



Facade of the Royal Pavilion at Brighton, remodeled by John Nash, architect, 1815–1821, to create a typical Romantic fantasy. Note the orientalizing details of lattice work, onion domes, and minarets. (Photo: Courtesy Ellen Stock)

CONFICTING INTERPRETATIONS OF ROMANTICISM

Recent criticism has developed various interpretations of Romanticism. The conflict among these interpretations suggests that contemporary culture is still coming to terms with its relation to the Romantics. These conflicts also, of course, reflect the differing suppositions and preoccupations of the current intellectual scene. To help clarify your own reading of Romanticism, you should have an overview of the major controversies and interpretations. Each distinctive trend in the current approaches to Romanticism poses a particular general question and then answers it in a unique way. In other words, the question critics choose to address has just as much impact as the way they choose to answer it.

The general questions that shape today's discussions of Romanticism can be roughly divided into three major controversies: (1) The first looks at the

theme of *mind and nature* in order to examine how the value the Romantics placed on imagination affected the composition of their poems. (2) The second transforms the first into a question about *poetic language*—simile, metaphor, personification, and so on—and seeks to determine whether the Romantics experienced writing as a reliable means or a difficult obstacle to realizing the values they sought. (3) The third focuses on the role of *writing in society* and evaluates the social commitments and political values of Romantic literature. The following discussions illustrate how each of these controversies triggers a debate between two main opposing positions. Looked at in this way, there are six basic interpretations of Romanticism.

A Poetics of Mind and Nature

Romanticism often has been identified by the importance of the natural world in its imagery and themes. In fact, changes in the attitude toward nature were taking place throughout society in the Romantic period. On the one hand, the growth of science and industry gave rise to ideas and practices of controlling, exploiting, or utilizing nature for ever newer human purposes. The Romantics, especially in England, were the first generation of writers to glimpse not only the possibilities contained in these developments but also the social disruptions they caused. On the other hand, the idea of an essentially aesthetic attitude toward nature—looking at a beautiful scene in the wild, traveling through the countryside for the sheer sake of seeing it, or climbing mountains just for the experience—was taking shape throughout the eighteenth century. Poetry and painting gradually became the practices that seemed the most crucial counterweight or complement of the first attitude toward nature and the most meaningful extension or realization of the second attitude. Modern criticism, which has highlighted the Romantic writers' intense fascination with their own relation to nature, poses the following question:

What is the relation between mind and nature in Romantic poetry?

The first interpretation argues that the Romantics discovered that the mind gained power over nature through its capacity to create imaginative forms like poems, metaphors, and myths. The imaginative creations of the mind are neither bound to nature in the sense of the physical world apprehended through the senses nor constrained by nature in the sense of the material laws that govern human actions and societies. According to this interpretation, the imagination reaches its highest achievement in those literary forms that represent some ultimate *overcoming* of the physical, social, or historical world.

Apocalyptic representations, romances, and salvation narratives are, according to this first school of thought, the most characteristically Romantic forms of writing. Some Romantic works represent a long-thwarted human desire being fulfilled through an apocalypse that brings human history to an end. Other poems borrow the pattern of medieval romances—in which a knight undertakes a dangerous quest in search of a sacred object—and rewrite it in the modern form of an individual's inward quest for some kind of self-realization. This interpretation also stresses how the salvation narrative of Christianity—the pattern of original innocence, the fall into sin and history, and the redemption from the natural cycle of life and death—is repeated in many



William Blake

Romantic works as a model for individual biography or even for the progress of the poet in his vocation. Consider, for example, the final stanza from “And Did Those Feet” (1804) by William Blake (1757–1827). Blake’s first stanzas picture his contemporary England a fallen realm of “dark Satanic Mills” where there are no traces of an original city of God, like Jerusalem. But then he asserts:

Bring me my Bow of burning gold:
Bring me my Arrows of desire:
Bring me my Spear: O clouds unfold!
Bring me my Chariot of fire!

I will not cease from Mental Fight,
Nor shall my Sword sleep in my hand:
Till we have built Jerusalem,
In Englands green & pleasant Land.

