



ROMANTICISM

A Literary and Cultural History

Carmen Casaliggi and Porscha Fermanis

ROUTLEDGE


Romanticism

The Romantic period coincided with revolutionary transformations of traditional political and human rights discourses, as well as witnessing rapid advances in technology and a primitivist return to nature. As a broad global movement, Romanticism strongly impacted on the literature and arts of the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries in ways that are still being debated and negotiated today.

Examining the poetry, fiction, non-fiction, drama and the arts of the period, this book considers:

- important propositions and landmark ideas in the Romantic period;
- key debates and critical approaches to Romantic studies;
- new and revisionary approaches to Romantic literature and art;
- the ways in which Romantic writing interacts with broader trends in history, politics and aesthetics;
- European and global Romanticism;
- the legacies of Romanticism in the twentieth and twenty-first centuries.

Containing useful, reader-friendly features such as explanatory case studies, chapter summaries and suggestions for further reading, this clear and engaging book is an invaluable resource for anyone who intends to study and research the complexity and diversity of the Romantic period, as well as the historical conditions which produced it.

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Preface

Over the past thirty years, literary scholars have increasingly questioned the reiteration of familiar stories about our literary past, making the writing of literary history a more tentative – but perhaps more necessary – project than ever before. As David Perkins has pointed out in the opening pages of *Is Literary History Possible?* (1992), two of the three principal assumptions of traditional literary history – that works are formed by their historical contexts, that changes in literary forms and styles take place developmentally and that these changes are the products of an overarching idea – have gradually been eroded by less teleological ways of thinking about periodicity and by the inclusion of previously neglected and less easily accommodated writers in literary canons. In the context of Romantic studies this destabilisation of periods and canons has led to concerns about how to characterise the relationship between eighteenth-century, Romantic and Victorian writing, and ultimately to fears that the term ‘Romanticism’ itself may have become obscured and even meaningless.

Until recently these anxieties have been felt primarily at the level of academic scholarship, but they are now permeating classrooms and pedagogical discussions. Students of British Romanticism will no longer encounter just the ‘Big Six’ Romantic poets in their seminars and lectures, but will most likely be exposed to the work of female, working-class, transatlantic, Scottish, Irish and Welsh writers. This book is intended as a useful guide for undergraduate and postgraduate students navigating these difficult new waters, but it will also be of interest to scholars and teachers of Romanticism more generally. The Introduction to the book (‘Romanticism and its discontents’) offers an overview of debates surrounding the definition of Romanticism, as well as providing a survey of different critical approaches. Seven substantive chapters follow: 1) ‘Contexts of Romanticism’, 2) ‘Romantic forms, genres and language’, 3) ‘Romantic groups and associations’, 4) ‘National, regional and local Romanticism’, 5) ‘Romanticism in the arts’, 6) ‘European Romanticism’ and 7) ‘Global Romanticism’. The Conclusion (‘Legacies of Romanticism’) considers the ways in which Romanticism has influenced nineteenth-, twentieth- and twenty-first-century literary cultures. Each of these chapters can be read individually in its own right, but the book is designed to promote adaptive reading strategies by pointing out links and connections between a variety of ideas, events, themes, genres and concepts across chapters

and sections. At the same time, case studies, or close readings, of selected individual texts provide specific examples of the broader ideas and contexts raised in the book.

Some of the book's narratives will already be familiar to students and scholars of British Romanticism, others less so. It is traditional, for example, to find chapters on Romantic groups and on genres/forms in literary histories of Romanticism, but we are less used to seeing chapters on European Romanticism, Romanticism and the arts and global Romanticism. While these chapters contribute to the book's distinctive flavour, their primary purpose is to provide readers with a sense of the ways in which key Romantic paradigms have been tested and revised in recent years, in particular by new studies on the transnational, European-wide origins of the novel, inter-disciplinary studies on the Romantic arts and studies of native and non-Anglophone literary cultures within the British Empire and beyond. In other words, while the book's aim is to introduce readers to the principal ideas, concepts, texts, art works and events of the Romantic period – and to be as comprehensive and accessible as possible – it also aspires to provide its readers with the tools with which to question traditional understandings of Romanticism and even the arguments made in the book, which are themselves the product of particular critical positions and institutional biases.

Without indulging repeatedly in metaphysical musings on its own ontological construction, the book hopes to raise the kinds of questions that literary scholars have themselves been grappling with in the last thirty years. Is Romanticism best understood as a remedy, reaction to or extension of the Enlightenment? Does Romanticism involve a wholesale rejection of empiricism and mechanism? Did Romantic and neoclassical literary models coexist? Did the French Revolution really coincide with radical aesthetic changes? How does our understanding of the period alter when female, regional and working-class Romantic writers are allowed into the canon? Is there such a thing as a pan-European Romanticism? Is there still a Romanticism to be found when we extend the temporal, diachronic and spatial co-ordinates of Romanticism to include writers outside traditional periodisations (1789–1832) and geographical spaces (England and especially metropolitan London)?

