

Myth

1 ROMANTICISM BEGAN IN 1798

Once upon a time, as Karl Kroeber has observed, ‘Romanticism was five poets, a Scottish novelist nobody read, and the years 1798–1832’.¹

Even today, there are numerous authorities that proudly declare, with the *Routledge History of Literature in English* (2nd ed., 2001), that ‘the period begins in 1798’;² with the more recent *Britannica Guide to World Literature* (2011), that ‘*Lyrical Ballads* (1798) [began] the Romantic movement’;³ or with the *Cambridge History of Literary Criticism*, that ‘British Romanticism ... [has a] commonly accepted founding date of 1798 (the publication of *Lyrical ballads*)’.⁴

This is not unreasonable. Even to those alive at the time, the year was an important one – though not because it had anything to do with the ‘R’ word. The numbers that composed it, Hazlitt wrote in 1823, ‘are to me like the “dreaded name of Demogorgon”’.⁵ He may have been thinking of the uprising of the United Irishmen⁶ or his first meetings with Wordsworth and Coleridge;⁷ it is less likely he had in mind the year in which the Schlegel brothers began to publish in *The Athenaeum* writings that would activate the term ‘Romantic’.⁸

The obvious objection is that 1798 consigns to the limbo of what used to be called ‘pre-romanticism’ most of Blake, Burns, Cowper, Mary Robinson, Anna Laetitia Barbauld, Charlotte Smith, Helen Maria Williams, and Ann Yearsley, not to mention early works of Wordsworth, Coleridge, Samuel Rogers, Crabbe, William Lisle Bowles, Ann Radcliffe, Hannah More, Elizabeth Inchbald, and the entire Revolution debate (Burke, Paine, Price, Wollstonecraft, Godwin, and Mackintosh, among others). One response is to backdate it to 1785, in line with the position taken by the *Norton Anthology of English Literature* from its sixth edition (1993) onwards. The *Norton’s* editors leave us to deduce for ourselves whether Romanticism began on 1 January 1785 – as opposed

³⁰ *Great Myths About the Romantics*, First Edition. Duncan Wu.
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to 7 January, when a Frenchman and an American made the first crossing of the English Channel by hot-air balloon; 1 June, when John Adams, the American ambassador to Great Britain, had his first meeting with George III; or 6 July, when America adopted the dollar as its currency. Whatever their view, they include a number of works published prior to 1785: Barbauld's 'The Mouse's Petition' (1773), Charlotte Smith's 'Written at the Close of Spring' (1784), and John Newton's 'Amazing Grace!' (1779).

The *Norton* is guilty of inconsistency rather than confusion, and not without cause: theories about Romanticism have a tendency to fracture when crystallized as rules that have to be policed. That is because the concept has no exact correlative in historical time, unlike the Elizabethan age and the Restoration period (Sunday, 15 January 1559 being the date of Elizabeth's coronation, 29 May 1660 that of Charles II's triumphant entry to London). Instead, it is dependent on a post-mortem rationalization of the people and events with which it is associated, such rationalizations being seldom other than circular. That is to say, having determined Blake was not Romantic, we construct a definition excluding him; if we decide Hannah More and the Bluestockings *were*, we conceive it accordingly. And so on.

Which raises the matter of who we consider the Romantics to have been. No one today would question the eligibility of Keats, Shelley, and Blake, but in their own time they were either obscure or subject to ridicule. Then as now, successful writers were those whose books sold – such as James Montgomery (whose net sales amounted to 38,000 copies), Robert Bloomfield (100,000), George Crabbe (35,000), Henry Kirke White (21,000), and Robert Pollok, whose *The Course of Time* (1827) sold 17,750 copies in less than three years.⁹ The most frequently read and discussed were Byron, Thomas Campbell, Coleridge, Thomas Moore, Samuel Rogers, Walter Scott, Southey, and Wordsworth.¹⁰ If taxonomized at all, they were 'The Living Poets', a term Hazlitt used in his *Lectures on the English Poets* (1818), with the caveat, 'I cannot be absolutely certain that any body, twenty years hence, will think any thing about any of them'.¹¹ It was well advised: who, at the time of reading this essay, would confidently declare which poets of the present will be read decades from now? All the same, 'The Living Poets' stuck, perhaps because it was a label with no pretension other than to classify a diverse group by the one thing they had in common, and it persisted until around 1830, by which time one of them was dead.