The first interpretation emphasizes that the struggle Blake wants to wage is a “*Mental Fight*,” perhaps indeed the struggle of mind and imagination, against the degradations of historical progress itself. He fights not with material weapons but with his “Arrows of desire,” so that ultimately he may well be picturing the powers of imagination as themselves the means for overcoming the fallen state of England. When he placed this poem within a longer work he



The Ruins of Tintern Abbey, after a drawing by J. M. W. Turner



William Wordsworth

followed the stanzas just quoted with a biblical passage: “Would to God that all the Lords people were Prophets” (Numbers 11:29).

Running counter to this whole line of thinking is a second interpretation which accepts that the Romantics were preoccupied with the interplay of mind and nature, but finds a different outcome. Scholars who fall into this category argue that the most important Romantic poems discover the *limits* to the power of the imagination. The poet experiences the overcoming of nature as a painful separation that ends up being repaired in a more tempered, balanced, or synthesized relation between the mind and nature. An exemplary moment for this interpretation is a passage from the poem commonly called “Tintern Abbey” and actually entitled “Lines Composed a Few Miles Above Tintern Abbey, on Revisiting the Banks of the Wye during a Tour, July 13, 1798.” William Wordsworth composed the poem, out loud and on the spot, during his return visit to a secluded landscape in Wales he had seen five years before. He describes how he cannot recover the “aching joys” he felt on that earlier visit, because now he has come

To look on nature, not as in the hour
Of thoughtless youth; but hearing oftentimes
The still, sad music of humanity.



Abbey Under the Oak Trees, by Caspar David Friedrich, 1810 (Courtesy Schloss Charlottenberg Collection, Berlin)

During the intervening years his memory (the mind’s power to call up what is no longer felt or seen)³ has compensated for his loss of the more intense, more immediate joys. And his imagination (the mind’s power to call up what has never been felt or seen) has given him a “sense sublime” and a “serene and blessed mood.” But Wordsworth does not use these powers of mind in order to abandon or supersede nature. Instead, he connects them with the actual, physical earth:

Therefore am I still

A lover of the meadows and the woods,
And mountains; and of all that we behold
From this green earth; of all the mighty world
Of eye, and ear,—both what they half create,
And what perceive; well pleased to recognize
In nature and the language of the sense,
The anchor of my purest thoughts, the nurse,
The guide, the guardian of my heart, and soul
Of all my moral being.

In sum, while the first school of thought values those poetic representations in which the mind transcends the limits of nature and reinvents within its

³In his Preface to the second edition of *Lyrical Ballads* (1800), Wordsworth rejected neoclassical assumptions about poetic genres. He proposed for poetry a new range of subject matter (“incidents and situations from common life”), a new level of diction (“a selection of language really used by men. . . the language of prose”), and a new explanation of its source. In a characteristically Romantic way, Wordsworth’s effort to understand the creative process reveals his personal psychology. Like “Tintern Abbey” itself, the Preface stresses the centrality of memory, defining poetry as “the spontaneous overflow of powerful feelings: it takes its origin from emotion recollected in tranquillity: the emotion is 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.”



Johann Gottfried von Herder

own inward experience longstanding myths of Western culture—Apocalypse, the Quest, Salvation—the second values those poetic balancing acts in which the poet pulls back from the edge of a tempting individual transcendence, whether symbolic or real, and reconciles mind and nature anew. What both interpretations share is their approach to Romantic literature from the angle of the imagination and their understanding of imagination as the mind's power to separate human experience from nature.

Poetic Language

The second controversy significantly modifies the terms of the debate, shifting the emphasis from philosophical speculations about the mind to the rhetorical analysis of language. The shift partially reflects the fact that current literary criticism generally considers language the basis of literature and therefore the most fruitful ground of literary analysis. However, the focus on language also has antecedents in the Romantic period itself. Important treatises on the origins of language were written by Jean-Jacques Rousseau and another thinker who heavily influenced Romanticism, Johann Gottfried von Herder (1744–1803). Both thought that the devices of poetic language, especially metaphor, were actually closer to the original forms of human speech than are the less colorful, more prosaic forms of everyday language. If language is the basis of poetry—and if indeed poetry is perhaps the basis of language—a new question can refocus the interpretation of Romanticism:

Does the language of Romantic poetry strive to describe and embody the natural world, or does it achieve its meanings by abandoning, overcoming, even destroying one's grasp “of all the mighty world / Of eye, and ear”?