The answers to these questions have changed and will continue to change over time. Nor are there always answers to the questions raised: in some cases – for example, in relation to whether Romanticism is best defined as a literary movement or historical phenomenon/period – there is no overwhelming critical consensus. The plurality of critical opinions raised in the book, and the intensity of debates surrounding changing understandings of Romanticism, is suggestive not only of the diversity of the period itself, but also of the exceptionally innovative work being done by colleagues in the field. That chapters with a European-wide coverage and with a focus on comparative, transnational and global methodologies should now make their way into a literary history of Romanticism is a testament to the strength of the revisionary body of scholarly work produced in recent years, work that has countered the long-standing dominance of nation-centric explanations of the rise and development of Romanticism

without subscribing to older notions of a coherent, holistic, pan-European and/or world literary movement. Such innovation shows no sign of abating and, as such, there will always need to be ‘yet another’ book on Romantic literary history.

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Note on texts

Unless otherwise stated, all references to primary texts are taken from the following editions and are cited parenthetically by line, volume or page number in the main text.

- Austen, Jane (2013) *The Cambridge Edition of the Works of Jane Austen*, gen. ed. Janet Todd, 9 vols, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Blake, William (2008) *The Complete Poetry and Prose of William Blake*, ed. David V. Erdman, Berkeley, CA and London: University of California Press.
- Clare, John (1978) *Selected Poems and Prose of John Clare*, eds. Eric Robinson and Geoffrey Summerfield, Oxford: Oxford University Press.
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- Wordsworth, William and Samuel Taylor Coleridge (2013) *Lyrical Ballads*, 2nd ed., ed. Michael Mason, London and New York: Routledge.

Note on translations

[Chapter 6](#) of this book makes extensive use of citations from prose and poetry in German, French, Italian and Spanish. Except for relatively short passages, all such citations are given in the main text in English. Translation is based on texts indicated in the Bibliography. Where such translations do not already exist, they are our own.

Romanticism timeline (1789–1837)

(The following is a timeline of traditional Romantic periodisation: from the outbreak of the French Revolution to the accession of Queen Victoria to the British throne.)

<i>Year</i>	<i>Historical background</i>	<i>Literature</i>	<i>Arts</i>
1789	Outbreak of the French Revolution; storming of the Bastille		
1790		Publication of Edmund Burke's <i>Reflections on the Revolution in France</i>	
1791	Slave rebellions in St. Domingue (1791–1804)		
1792	Proclamation of the French Republic	Publication of Mary Wollstonecraft's <i>A Vindication of the Rights of Woman</i> ; Birth of Percy Bysshe Shelley	Death of Sir Joshua Reynolds
1793			
1794		Publication of William Blake's <i>Songs of Innocence and of Experience</i> ; William Godwin's <i>Caleb Williams</i> ; Ann Radcliffe's <i>The Mysteries of Udolpho</i>	
1795		Birth of John Keats	
1796			
1797			
1798	United Irishmen rebellion in Ireland; Nelson's great victory in Aboukir Bay near the mouth of the Nile, securing the Mediterranean for the British and the East from conquest by Napoleon	Publication of William Wordsworth and Samuel Taylor Coleridge's <i>Lyrical Ballads with a few other Poems</i> ; First edition of Joanna Baillie's <i>Plays on the Passions</i>	

<i>Year</i>	<i>Historical background</i>	<i>Literature</i>	<i>Arts</i>
1800	Ireland enters into political union with Great Britain	Publication of the second edition of <i>Lyrical Ballads</i> , with Wordsworth's radical 'Preface'	Antoine-Jean Gros returns to Paris from Italy and is employed by Napoleon to record his military successes
1801			Jacques-Louis David paints <i>Napoleon Crossing the Alps</i> ; Jean-Auguste-Dominique Ingres wins the Prix de Rome
1802	Peace of Amiens between Great Britain and France	Publication of Wordsworth and Coleridge's <i>Lyrical Ballads</i> with expanded version of the 1800 'Preface'; Second edition of Joanna Baillie's <i>Plays on the Passions</i> ; Birth of Letitia Elizabeth Landon and Victor Hugo; William Hazlitt visits Paris	John Constable first exhibits at the Royal Academy; J. M. W. Turner makes first trip to the continent; Birth of Richard Parkes Bonington; Death of Thomas Girtin
1803	War between Britain and France resumes; Robert Emmet's uprising in Dublin; Emmet executed		
1804	Napoleon crowned Emperor of France; Pitt re-elected as British Prime Minister	Blake begins <i>Jerusalem</i> ; Death of William Gilpin, Joseph Priestley and Immanuel Kant	
1805	Nelson killed in the Battle of Trafalgar, where the French and Spanish fleets are destroyed	Publication of Walter Scott's <i>The Lay of the Last Minstrel</i> ; Robert Southey's <i>Madoc</i> ; Hazlitt's <i>An Essay on the Principles of Human Action</i> ; Godwin's <i>Fleetwood: Or, The New Man of Feeling</i>	David Wilkie moves to London; Foundation in London of the British Institution and Society of Painters in Water Colours
1806	Napoleon invades Prussia; British army defeats French army in Italy; Death of Pitt and Charles James Fox; Lord Grenville becomes Britain's Prime Minister	Publication of Sydney Owenson's <i>The Wild Irish Girl</i> ; Thomas Moore's <i>Epistles, Odes, and Other Poems</i> ; Lord Byron's <i>Fugitive Pieces</i> ; Scott's <i>Ballads and Lyrical Pieces</i> ; Death of Charlotte Smith	David Wilkie's work celebrated at the Royal Academy; Ingres travels to Rome

