortly after the appearance of *The Romantic Ide-*

ology. Her critique of romantic studies continues, but her earliest lines of inquiry are set down in her essays in *Rethinking Historicism* (note 2). See also Clifford Siskin's *The Historicity of Romantic Discourse* (New York: Oxford Univ. Press, 1988). Most recent to argue along these lines is Frances Ferguson in her critical review "On the Numbers of Romanticisms," *ELH* 58 (1991): 477.

⁸ This is the demand made by (among others) Michael Fischer in his early critique of *The Romantic Ideology* in *Blake: An Illustrated Quarterly* 18 (1984–85): 152–55.

⁹ Michael Taussig's approach to anthropology, set forth in a series of essays during the 1980s, offers another discipline's model of what I have in mind. The essays have just been collected as *The Nervous System* (London: Routledge, 1992).

¹⁰ See Charles Bernstein's collection of essays *Content's Dream. Essays 1975–1984* (Los Angeles: Sun & Moon Press, 1984); and Susan Howe's *My Emily Dickinson* (Berkeley: North Atlantic Books, 1985).

¹¹ Two of Randall McLeod's published essays: "Unemending Shakespeare's Sonnet 111," *SEL* 21 (1981): 75–96; "Unediting Shak-speare," *Sub-Stance* 33/34 (1982): 26–55. Much of his most innovative work remains in typescript (such as "Information on Information"; "The bucke stoppeth here"; "Or Words to that dEffect").

¹² Jeffrey Robinson, *The Current of Romantic Passion* (Madison: Univ. of Wisconsin Press, 1991); Donald Ault, *Narrative Unbound: Re-visioning William Blake's The Four Zoas* (Barrytown: Station Hill Press, 1987).

¹³ A number of these have been published (often under transparent pseudonyms). The most recent (as well as most comprehensive) is "A Dialogue on Dialogue," published in the electronic journal *Postmodern Culture* 2.1 (September, 1991).

¹⁴ *New History of French Literature*, ed. Dennis Hollier (Cambridge: Harvard Univ. Press, 1989).

¹⁵ My edition here is *The Golden Treasury*, ed. Francis T. Palgrave, introd. William Tenney Brewster (New York: Macmillan, 1937).

¹⁶ One of the few recent critics to give any attention to the period is Virgil Nemoianu in his *The Taming of Romanticism: European Literature and the Age of Biedermeier* (Cambridge: Harvard Univ. Press, 1984).

¹⁷ See James M. Kee, "Narrative Time and Participating Consciousness: A Heideggerian Supplement to *The Romantic Ideology*," *Romanticism Past and Present* 9 (Summer 1985): 51–63.

¹⁸ For a detailed exegesis of the poem along these lines see my "What Difference do the Circumstances of Publication Make to the Interpretation of a Literary Work," in *Literary Pragmatics*, ed. Roger D. Sell (London: Routledge, 1991), 190–207.

¹⁹ All Tennyson citations are from *The Poems of Tennyson* (London: Longman, 1969).