The first school of thought dealing with this question looks at the wealth of Romantic nature poetry and sees the most sustained effort in Western literary history to render accurate representations of our perceptions and impressions of the natural world. Moreover, since the nature imagery also helps represent the feelings or experiences of the poet, the outer world and the inner world come together in the language of poetry, fusing the *description* of nature and the *expression* of the self. The precedent for this critical interpretation may be traced to the writings of one of the leading British Romantic poets and critics, Samuel Taylor Coleridge (1772–1834).



Samuel Taylor Coleridge

The last section of Percy Bysshe Shelley's (1792–1822) "Ode to the West Wind" (1820) shows the Romantic linking of the outer world through descriptions of the West Wind in autumn, and the inner world through the expression of the poet's desire to have his writings become a prophetic message understood by future generations:

Make me thy lyre, even as the forest is:
What if my leaves are falling like its own!
The tumult of thy mighty harmonies

Will take from both a deep, autumnal tone,
Sweet though in sadness. Be thou, Spirit fierce.
My spirit! Be thou me, impetuous one!

Drive my dead thoughts over the universe
Like withered leaves to quicken a new birth!
And, by the incantation of this verse,



Percy Bysshe Shelley, drawn from the portrait by George Clint

Scatter, as from an unextinguished hearth
Ashes and sparks, my words among mankind!
Be through my lips to unawakened Earth

The trumpet of a prophecy! O Wind,
If Winter comes, can Spring be far behind?

Throughout the poem, Shelley describes the autumn wind's power to blow leaves from the trees, to scatter seeds that will generate in the spring, to drive storm clouds in from the sea, and to resound through huge forests. These kinds of images make up the poem's descriptive language. As Coleridge suggested, nature imagery would become merely mechanical and arbitrary if it were used only to describe. In other words, the poem also needs to convey an inner experience that accompanies the precise observations of nature.

In the case of Shelley's poem, the inner experience to be expressed is his aspiration to create prophetic poetry. How, then, does he make the connection between the outward description of the West Wind and the expression of this aspiration? Coleridge thought such connections were made through the most basic of poetic processes, simile and metaphor. According to critics who follow Coleridge, then, when Shelley hears the West Wind blowing through the forests he initially perceives the trees as being the

strings of an instrument played by the force of the wind itself to create its awe-inspiring music: "Make me thy lyre, even as the forest is." That underlying metaphor (tree = musical instrument, sound of the wind = ferocious music) establishes the basis for the link between outward description (the West Wind) and inner experience (poetic aspiration to prophecy).

Coleridge considered these sorts of connections far more than poetic inventiveness. In his view, the metaphorical link connecting outer and inner, natural and human worlds was an *organic* connection. The climax of "Ode to the West Wind" conveys just such an identification between wind and self: "Be thou, Spirit fierce, / My Spirit! Be thou me, impetuous one!" The imaginative power of the poet does not simply *invent* but actually *discovers* the links between self and nature.



Lynos and Iphicles playing lyres, with a lyre on the wall between them, after the Greek vase by the Pistoxenos painter, c. 470 B.C., in the Schwerin Staatliche Museum

The opposing interpretation challenges all this evidence of the unifying power of language and the synthesis of outer and inner worlds. It begins, of course, with a different emphasis, a different angle of approach. This fourth interpretation does grant that there are many descriptive elements in Shelley's poem, and that the ultimate point of the poem is a call for the spiritual force of the poet's own creativity to push his work into the future. It offers, however, a very different account of both aspects.

Throughout "Ode to the West Wind," the language used to designate the West Wind does not seem to be the organic metaphor valued by Coleridge so much as its devalued opposite, *allegory* and *personification*. Shelley calls the West Wind the "breath of Autumn's being," an "enchanter" chasing ghostlike leaves, a chariot or charioteer carrying seeds "to their wintry bed," and the "Dirge of the dying year." Each

of these images does indeed vividly express something about the West Wind, but they are not descriptive. They are instead wildly different allegorical designations: the wind is breath, magician, charioteer, funeral song.

