

Karsten Runge

English Romantic Poets and their Reading Audiences

Thesis (M.A.)

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Bibliographic information published by the German National Library:

The German National Library lists this publication in the National Bibliography; detailed bibliographic data are available on the Internet at <http://dnb.dnb.de> .

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Imprint:

Copyright © 2002 GRIN Verlag
ISBN: 9783638194808

This book at GRIN:

<https://www.grin.com/document/13961>

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English Romantic poets and their reading audiences

**Schriftliche Hausarbeit
für die Magisterprüfung der Fakultät für Philologie
an der Ruhr-Universität Bochum
(Magisterprüfungsordnung vom 20. April 1993)**

**vorgelegt von
Runge, Karsten**

02.12.2002

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List of Abbreviations

Full entries are given in the bibliography. Citations of works comprising more than one volume are rendered with [volume, page], e.g. LJK II, 123.

| | |
|------|---|
| BL | Samuel Taylor Coleridge, <i>Biographia Literaria</i> |
| BLJ | <i>Byron's Letters and Journals</i> |
| BPW | <i>Byron's Poetical Works</i> |
| CCS | Samuel Taylor Coleridge, <i>On the Constitution of the Church and State</i> |
| CPWS | <i>The Complete Poetical Works of Percy Bysshe Shelley</i> |
| ECT | Enright and de Chickera (eds.), <i>English Critical Texts</i> |
| EY | <i>The Letters of William and Dorothy Wordsworth: The Early Years</i> |
| KC | <i>Letters and Papers of the Keats Circle</i> |
| LJK | <i>The Letters of John Keats</i> |
| LPBS | <i>The Letters of Percy Bysshe Shelley</i> |
| MY | <i>The Letters of William and Dorothy Wordsworth: The Middle Years</i> |
| PWW | <i>The Prose Works of William Wordsworth</i> |
| RCE | Bromwich (ed.), <i>Romantic Critical Essays</i> |

I. Introduction

The late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries were a time of accelerating cultural, social, economic, and political change. The outbreak of the French Revolution in 1789 and the passing of the first Reform Bill in 1832 are the political cornerstones of an age that saw the promotion of human rights and civil liberties against established systems of absolutist governments and limited possibilities of political participation. Democratic ideas that form the constitutional basis of modern Western societies were developed and circulated in a highly-charged political and cultural climate, represented, defended and contested in a bourgeois public sphere that had only come into being as a space of rational contestation in England in the century between the Glorious Revolution and the French Revolution.¹

In philosophy, perhaps the most far-reaching development in the eighteenth century was the exploration of the individual psyche. John Locke's empiricist epistemology was based on the idea that the mind of the infant is like a *tabula rasa* and that there are no innate ideas or moral principles. Instead, Locke argued, the individual's knowledge springs from his or her own sensory perceptions. This epistemology carried with it a serious social problem: in effect perceivers were deprived of shared views and, isolated in their own perceptions, were cut off from the environment that had produced their knowledge. "Equally isolated from objects and from others, Lockian perceivers can be certain of only their individual mental processes. [...] Certainty, knowledge, and truth become, at best, relational."²

The problem of the individual's position in and relation to a society that was already perceptibly fragmenting as a result of economic

¹ Cf. Jürgen Habermas, *Strukturwandel der Öffentlichkeit: Untersuchungen zu einer Kategorie der bürgerlichen Gesellschaft* (Neuwied: Luchterhand, 1962).

² Regina Hewitt, *Wordsworth and the Empirical Dilemma* (New York et al.: Peter Lang, 1990), 5f.

developments and increased social mobility was debated by philosophers throughout the eighteenth century. David Berkeley, the Earl of Shaftesbury, and Adam Smith all in their own ways tried to find a solution to the empirical dilemma they had inherited from Locke and sought to relocate the individual in a social context.³

This empirical dilemma turned into a professional one for the Romantic poets as the growth of the reading public and the emergence of the literary marketplace left writers and readers with the task to redefine their own positions as well as their relations toward each other. In the course of these redefinitions “literature” lost its broader public significance, and by the 1820s the terms “public” and “literary” had come to be regarded as an open contradiction.⁴ The commodification of poetry and other forms of writing in the nascent literary marketplace produced what J.W. Saunders has termed the “Romantic dilemma”:

One insistent claim made by the Romantics was that writers, especially poets, had a special vision of truth which ought not to be socially corrupted or circumscribed: they should be free to write as their inspiration took them; it was enough for society to protect their special gifts and profit from their prophecies and insight. The Romantic dilemma, as far as the literary profession was concerned, was how to adapt the social context of literature to make room for this new claim. The dilemma became sharper when the reading public demanded an immediate and practical use for writers’ dreams and visions, not as a means to truth and an understanding of life, but as a kind of anodyne, a means of escape from life. Wide schisms were to open between what the public expected of literature and what the writers wanted to do: after an age of balance, an age of most extraordinary unbalance, producing in extreme instances literary schizophrenia.⁵

It is this dilemma I want to explore in the present study. At exactly that point in history where Romantic writers had the potential to reach wider audiences than ever before with their insights, how did they make sense of this potential power, and how did it materialize in the literary marketplace? How did the Romantics explain their successes or failures in

³ *Ibid.*, 7-32.

⁴ Jon P. Klancher, “Prose,” in *An Oxford Companion to the Romantic Age: British Culture 1776-1832*, ed. Iain McCalman (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999), 286.

⁵ J.W. Saunders, *The Profession of English Letters* (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul; Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1964), 158f.

the marketplace, and which concepts of reading did they develop as a consequence?

There is a perception of Romanticism as a self-centred monologue of aesthetic brilliance but limited social relevance that is still common due to the fact that much scholarship of the twentieth century has treated Romanticism on its own terms, a critical orientation that Jerome J. McGann has identified as the “Romantic Ideology,” “an uncritical absorption in Romanticism’s own self-representations.”⁶ An important tenet of this ideology is the figuration of the Romantic poet as a Shelleyan “nightingale,” devoid of any contact with reading audiences, and free from social obligations. Even in such influential studies as M.H. Abrams’s *The Mirror and the Lamp* (1953), Romantic critical theory is treated on a broad philosophical and aesthetic basis, while socio-historical approaches do not enter the picture. It is one of the aims of the present study to restore the socio-historical context to Romantic conceptions of poetry, the poet, and his audiences, and show that Romantic engagements with readers and audiences were more complex and conflicted than an intrinsic approach to critical theory is likely to suggest.

Consequently, I have tried to avoid a methodological restriction that would fall short of any accurate depiction of developments, events and the reactions they provoked. While a close reading of Romantic critical texts will constitute the basis of my argument, I hope to do justice to the complex interrelations between poetry, history, society, economy, and psychology by outlining the transformations of literature in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries from the perspectives of readers, writers, publishers, and reviewers, and relocating Romantic critical statements in this context.

As much of Romantic prose is concerned with the growth of the reading public and its effects upon authors, a critical survey of this growth will

⁶ Jerome J. McGann, *The Romantic Ideology: A Critical Investigation* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1983), 1.

precede my discussion of the literary marketplace and the Romantics' share in it. The core of the present study is formed by a close reading of Romantic critical statements that is guided by an interest in the implications these statements carry for the relations of writers and readers. The conclusion will then focus on the different strategies developed by English Romantic poets to solve their dilemma with the reading public and pose the question how these options were realized as the reading public grew into the mass dimensions so familiar to us today.

From the 1920s until the 1960s, only few studies were devoted to the role of the reader in British Romantic literature. Owing to the predominance of New Critical premises in literary criticism, comparatively little was done with the socio-historical backgrounds to literature. Those studies that did appear argued from contesting points of view and perpetuated the ambivalent stance toward the literary market that had characterised the original discourse of Romantic poets on literature as a commodity. Cultural conservatives who bemoaned the decline of values and standards in the wake of the extension of the reading public betrayed a bias against mass audiences and promoted a cultural elitism that established a continuation of aristocratic elitist complaints about the harmful effects of the mass market. A.S. Collins' *The Profession of Letters: A Study of the Relation of Author to Patron, Publisher and Public, 1780-1832* starts off, in a fatalist, resigned tone, with a flat rejection of the literary marketplace and its allegedly harmful effect on writers and readers alike:

That literature ever became a profession, or, for the most of those who practise it, a trade, is one of those developments which, when one looks back, seems all the way inevitable, but of which we cannot at times help but feel, that had the world done without them, it had done better.⁷

Collins goes on to argue that the leisured classes had produced the greatest works, evoking the impression that the great Romantic poets

⁷ A.S. Collins, *The Profession of Letters: A Study of the Relation of Author to Patron, Publisher and Public, 1780-1832* (London: Routledge, 1928; repr. Clifton, NJ: Augustus M. Kelley, 1973), 7f.