<i>Year</i>	<i>Historical background</i>	<i>Literature</i>	<i>Arts</i>
1807	France invades Spain and Portugal; Napoleon defeats Russia; Abolition of slave trade	Publication of Byron's <i>Hours of Idleness</i> ; Southey's <i>Letters from England</i> ; Wordsworth's <i>Poems in Two Volumes</i> ; Madame de Staël's <i>Corinne, or Italy</i>	David completes <i>The Coronation of Napoleon</i>
1808	Peninsular War begins; Joseph Bonaparte becomes King of Spain; Spanish American Wars of Independence (1808–33)	Publication of Scott's <i>Marmion</i> ; Moore's <i>Irish Melodies</i> ; Johann Wolfgang von Goethe's <i>Faust</i> ; <i>Examiner</i> founded	Ludwig van Beethoven completes <i>Fifth Symphony</i>
1809	Wellington commands British army in Portugal	Publication of Byron's <i>English Bards, and Scotch Reviewers</i> ; Tory <i>Quarterly Review</i> is founded; Death of Thomas Paine	Blake organises his own private exhibition in London
1810		Publication of Scott's <i>The Lady of the Lake</i> ; Baillie's <i>The Family Legend</i>	Francisco Goya begins <i>Disasters of War</i> ; Birth of Frédéric Chopin
1811	George, Prince of Wales, made Prince Regent; Luddite uprisings in Britain	Publication of Scott's <i>The Vision of Don Roderick</i> ; Jane Austen's <i>Sense and Sensibility</i> ; Percy Shelley expelled from Oxford	
1812	Wellington enters Madrid; Napoleon invades Russia; Lord Liverpool becomes Britain's Tory Prime Minister; Luddite reform bill in Britain; Spanish Constitution of Cádiz	Publication of Byron's <i>Childe Harold's Pilgrimage</i> (Cantos I and II)	William Bullock's Egyptian Hall opened in London; First exhibition of Théodore Géricault at the Paris Salon
1813	Wellington defeats French army and invades France; Napoleon defeated at Leipzig; Belfast riots	Publication of Austen's <i>Pride and Prejudice</i> ; Coleridge's <i>Remorse</i> ; Byron's <i>The Giaour</i> , <i>A Fragment of a Turkish Tale</i> and <i>The Bride of Abydos</i> ; Scott's <i>Rokeby</i> ; Shelley's <i>Queen Mab</i> ; Southey becomes Poet Laureate after Scott declines the honour; Leigh Hunt imprisoned	Opening of the Dulwich Picture Gallery, England's first public art gallery; Birth of Giuseppe Verdi and Richard Wagner

<i>Year</i>	<i>Historical background</i>	<i>Literature</i>	<i>Arts</i>
1814	Napoleon abdicates and is exiled to the island of Elba	Publication of Byron's <i>The Corsair</i> ; <i>Lara</i> and <i>The Ode to Napoleon</i> ; Scott's <i>Waverley</i> ; Wordsworth's <i>The Excursion</i> ; Austen's <i>Mansfield Park</i>	Wilkie, Robert Haydon and John Crome visit Paris
1815	'Hundred Days' of Napoleon; Britain defeats France at Battle of Waterloo; Napoleon exiled to St Helena; Corn Laws in Britain	Publication of Byron's <i>Hebrew Melodies</i> ; Scott's <i>Guy Mannering</i> and <i>The Field of Waterloo: A Poem</i> ; Wordsworth's <i>Poems</i> ; Byron marries Annabella Milbanke	Turner exhibits <i>Crossing the Brook</i> at the Royal Academy
1816	Spa Fields riots in London; Shipwreck of the Medusa	Publication of Austen's <i>Emma</i> ; Byron's <i>The Prisoner of Chillon</i> , <i>Childe Harold</i> (Canto III), <i>The Siege of Corinth</i> ; Coleridge's <i>Christabel and Other Poems</i> ; Scott's <i>The Antiquary</i> ; Hunt's <i>The Story of Rimini</i> ; Shelley's <i>Alastor; or, The Spirit of Solitude and Other Poems</i> ; Byron's final departure from England	Elgin Marbles exhibited at the British Museum; First British Institution competition for 'Grand Historical Painting'; David exiled to Brussels; Géricault travels to Italy; Rossini's <i>Otello</i>
1817		Publication of Byron's <i>Manfred</i> and <i>The Lament of Tasso</i> ; Scott's <i>Rob Roy</i> and <i>Harold the Dauntless</i> ; Keats's <i>Poems</i> ; Percy Shelley's <i>The Revolt of Islam</i> ; Mary and Percy Shelley's <i>History of a Six Weeks' Tour through a part of France, Switzerland, Germany, and Holland</i> ; <i>Blackwood's Edinburgh Magazine</i> is founded; Stendhal visits London; Death of Jane Austen	Narrative accounts of the <i>Medusa</i> shipwreck by Alexander Corréard and Henri Savigny published in Paris
1818		Publication of Mary Shelley's <i>Frankenstein, or, the Modern Prometheus</i> ; Austen's <i>Northanger Abbey</i> and <i>Persuasion</i> ; Byron's <i>Childe Harold</i> (Canto IV) and	Turner exhibits <i>Field of Waterloo</i> at the Royal Academy; English translation of Corréard and Savigny's accounts of the <i>Medusa</i>