Moreover, this interpretation argues that the passage quoted above brings out the difference rather than the identity between outer and inner worlds. Reconsider, for example, the link made between the sounds of the wind ("The trumpet of a prophecy") and the sounds of the poet ("the incantation of this verse"), between the forest and the poet, and between the trees' leaves and the poet's pages ("my leaves"). The two sets of terms do not really mirror one another; Shelley is making a plea and expressing a wish. He *wants* his own creations, which are falling from him like dead leaves blown loose by his own impetuous spirit, to be carried into a future in order "Like withered leaves to quicken a new birth!" But he cannot know that they will. His voice reaches toward the future without the certainty that it will ever be heard. A refrain addressed to the West Wind throughout the poem is, "O hear!"

The poet's experience of writing has exposed him to a horrible uncertainty about the future fate of his own writings. No such uncertainty afflicts the West Wind. Unlike the poet's songs, the West Wind definitely will be followed by the spring winds and the regeneration of the natural cycle. When Shelley pleads with the West Wind, "Be thou me," he is begging for his works to regenerate the world in the distant future. And when he ends the poem by saying, "O Wind, / If Winter comes, can Spring be far behind?" the answer is obvious for the West Wind but completely unanswerable for himself. Therefore, the outer and inner worlds are discrepant, not identical. The language of poetry—through its allegories, personifications, and pleadings—has sharpened rather than overcome the discrepancy.

Writing in Society

The third controversy makes a decisive break with the first two. It tends to view the four other interpretations with suspicion, because all four adapt the view of literature which was promoted by the trend within Romanticism that became the most politically conservative and culturally traditionalist. Coleridge's conservatism, for example, developed under the pressure of the bitter fruits of the French Revolution and the protracted role of England as Europe's most counterrevolutionary power. He and Wordsworth eventually embraced the idea that the spiritual value of poetry depended on its remoteness from struggles for equality or justice. This position already had been prepared by an anti-revolutionary and anti-Enlightenment strand of Romanticism in Germany,



Friedrich Schlegel, drawn from his death mask

most forcefully articulated by Friedrich Schlegel (1772–1829). The whole stress in the first four interpretations on the relation of poetry to nature presupposes that an engagement with politics or society is secondary or tangential to the real meaning of Romantic writing. The third controversy, then, asks the contrary question:

How did the writers of the Romantic period respond, through the very forms and styles of their writing, to the social and political world in which they participated?

The first way of responding to this question, the fifth of the six interpretations discussed here, argues that it is just this presupposition that forms the basis of the "Romantic ideology." The task of interpretation, accordingly, is to examine how the works produced by Romantic writers embodied this ideology or how, alternatively, they may have struggled against the force it exerted within their literary and intellectual movement. The basis of the Romantic ideology lay in the idea that the poetic imagination, the completely inward power of the mind, could be the primary or ultimate source of human meanings and values.

This idea, advocates of the fifth interpretation claim, arose as a particular response that literary intellectuals made to the social changes and political upheaval of the era. When they lost the assurance

Kant had enjoyed that Enlightenment could spawn peaceful reform, and when they discovered that appeals to universal principles actually reach a socially variegated, potentially unruly public, many writers retreated to the view that their own poetic creations were a separate, indeed higher truth. They considered literature something whose value was assured by its very distance from public and political realities and its proximity to the inner world of feeling.

At the extreme, shown in the following passage from Schlegel's *Dialogue on Poetry* (1799–1800), Enlightenment is replaced by mystery, even as the goals of social justice (the universal brotherhood of the French Revolution's *Fraternité!*) are replaced by spiritual love:

. . . that is romantic which presents a sentimental theme in a fantastic form. . . . What then is sentimental? It is that which appeals to us, where feeling prevails, and to be sure not a sensual but a spiritual feeling. The source and soul of all these emotions is love, and the spirit of love must hover everywhere invisibly visible in romantic poetry. . . . Only the imagination can grasp the mystery of this love and present it as mystery; and this mysterious quality is the source of the fantastic in the form of all poetical representation.⁴

Coleridge's poem "Kubla Khan" (1798) is an important example of this tendency to view poetry on a par with inspired dreams. Consider, too, "La Belle Dame Sans Merci" (1820) by John Keats (1795–1821). This ballad tells of a wandering knight in a magical landscape; he follows the "Merciless Beautiful Lady" to a cave, where her spell gives him a yet more mysterious—and mournful—vision:

I saw pale kings, and princes too,
Pale warriors, death pale were they all;
They cried—"La belle dame sans merci
Hath thee in thrall!"