During the Romantic period, 'romance' was meaningful only as a term by which certain kinds of novels or poems were taxonomized. In 1785, Clara Reeve used it to describe a 'wild, extravagant, fabulous Story'

associated with epic and a likeable hero,¹² and contemporaries applied it similarly: Byron called *Childe Harold's Pilgrimage* a 'Romaunt'; Southey called *Thalaba* a 'rhythmical romance'; Scott's *Marmion* was 'a romance in six cantos', while Moore's *Lalla Rookh* was 'an oriental romance'. None of which would have caused anyone to brand them Romantic.¹³ 'We are troubled with no controversies on Romanticism and Classicism', declared Carlyle as late as 1831, a little smugly.¹⁴ The debate did not begin until long after the Romantics were capable of saying what they thought about it, and only in 1875 were Wordsworth, Southey, and Coleridge identified as comprising a Romantic school.¹⁵ Even then, the term was slow to catch on. Mrs Oliphant's *Literary History of England* (1886) does not use it, referring instead to 'The New Brotherhood', while subsequent commentators mention 'The New Poetry'.

One wonders why anyone would posit a starting-point of 4 October 1798, even if that was the publication date of *Lyrical Ballads*. A precise date argues for specificity where the more politic option is that of vagueness, while placing emphasis on what, to most contemporaries, was a non-event. In March 1799, according to Sara Coleridge, 'The Lyrical Ballads are laughed at and disliked by all with very few excepted.'¹⁶ Reviews were 'on the whole favorable, some of them laudatory', despite charges of 'babyism and social withdrawal'.¹⁷ No one called it Romantic. And no one suggested, against the evidence, that Scott, Byron, Southey, Coleridge, and Wordsworth had anything in common until April 1820, when John Wilson wrote,

This age has unquestionably produced a noble band of British Poets – each separated from all the rest by abundant peculiarities of style and manner – some far above others in skill to embrace and improve the appliances of popularity – but all of them successful in the best and noblest sense of that term, because all of them bound together, (however little some of themselves may suspect it) by rich participation in the stirring and exalting spirit of the same eventful age – an age distinguished above almost all its predecessors by the splendour of external things, but still more distinguished by the power and energy which these have reflected upon the intellect and imagination of its children.¹⁸

Wilson's commentary deals in generalities ('rich participation', 'the splendor of external things', and so on), the precise meaning of which may have been unclear even to him. Indeed, what might have struck contemporaries most forcibly were its implausibilities, especially given the animosities between some of those concerned.

Nonetheless, what he says is worth notice. He is reticent about assigning a *terminus a quo* to 'the stirring and exalting spirit of the same eventful

age', despite having been one of its witnesses. And that was wise, for attempts at precise dating are probably doomed. Understandably, the trend among recent scholars has been to back away from 1798 (and *Lyrical Ballads*) and suggest, instead, 1789 (for example). Again, the argument is circular: by this means, Romanticism is defined in relation to events in France. Which is fine so long as that is deemed adequate to encompass the literature classed as Romantic.

Ernest Bernbaum dated the inception of Romanticism to 'c. 1783' for his *Anthology of Romanticism* (3rd edition 1948), which allowed him to begin with Blake's *Poetical Sketches*.¹⁹ Such a move seems uncontroversial, as it is dependent not on a historical event but on a creative one. The problem lies with Romanticism as a concept, which has never been stable.²⁰ Blake was not essential to it until 1896, apparently. If you agreed with F. R. Leavis in 1932, Blake was out; if with Northrop Frye in 1947, he was in.²¹ Southey took his place in the Romantic canon until Bernbaum's *Anthology*,²² but failed to make the cut either in Auden and Pearson's *Portable Romantic Poets* (1950) or in Bloom and Trilling's *Romantic Poetry and Prose* (1973). He is absent from the ninth edition of the *Norton* (2012) which does, however, contain Letitia Landon, Horace Walpole, and Maria Edgeworth. As if that were not enough, there is the added complication of how the Romantics perceived themselves. Was Byron a Romantic? He didn't think so. In fact, he thought most poets after Pope, with the possible exceptions of George Crabbe and Samuel Rogers, a deviation from the true path – of Augustanism (see p. 34). That sort of opinion is put down to lordly eccentricity, but that this is Byron rather than Thomas Warton the younger should give us pause. To reiterate: the poet now reckoned the most Romantic of Romantics cast himself as Augustan, because to him Augustanism was the correct thing, rather than the incorrect thing of which all but two contemporaries were guilty – which was what? Anything but Romanticism, which did not yet exist.