Year	Historical background	Literature	Arts
		<i>Beppo</i> ; Hazlitt's <i>Lectures on the English Poets</i> ; Keats's <i>Endymion: A Poetic Romance</i> ; Scott's <i>The Heart of Midlothian</i> ; Percy Shelley's final departure from England; Keats attacked in <i>Blackwood's Edinburgh Magazine</i>	shipwreck published in London
1819	Peterloo Massacre in Manchester; Birth of Victoria, later Queen of England	Publication of Byron's <i>Don Juan</i> (Cantos I and II) and <i>Mazeppa</i> ; Scott's <i>Ivanhoe</i> and <i>The Bride of Lammermoor</i> ; Percy Shelley's <i>The Cenci: A Tragedy</i> and <i>Peter Bell the Third</i> ; Wordsworth's <i>Peter Bell: A Tale in Verse</i> ; John William Polidori's <i>The Vampyre</i> ; Birth of John Ruskin	Géricault exhibits <i>The Raft of the Medusa</i> at the Paris Salon; John Constable exhibits <i>The White Horse</i> ; Turner visits Italy
1820	Death of George III and accession of George IV	Publication of John Clare's <i>Poems Descriptive of Rural Life and Scenery</i> ; Keats's <i>Lamia, Isabella, The Eve of St. Agnes, and Other Poems</i> ; Maturin's <i>Melmoth the Wanderer</i> ; Percy Shelley's <i>Prometheus Unbound and Other Poems</i> ; Scott's <i>The Abbott</i> and <i>The Monastery</i> ; Scott is knighted	Death of Benjamin West, President of the Royal Academy (Thomas Lawrence succeeds); Géricault exhibits <i>The Raft of the Medusa</i> at Bullock's Egyptian Hall in London; Bonington meets Delacroix in the Louvre; Marshall's panoramas tour Scotland (and conclude in Dublin in 1821)
1821	Greek War of Independence begins; Death of Napoleon at St Helena; Famine in Ireland	Publication of Byron's <i>The Two Foscari</i> ; <i>Cain</i> ; <i>Sardanapalus</i> and <i>Don Juan</i> (Cantos III–V); Percy Shelley's <i>Adonais: An Elegy on the Death of John Keats</i> ; Southey's <i>A Vision of Judgement</i> ; Scott's <i>Kenilworth</i> ; Hazlitt's <i>Table-Talk</i> ; Death of John Keats in Rome; Death of John Polidori; Birth of Charles Baudelaire, Gustave Flaubert and Fyodor Dostoevsky	Géricault spends the year in London; Wilkie visits Paris

<i>Year</i>	<i>Historical background</i>	<i>Literature</i>	<i>Arts</i>
1822	Greece declares independence; Massacre of Chios by the Turks; Congress of Verona decides the partition of Europe; Robert Stewart – Viscount Castlereagh commits suicide	Publication of Scott's <i>The Fortunes of Nigel</i> and <i>Peveril of the Peak</i> ; Byron's <i>The Vision of Judgement</i> ; Shelley's <i>Hellas</i> ; Thomas De Quincey's <i>Confessions of an English Opium-Eater</i> ; Wordsworth's <i>Ecclesiastical Sketches</i> and <i>A Description of the Scenery of the Lakes in the North of England</i> ; Death of Shelley in Italy	Wilkie's <i>The Chelsea Pensioners Reading the Waterloo Dispatch</i> exhibited at the Royal Academy; Opening of the Paris diorama by Charles Bouton and Louis Daguerre; David visits London
1823	Byron sails to Greece to take part in the Revolution	Publication of Byron's <i>Don Juan</i> (Cantos VI–XIV); Scott's <i>Quentin Durward</i> ; Mary Shelley's <i>Valperga, or; the Life and Adventures of Castruccio, Prince of Lucca</i> ; Hazlitt's <i>Liber Amoris, or; The New Pygmalion</i> ; Charles Lamb's <i>Essays of Elia</i> ; Lamartine's <i>Nouvelles Méditations Poétiques</i> ; Death of Robert Bloomfield and Ann Radcliffe	Opening of the first British diorama in Regent's Park
1824	Charles X becomes King of France	Publication of Byron's <i>Don Juan</i> (Cantos XV–XVI); James Hogg's <i>The Private Memoirs and Confessions of a Justified Sinner</i> ; Scott's <i>Redgauntlet</i> and <i>St. Ronan's Well</i> ; Letitia Elizabeth Landon's <i>The Improvisatrice, and Other Poems</i> ; Athenaeum Club founded in London; Death of Lord Byron at Missolonghi and Charles Maturin	Society of British Artists formed; Foundation of the National Gallery in London; Delacroix's <i>Massacre at Chios</i> creates a sensation; Constable, Bonington and Anthony Vandyke awarded a gold medal at the British Salon in Paris; Death of Géricault and Girodet; Beethoven finishes <i>Ninth Symphony</i>
1825	The first steam-locomotive railway opens, from Stockton to Darlington	Publication of Hazlitt's <i>The Spirit of the Age</i> ; Coleridge's <i>Aids to Reflection</i> ; Scott's <i>The Betrothed</i> ; Felicia Hemans's <i>The Forest Sanctuary, and Other Poems</i> ; Death of Anna Letitia Barbauld and Henry Fuseli	Daguerre's diorama <i>Ruins of Holyrood Chapel</i> displayed in London; Bonington and Delacroix travel to London in the summer; Wilkie visits Paris; Death of David in Brussels