I saw their starv'd lips in the gloam
With horrid warning gaped wide,
And I awoke and found me here
On the cold hill's side.

The Romantic ideology, according to the fifth interpretation, turns the collective dreams of the age—the hopes originally spurred by new ideals of freedom and justice—into the private dreams of the fantastic.



John Keats

Critics who adhere to this idea point, for example, to the date of Wordsworth's "Tintern Abbey"—July 13, 1798—which was the eve of the ninth anniversary of the fall of the Bastille and beginning of the French Revolution. They further note that the ruins of Tintern Abbey were shelter to dozens of rural homeless at the time of Wordsworth's visit. The poem as a whole may be an attempt to transpose these slight traces of political awareness into a vision of nature, reducing this "still, sad music of humanity" to background music for viewing beautiful countryside.

The sixth and final interpretation does not consider the so-called Romantic ideology to be all-pervasive. Instead, its proponents argue that there were conflicts between reactionaries and revolutionaries, conservatives and liberals, throughout the Romantic era. The poems, novels, and treatises became an integral part of the "war of intellectuals" that was shaping the political values and cultural habits of societies undergoing rapid change. In the 1790s, both

⁴*Dialogue on Poetry and Literary Aphorisms*, trans. Ernst Behler and Roman Struck (University Park: Pennsylvania State University Press, 1986).



Lord Byron (George Gordon) in Albanian national dress

Wordsworth and Coleridge had deep sympathies with the French Revolution and generally supported ideas of liberal reform in England. Wordsworth's main intention in that period, as articulated in the Preface to *Lyrical Ballads* (see footnote 3), was to write poetry in the language and idiom of ordinary people, and to show that heightened feeling and expressiveness were not restricted to genteel, upper-class civility. As he and Coleridge became more conservative, the poetry became more remote and explored the philosophy of the self rather than ties with the people.

The second generation of British Romantics, including Lord Byron (1788–1824), Keats, and Shelley, reacted against the inwardness and mysteriousness of this conservative trend. According to the sixth interpretation, they therefore gave their poetry its

urbane and intellectual style and its classical themes as a way of reasserting Enlightenment values. Shelley's atheism, a point of public controversy during his career, signalled his political rejection of English conservatism. From this viewpoint, Keats' odes (written in 1819–1820)—“Ode to Psyche,” “Ode on a Grecian Urn,” “Ode to a Nightingale,” “Ode on Indolence,” “Ode on Melancholy,” and “To Autumn”—break through the self-centered focus of Romantic ideology and present intense feeling filtered through a sensibility educated in the Enlightened cultural tradition.

The sixth interpretation of Romanticism thus sees a kind of paradox in the development of British Romanticism. Keats and Shelley signal their more liberal, sometimes radical commitments to the people in a poetic style that is in fact more esoteric and removed from popular themes. Is this a bind of their own making or a condition of their times? That question is the one ultimately at stake in the controversy over writing in society. (By the same token, it is important not to equate the Romantic period only with poetry, whether esoteric or popular. Long neglected is the fact that novels of social reform, novels for a readership largely composed of women, and stories of life in the middle and upper-middle classes were really the mainstays of the reading public in this period.)

As your own understanding of Romanticism develops—as well as “the courage to use your *own* understanding”—you will likely test out various elements of all the interpretive approaches discussed above that have come to shape our contemporary readings of these authors. As readers, we all form our own views by making many efforts to come to grips with individual poems, autobiographies, and novels, going back-and-forth between the large controversies in which they participate and the close analysis of specific texts. Lyric poetry especially deserves—and rewards—that attentiveness of analysis along with detailed arguments for one’s own view. To guide you in those efforts, the following example provides a model to emulate in working out your own understanding of one of the most influential poems of the Romantic period, Keats’ “To Autumn.” Then, you will have the opportunity to consider a group of poems drawn from other cultures, with information about their original contexts to facilitate your response.