This volume follows many others in the field in using the 'R' word unabashedly, which implies the obligation to offer readers some way of approaching it. I follow Roger Scruton in viewing Romanticism as the consequence of cultural developments that occurred during the Enlightenment.

The course of Romantic art is one of ever deeper mourning for the life of 'natural piety' which Enlightenment destroyed. And from this mourning springs the Romantic hope – the hope of recreating in imagination the community that will never again exist in fact. Hence the importance of folk poetry, folk traditions, and 'ancestral voices'. Beneath the rational culture of Enlightenment, the Romantics searched for another and deeper culture – the culture of the people, rooted in mystery, and surviving in the inner sanctuary of the poet's self.²³

By turning to ‘the inner sanctuary of the poet’s self’, Scruton echoes Auden, who said that in Romantic literature ‘the divine element in man is now held to be neither power nor free will nor reason, but self-consciousness . . . the hero whom the poet must celebrate is himself, for the only consciousness accessible to him is his own’.²⁴ These thoughts may not amount to a definition, but do indicate a means by which Romanticism can be distinguished from what came before and after it.²⁵

It is impossible to stick a precise date on when anyone (either individually or separately) started to think and act Romantically, but those who did were unlike their forebears. That is not to say they were opposed to them; after all, they were products of the Enlightenment. But if we regard them as preoccupied with the inner resources of the self, we apprehend something of what made them new. With that in mind, a quintessential Romantic moment might be found in a blank verse fragment of 1798 in which Wordsworth described a mystic experience when ‘beauteous pictures’

Rose in harmonious imagery – they rose
As from some distant region of my soul
And came along like dreams . . .²⁶

Composition of these lines in early 1798 might be taken to indicate that Romanticism had by then been conceived, but precise datings are probably best avoided if only because of the variation in what was being written at any one time. If Blake as Romantic composed *Urizen* in 1794, the same need not be argued of Henry James Pye as he wrote *The Siege of Meaux* the same year. We are enjoined neither to argue for consistency across the work of separate authors nor to demand it from a single writer across decades: Wordsworth in 1842 was not the same writer as in 1798 (Myth 12). Furthermore, the quality of whatever that thing was, as expressed through those on whom it alights, should be allowed to change. If we find it in ‘Tintern Abbey’, it need not be identical to what we find in *Childe Harold’s Pilgrimage* Canto III or in ‘Mont Blanc’.

Inexact that may be, but it exonerates us from nominating an entire country ‘Romantic’ for an arbitrary span determined in the ivory tower. If instead we think of Romanticism as mobile, localized, impermanent, and filtered through the prism of the individual, it becomes easier to see why attempts to restrict it to a definable moment remain perpetually open to debate. It is not stable in the same sense as historical events, being a retrospective judgement on a long-dead past. Far from invalidating it, acceptance of those inherent qualities – its variousness and selectivity – helps us consider it on its own terms, as it arises from the inner world of the individual writer, from his or her place within the

culture, and as the agent of creative renewal, rather than as something monolithic, all-encompassing, and consistent, an edict imposed on an earlier time innocent of how it would be judged by a more knowing future.