<i>Year</i>	<i>Historical background</i>	<i>Literature</i>	<i>Arts</i>
1826	Missolonghi falls to the Turks	Publication of Scott's <i>Woodstock</i> ; Mary Shelley's <i>The Last Man</i> ; Disraeli's <i>Vivian Grey</i> ; Alfred de Vigny's <i>Cinq-Mars</i>	Bonington exhibits for the first time in London at the British Institution; he shares a studio in London with Delacroix; Bonington and Delacroix visit Venice; Scott visits Paris and attends Rossini's adaptation of <i>Ivanhoe</i>
1827	George Canning becomes Prime Minister of Britain after resignation of Lord Liverpool; Independence of Greece declared by the Treaty of London	Publication of Scott's <i>The Life of Napoleon Buonaparte</i> and <i>Chronicles of the Canongate</i> ; Clare's <i>The Shepherd's Calendar</i> ; Landon's <i>The Golden Violet, With Its Tales of Romance and Chivalry, and Other Poems</i> ; Victor Hugo's 'Preface' to <i>Cromwell</i> ; Scott acknowledges authorship of the Waverley novels; Death of Blake	Constable exhibits <i>The Cornfield</i> at the Paris Salon; Delacroix shocks critics with his <i>Death of Sardanapalus</i> ; Paul Delaroche visits London; Death of Beethoven and George Canning (after less than four months in office)
1828	Wellington becomes Prime Minister of Britain	Publication of Hazlitt's first two volumes of <i>Life of Napoleon Buonaparte</i> ; Hemans's <i>Records of Woman with Other Poems</i> ; Death of Lady Caroline Lamb	Delacroix's first exhibition at the British Institution in London; Bonington's last exhibition in London and Paris; Hector Berlioz composes the <i>Waverley Overture</i> ; Death of Bonington, Goya and Franz Schubert
1829	Catholic Emancipation Act passed in Britain	Publication of Hugo's <i>Les Orientales</i>	Constable elected Royal Academician; Premieres of Rossini's <i>William Tell</i> and Donizetti's <i>Kenilworth</i>
1830	Death of George IV and accession of William IV; Earl Charles Grey becomes Prime Minister of Britain; July Revolution in France	Publication of Hemans's <i>Songs of the Affections, with other Poems</i> ; Volumes three and four of Hazlitt's <i>Life of Napoleon Buonaparte</i> ; Stendhal's <i>The Red and the Black</i> ; Death of Hazlitt	Hugo stages <i>Hernani</i> ; First performance of Berlioz's <i>Symphonie fantastique</i>

<i>Year</i>	<i>Historical background</i>	<i>Literature</i>	<i>Arts</i>
1831	Whigs introduce Reform Bill into Parliament, but it is defeated in House of Lords; National Union of the Working Classes founded in London with assistance of Robert Owen	Publication of Mary Shelley's revised edition of <i>Frankenstein</i>	Delacroix's exhibition of <i>Liberty Leading the People</i> ; Berlioz conducts <i>Rob Roy</i> ; Death of Hegel in Berlin
1832	Passing of the Great Reform Act; Britain proclaims sovereignty over the Falkland Islands	Publication of Shelley's <i>The Mask of Anarchy</i> ; Death of Scott and Goethe	Turner exhibits <i>Childe Harold's Pilgrimage</i> at the Royal Academy
1833	Abolition of slavery in the British Empire; Factory Act limits child labour in Britain	Death of Hannah More	
1834	The Tories, under Robert Peel, take office in Britain	Death of Coleridge	Delaroche exhibits <i>The Execution of Lady Jane Grey</i> at the Paris Salon
1835	Whigs in power in Britain under Melbourne; Press Law passed	Publication of De Musset's <i>Confession d'un enfant du siècle</i> ; Vigny's <i>Chatterton</i>	Gold medal awarded to John Martin for his exhibition of <i>The Deluge</i> at the Paris Salon; Premiere in Naples of Donizetti's <i>Lucia di Lammermoor</i> ; Gros commits suicide
1836	Founding of London Working Men's Association by William Lovett		
1837	Death of William IV and accession of Victoria		Death of Constable

Introduction

Romanticism and its discontents

Romanticism: an ambiguous question, like everything modern.

Friedrich Nietzsche, *The Will to Power* (1885–6)

Overview

This introductory chapter is concerned with the ways in which Romanticism has been defined and understood from the nineteenth century to the present day. The first part of the chapter explores the difficulties of defining Romanticism, examining the history of the term; the ways in which the period is marked by various (and competing) dates of political, social and cultural significance; the efficacy (or otherwise) of period markers such as ‘early’ or ‘pre-’ Romanticism; questions of canonicity and representativeness; and the usefulness of rubrics such as the ‘Age of Feeling’, the ‘Age of the Individual’, the ‘Age of the Lyric’ and the ‘Age of Nationalism’. This part of the chapter therefore primarily examines issues surrounding periodisation, including the various theories or hypotheses that have been used to explain the relationship between eighteenth-century and Romantic literature, such as ‘rupture’, ‘continuity’, ‘developmental’ and ‘emergence’ theses. The second part considers critical approaches to Romanticism such as deconstruction, New Historicism, cultural materialism, gender criticism and ecocriticism. As Jon Klancher has pointed out, disputes about what constitutes Romanticism are deeply entangled with its institutional and critical history (Klancher 1989: 77–88). This second part therefore also explores the ways in which our inherited notions of Romanticism (as discussed in the first part) have increasingly been undermined by revisionist approaches and methodologies.

Defining Romanticism

The history and meaning of the term

It is by now a commonplace to acknowledge that the designation ‘Romantic’ is anachronistic or, in other words, a term applied retrospectively to the literature of the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries. Although the word ‘Romantic’ did appear in writing of the period – William Wordsworth (1770–1850) uses it ten

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times in his poetry, Samuel Taylor Coleridge (1772–1834) five times, John Keats (1795–1821) four times, Percy Bysshe Shelley (1792–1822) three times and Lord Byron (1788–1824) fifteen times (Whalley 1972: 164, 178, 194–5) – it was never applied to a school of British writing or a group of British writers, and ‘none of the English poets of the time . . . recognized himself as a romanticist’ (Wellek 1955: 110–11). Some critics have even maintained that early nineteenth-century writers either disavowed or deliberately avoided the word ‘Romantic’ (Isbell 2004: 37–57; Whalley 1972: 159), which has, in turn, led to claims that its continued use has obfuscated, rather than clarified, the nature of literary writing in the period. Marilyn Butler, for example, has argued that ‘[g]oing out to look for “romanticism” means selecting in advance one kind of answer’ and that the term itself is ‘historically unsound’ (Butler 1988: 37; 1981: 186–7). At the same time, few critics go so far as to suggest that Romanticism is solely an arbitrary ‘convention/necessary fiction’ or that we should abandon it altogether (Pittock 2008: 3). As John Reider has rightly pointed out, the status of the term continues to ‘hover[s] uneasily between its critical usefulness and its obfuscation of historical complexity’ even as we persist in using it (Reider 1997: 145).

Raymond Williams’s definition of ‘Romantic’ in *Keywords* (1976) is a useful place to start when considering the term’s history. Williams points out that the origins of the word ‘romantic’ lie in the verse and prose quest romances of the medieval and early modern periods (Williams 1976: 230), a link seized on by critics such as Harold Bloom, who describes Romanticism as an ‘internalization’ of these older forms of ‘quest-romance’ (Bloom 1970: 3–24). As early as 1650 in Britain, the word ‘romantick’ was applied to the adventurous, fantastic, absurd or unrealistic (Eichner 1972: 5), but by the early to mid eighteenth century it was used in a more positive sense to refer to striking, dark, remote or mysterious landscapes (Immerwahr 1972: 24). By the 1760s, ‘romantic’ had an established usage in art criticism on painters such as Salvator Rosa (1615–73) and Claude Lorrain (1600–82) (see [Chapter 5](#)), and in writing on the picturesque by William Gilpin (1724–1804), Uvedale Price (1747–1829) and others (see [Chapter 2](#)). Towards the end of the eighteenth century, the word was increasingly used to refer to emerging sentimental and Gothic genres (Whalley 1972: 242) or what Wordsworth described, in more negative terms, in the 1802 ‘Preface’ to *Lyrical Ballads* (1798) as ‘frantic novels, sickly and stupid German tragedies, and deluges of idle and extravagant stories in verse’ (65).

In seventeenth- and eighteenth-century France, on the other hand, a distinction was made between *Romanesque* (a derogatory term) and *Romantique* (tender, sentimental or gentle) (Eichner 1972: 5). In Germany the term *Romanisch* or *Romantische* was used in a negative sense in the seventeenth century, but by the mid eighteenth century it too had come to mean tender, gentle or melancholy. Drawing on Thomas Warton’s (1728–90) juxtaposition of ‘classical’ and ‘romantic’ in his *Observations on the Faerie Queene* (1754), Friedrich Schlegel (1772–1829) defined *Romantische* literature very widely in his 1798 *Athenaeum* fragment as ‘literature depicting emotional matter in an imaginative form’ (cited in Grange 2011: 32). Other German philosophers and aestheticians such as

Friedrich Schiller (1759–1805) and Wilhelm Schlegel (1767–1845) used *Romantische* in a slightly more technical sense to refer to ‘modern’ rather than ‘classical’ literature (see [Chapter 6](#)), but, arguably, the impact of these debates in Britain was limited (Isbell 2004: 44).

Throughout the eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries the terms ‘Romantic’, ‘Romantique’ and ‘Romantische’ were therefore vague and diffuse labels. Even in the mid to late nineteenth century, writers and critics did not often or habitually use the term ‘Romantic’ to refer to the literary productions of their predecessors. Mrs Oliphant’s (1828–97) 1882 *Literary History of England*, for instance, avoids the term altogether. Victorian critics were nonetheless highly influential on the way in which the field of Romantic studies developed; and an interest in Romantic forms and styles did not simply fade away as the nineteenth century progressed (Cronin 2002). Although he never used the words ‘Romantic’ or ‘Romanticism’, Matthew Arnold (1822–88), for example, tended to de-politicise the work of Wordsworth, Byron, Keats and Shelley, representing it as an escape from the history and politics of its time. Establishing what subsequently became known as a Romantic ‘cult of sensitivity’, he famously referred to Shelley as ‘a beautiful and ineffectual angel beating in the void his luminous wings in vain’ (cited in Culler 1961: 380), an idea of the Romantic poets that was later invoked by the New Critical academy of T. E. Hulme, F. R. Leavis and T. S. Eliot, who dismissed Romanticism as escapist and even fantasist when arguing for the deep division between Romantic and classical styles. The German philosopher Friedrich Nietzsche also saw Romanticism as an escape from conflict through dreams, visions and other forms of self-deception. As the epigraph to this chapter suggests, Nietzsche’s attitude towards Romanticism was deeply ambivalent, attributing to the new movement a hunger or desire for change combined with a decadent philosophical pessimism that devalued the present in favour of the past and future (Nietzsche 1968: 445–6).