Notes

- 1 Quoted by Harriet Kramer Linkin, 'The Current Canon in British Romanticism Studies', *College English* 53 (1991), 548–70, p. 548.
- 2 Ronald Carter and John McRae, *The Routledge History of Literature in English: Britain and Ireland* (2nd ed., London: Routledge, 2001), p. 177.
- 3 *The Britannica Guide to World Literature: English Literature from the Restoration Through the Romantic Period*, ed. J. E. Luebering (New York: Britannica Educational Publishing, 2011), p. 155.
- 4 David Simpson, 'The French Revolution', in *The Cambridge History of Literary Criticism*, vol. v, *Romanticism*, ed. George Alexander Kennedy and Marshall Brown (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000), pp. 49–70, 52.
- 5 'My First Acquaintance with Poets', in *The Selected Writings of William Hazlitt*, ed. Duncan Wu (9 vols., London: Pickering & Chatto, 1998), ix. 95.
- 6 The suggestion is Tom Paulin's; see, *inter alia*, his 'Diary' article, *London Review of Books* 17 (24 August 1995), 24–5.
- 7 As David Higgins suggests; see *Romantic Genius and the Literary Magazine: Biography, Celebrity, Politics* (Abingdon, Oxon.: Routledge, 2005), p. 118.
- 8 Jonathan Arac, 'The Impact of Shakespeare', in *The Cambridge History of Literary Criticism*, vol. v, pp. 272–95, 273.
- 9 William St Clair, *The Reading Nation in the Romantic Period* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004), pp. 217, 630.
- 10 *Ibid.*, p. 210.
- 11 'On the Living Poets', in *Selected Writings of William Hazlitt*, ed. Wu, ii. 300. The very issue of posterity is one means by which modern critics have attempted to define Romanticism; see, in particular, Andrew Bennett, *Romantic Poets and the Culture of Posterity* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999).
- 12 Richard Maxwell, 'The Historiography of Fiction in the Romantic Period', in *The Cambridge Companion to Fiction in the Romantic Period*, ed. Richard Maxwell and Katie Trumpener (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2008), pp. 7–21, 8.
- 13 This is not to say that romance did not shape Romanticism; see, *inter alia*, David Duff, *Romance and Revolution: Shelley and the Politics of a Genre* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994).
- 14 As quoted by Jane Moore and John Strachan, *Key Concepts in Romantic Literature* (Houndmills, Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2010), p. 7.
- 15 St Clair, *The Reading Nation in the Romantic Period*, p. 212n10.

- 16 Sara Coleridge to Thomas Poole, March 1799, in *Minnnow among Tritons: Mrs S. T. Coleridge's Letters to Thomas Poole, 1799–1834*, ed. Stephen Potter (London: Nonesuch Press, 1934), p. 4.
- 17 John O. Hayden, *The Romantic Reviewers 1802–1824* (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1969), p. 78.
- 18 [John Wilson], 'Wordsworth's River Duddon', *Blackwood's Edinburgh Magazine* 7 (April 1820), 406. The quotation is cited by St Clair, *The Reading Nation in the Romantic Period*, p. 211n4.
- 19 *Anthology of Romanticism*, ed. Ernest Bernbaum (3rd ed., New York: Ronald Press, 1948), p. iii. This was also the dating adopted by Lionel Trilling and Harold Bloom for their *Romantic Poetry and Prose* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1973), the volume with which I was introduced to the period in the early 1980s.
- 20 See the quotations reproduced by Moore and Strachan, *Key Concepts in Romantic Literature*, pp. 9–14. John Beer provides a good potted history of its early evolution in his entry on Romanticism in *The Blackwell Companion to the Enlightenment*, ed. John W. Yolton, Roy Porter, Pat Rogers, and Barbara Maria Stafford (Oxford: Blackwell, 1991).
- 21 See Seamus Perry, 'Romanticism: The Brief History of a Concept', in *A Companion to Romanticism*, ed. Duncan Wu (Oxford: Blackwell, 1998), pp. 3–11, 8.
- 22 Bernbaum includes that old warhorse 'The Battle of Blenheim', along with 'The Holly Tree', 'On the Speech of Robert Emmet', 'My Days among the Dead are Passed', 'The Death of John Wesley', and extracts from Southey's *History of the Peninsular War*, *Life of Nelson*, and *The Doctor*.
- 23 Roger Scruton, *An Intelligent Person's Guide to Modern Culture* (South Bend, IN: St Augustine's Press, 2000), p. 49.
- 24 'Introduction', in *The Portable Romantic Poets*, ed. W. H. Auden and Norman Holmes Pearson (1950; New York: Penguin Books, 1977), pp. xii–xiv.
- 25 Those in search of a definition could do worse than to consult 'In Search of a Definition', the first chapter of Isaiah Berlin, *The Roots of Romanticism* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1999).
- 26 William Wordsworth, 'The Discharged Soldier', ll. 28–31. The fragment eventually found its way into *The Thirteen-Book Prelude*. See *Lyrical Ballads and Other Poems, 1797–1800*, ed. James A. Butler and Karen Green (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1992), p. 278.