The application of the word ‘Romantic’ to a literary movement began in the late nineteenth century when the French literary historian Hyppolite Taine (1828–93) applied the term *Romantique* first to a group of late-eighteenth- and early-nineteenth-century French writers, and then later to a ‘school’ of English writers of the same period in his *History of English Literature* (1862–7, trans. 1871–2). But while the idea of a ‘Romantic school’ was established by the end of the nineteenth century, the concept of literary Romanticism as a distinct academic field is primarily a twentieth-century phenomenon. Early studies by Irving Babbitt (1919) and Carl Schmitt (1919) tended to consider Romantic writing in a wider European setting (see [Chapter 6](#)). This kind of comparativism was largely a product of European politics following World War I (Klancher 1989: 78), but it also meant that the differences between various nations, countries and regions could be elided. It was partly for this reason that, as early as 1924, Arthur O. Lovejoy argued for the ‘discrimination’ of Romanticisms on the basis that the term Romanticism had ‘come to mean so many things that, by itself, it means nothing’ (Lovejoy 1924: 232). Lovejoy’s key points were that diversity was the leading characteristic or principle of Romanticism and occurred even within national contexts; and that the term itself was a problem rather than a solution to the questions of national

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particularity and specificity that were only just being identified and debated by literary critics.

The period following Lovejoy's essay was both a period of discrimination, as national Romanticisms were given separate critical histories and institutional identities, *and* a period of consolidation, as a number of critics attempted to demonstrate that the designation 'Romantic' was not just a convenient fiction. In a direct response to Lovejoy, René Wellek, for example, described a holistic pan-European Romanticism as:

part of a great endeavor to overcome the split between subject and object, the self and the world, the conscious and the unconscious. This is the central creed of the great Romantic poets in England, Germany and France. It is a closely coherent body of thought and feeling

(Wellek 1963: 220)

Between 1945 and 1970 similarly recuperative attempts to define Romanticism as a cohesive aesthetic or cultural movement by critics such as Walter Jackson Bate, M. H. Abrams, Earl Wasserman, Northrop Frye, Carl Woodring, Geoffrey Hartman and Harold Bloom were less pan-European in their orientation but also tended to portray Romantic writers as 'triumphantly internalizing their traumatic encounter with history and politics' (Klancher 1989: 79).

Many of the orthodoxies or the most enduring ideas and popular perceptions of Romanticism emerged from the work of these critics in the post-war period: for example, the idea of Romantic poetry as an expression of emotion or feeling; the idea of the lyric poem as the movement's representative form of expression; the idea of the creative and solitary Romantic genius; and the idea that the imaginative faculty allowed the poet to transcend the material world. In formulating this 'interiority' model of Romanticism very little attention was paid to Romantic-era dramas, novels and narrative poems, or to female, working-class, Irish, Scottish and Welsh writers. Nor were the historical, material and intellectual contexts in which Romantic writers lived and worked a primary site of investigation. As Ian Duncan has put it, Romanticism was for many years solidified in the university system as 'an ideologically potent account of lyric poetry . . . which escaped or resisted the collected pressures of society and history' (Duncan 2004: 5).

The most serious challenge to this understanding of Romanticism came in the 1980s in the form of works such as Marilyn Butler's *Romantics, Rebels and Reactionaries* (1981) and Jerome McGann's *The Romantic Ideology* (1983). McGann pointed out that both Romantic writing and its scholarship were 'dominated . . . by an uncritical absorption in Romanticism's own self-representations' (McGann 1983: 137), accusing Abrams, Wellek and others of perpetuating the myths about genius, originality and isolationism that Romantic writers told about themselves (see also Siskin 1988). McGann also pointed to the tension between two central approaches to Romanticism, the first of which sees it as an aesthetic movement, and the second as a historical phenomenon or distinct historical period. As he later noted, the distinction between 'Romanticism' and the 'Romantic period' is

‘important not merely because so much of the work of [the] period is not “romantic”, but even more, perhaps, because the period is noted for its many ideological struggles . . . [and] sharp cultural conflict; some of the fiercest engagements were internecine – the civil wars of the romantic movement itself’ (McGann 2002: 236–7).

In similarly rejecting ‘Romanti-centric’ criticism, Butler went further than McGann in her attempt to define the historical specificity of the Romantic period, arguing that Romanticism was deeply entangled with the emergence of a culture of modernity: ‘Romanticism is inchoate because it is not a single intellectual movement but a complex of responses to certain conditions which Western society has experienced and continues to experience since the middle of the eighteenth century’ (Butler 1981: 184; see also 178–87). Like McGann, Butler sees the period as one characterised by ideological struggles, but she grounds the varied and conflicted responses to those struggles more fully in the historical conditions in which Romantic writers lived and wrote. If some critics see this ‘common historical ground’ definition of Romanticism as problematically ‘neutral’, ‘colourless’ and ‘odourless’, in that it attempts to encompass virtually all literary activity produced in Britain (and beyond) from the American Revolution to the First Reform Bill of 1832 (Reider 1997: 146, 147), it is nonetheless one to which numerous other critics have subscribed in various guises. Anne Janowitz, for example, has argued that Romanticism is a response (progressive or otherwise) to the emergence of capitalist modernity in that it is ‘the literary form of a struggle taking place on many levels of society between the claims of *individualism* and the claims of *communitarianism*’ (Janowitz 1998: 13; see also Chandler 1998; Makdisi 1998; Siskin 1988).

The continued unease about whether or not Romanticism exists as a cohesive movement may point, as Mark Parker has noted, to a desire among Romantic scholars for less prescribed period boundaries and definitions: ‘Perhaps we have come to a place where an ironic counterhistory of Romanticism, one less intent on closure, one more alive to the accidents and contingencies of descent, is at once possible and necessary’ (Parker 1991: 247). But while literary criticism has moved away from the essentialism of Wellek’s position, it has arguably not ‘fully addressed the difficulties of defining periodicity when the literary movement it is supposed to capture has lost the definition which made it worth capturing’ in the first place (Pittock 2008: 3). Murray Pittock, for one, is unsettled not only by the pervasiveness of old, ahistorical ideas about Romantic transcendence, but also by durability of the term Romanticism, which he sees as ‘the doughtiest survivor, the “last of the race” if you like, of the use of historical eras as a stalking-horse for aesthetic assumptions in literary history’ (Pittock 2008: 2). Pittock is right in suggesting that the traditional view of the Romantic period is still very powerful in institutional settings, but an increasing number of scholars are removing the capital from the term ‘romantic’ or avoiding the ‘R-word’ altogether (Galperin and Wolfson 1997: n.p.). Others have even suggested that Romanticism might be better understood as an isolated or ‘relative phenomenon’ within a broader picture of the period’s literary productions (Wolfson cited in Cox 1996: 8).

Periodising hypotheses

Despite continued debates about the definition and meanings of Romanticism, literary historians have consistently agreed that ‘something’ changed between 1700 and 1800. Even those scholars who argue against ‘rupture’ narratives (or the idea that 1789 marks a turning point in British literary culture) accept that what began as neoclassical or Augustan somehow ended as ‘Romantic’. Yet neither eighteenth-century nor Romantic scholars are in agreement about the nature of this change. The idea that 1789 and the French Revolution marks a rupture in literary and aesthetic styles was first introduced by Romantic writers themselves, and has been reinforced by the work of influential critics such as Abrams and Bloom. Continuity and emergence theses, on the other hand, see the birth of Romanticism as emerging either from a crisis within eighteenth-century thinking or from the gradual evolution of shared ideas and aesthetic styles. These kinds of theses not only argue against Romantic exceptionalism in favour of continuous changes over the ‘long eighteenth century’, but also highlight the ways in which Romantic and neoclassical styles could coexist.

Despite Marilyn Butler’s contention that a revival of neoclassical writing began with Byron’s *Childe Harold* (1812–18) and marked the writing of the second generation of Romantic poets (Butler 1981: 180–1), modern critics have often argued that around the 1790s writers rejected neoclassical (and, in particular, French) models of literature in favour of a new and uniquely English or British model that carried with it an appreciation of older, Gothic tastes. In ‘Sleep and Poetry’ (1816), for example, Keats refers to the schism caused by John Dryden (1631–1700) and Alexander Pope (1688–1744) – ‘with a puling infant’s force/ They sway’d about upon a rocking horse,/ And thought it Pegasus. Ah dismal soul’d!’ (ll. 185–8) – before considering the partial recovery of poetry in his own age: ‘yet in truth we’ve had/ Strange thunders from the potency of song;/ Mingled indeed with what is sweet and strong./ From majesty’ (ll. 230–3). April London has rightly described these kinds of narratives, championed by Francis Jeffrey (1773–1850), Leigh Hunt (1784–1859) and William Hazlitt (1778–1830), among others, as part of a gradual standardisation of literary history after 1800s, in which ‘the defense of a uniquely British “national mind”’ was ‘vested in a canonic “national literature”’ (London 2006: 111), but such narratives (and their modern counterparts) arguably underestimate the continued appreciation and adoption of neoclassical models after the 1790s.

A second rupture argument emerged from Abrams’s view that the 1790s in Britain saw a shift from neoclassical ‘mimesis’ to Romantic ‘expressionism’. Wordsworth’s ‘Preface’ to *Lyrical Ballads* is seen as a key text in explaining this change from the ‘mirror’ to the ‘lamp’ as a model for literary creation and production (Abrams 1971a) (see [Chapter 2](#)). In the ‘Preface’ Wordsworth famously describes poetry as ‘the spontaneous overflow of powerful feelings’ and argues that the primary aim of his poetry is to ‘follow the fluxes and refluxes of the mind when agitated by the great and simple affections of our nature’ (62, 63). Butler has not only argued against the representative status accorded to *Lyrical Ballads* (Butler 1981: 57, 58; see also Moore 2011: 253) – its publication is sometimes seen as a ‘manifesto’ or period