

Romantics in Context: Conclusion

The writers you're studying didn't call themselves Romantics.

The term isn't found in the *Oxford English Dictionary* until 1823, when it was used pejoratively by the *New Monthly Magazine* to describe the acceptance of a French school of thinking. Romanticism was not a unified movement with a clearly defined, let alone agreed literary or political agenda. They do have certain concerns in common, although their attitudes may differ on a personal, religious or political level.

Shelley was famously an atheist, while Wordsworth and Coleridge were Anglicans (although Wordsworth flirted with atheism in his youth and Coleridge was involved as a young man with the Unitarians, who deny the doctrine of the Trinity ie God the Father, Son and Holy Spirit). For Blake, God is the creative and spiritual power in man, not a power independent of man: 'God is Man and exists in us and we in Him...Imagination is the Divine Body in Every Man' (*Anecdotes to Berkeley's 'Siris'*).

I'm going to use the terms first and second generation to differentiate between those writing in the early and later periods of the Romantic era. The first generation refers to

Blake (1757-1827)

Wordsworth (1770-1850)

Coleridge (1772-1834)

The second generation refers to

Byron (1788-1824)

Shelley (1792-1822)

Keats (1795-1821)

A brief glance at history will show you that dates are significant here: Blake was an adult during the American Revolution (1775-83), Wordsworth and Coleridge saw the French Revolution (1798-92) as adults (Blake was still alive), Byron was a small child when the French were 'revolting' and wasn't born at the time of the American conflict. They all experienced the Industrial Revolution of course.

It's worth bearing in mind the difference in 'generation', particularly in terms of politics: Wordsworth experienced the French Revolution first hand; Shelley was still a baby during the 'reign of terror'. Does he therefore have the right to criticise Wordsworth for his apparent political change? In the early 1800s Wordsworth, Southey and Coleridge, who were radical in their youth, became increasingly conservative politically, supporting censorship, arguing against religious toleration. They supported the government for example in the war against France in the early 19thc and Wordsworth and Southey were given government posts (which they took because they needed the money!) Wordsworth became Distributor of Stamps for Westmoreland and Penrith in 1813. This led to them being criticised as hypocrite government hirelings.

Literary context

Intellectually, Romanticism pulled away from the philosophical rationalism and neoclassicism (ie using classical models - ancient Greek writers for example) of the Enlightenment (18thc). They developed an aesthetic freedom from formal rules and conventions, a degree of genuine self expression. Hence a sense of strong (but also original and authentic) feeling became significant, as did the development of natural, unforced poetic diction. In the *Preface to Lyrical Ballads*, Wordsworth argues that his poetry will engage with 'common life', using 'language really used by men'.

Where earlier 18thc writers favoured established literary methods and a settled, ordered society, Romanticism is often radical. The subject matter of Romanticism is typically rural rather than urban, the country rather than the city.

The people who are admired in Romantic literature are not urban sophisticates but rustics (see Wordsworth's *Michael* and *Resolution and Independence* for example). We also see a developing interest in the supernatural, the irrational and twilight states of consciousness - think of

Coleridge's *The Rime of The Ancient Mariner*, *Christabel* and of course *Kubla Khan*, Keats's *La Belle Dame Sans Merci* and his *Ode to a Nightingale*, *Ode on Melancholy* and *Ode on Indolence*, which explore different states of mind. The exploration of the inner depths of the personality was continued in the analysis of dreams (explored by Wordsworth and Keats as a form of withdrawal from life in order to recreate it) dabbling in the occult (Byron) and drug taking (particularly poor Coleridge, whose addiction caused him mental and physical anguish); Byron was guilty of everything and proud of it!

[While at Cambridge, Byron kept a dog and a bear in his quarters. He claimed to have had sex with 200 different women on consecutive evenings. His mistress, Lady Caroline Lamb, famously described him in her diary as 'mad, bad and dangerous to know', an image he tried hard to live up to!]

Romanticism affected attitudes to nature, the arts and politics but was initially primarily associated with literature. Rousseau (1712-1778) a French philosopher and novelist, who was particularly influential on English writers such as Wordsworth, rebelled against rigid social conventions and excessive formality in the arts; he argued for the primacy of feeling and imagination over law, convention and reason, believing that by returning to nature mankind would become ennobled morally and liberated from the artificial manners and constraints imposed by society. His view of human nature was fundamentally optimistic, arguing that society and its institutions, in particular its laws, had corrupted man from a state of natural innocence. In 1762 Rousseau's *The Social Contract* was published, introducing the phrase 'Liberty, Equality, Fraternity' which was so influential on early revolutionary thinkers.

The Romantics varied in their political ideologies but tended to see themselves as prophets / bards, with a special role to express deep philosophical and political truths to the reader. The imagination, especially the poetic imagination, sometimes referred to as genius, became particularly significant.

The Romantics didn't always agree or even get on

Wordsworth and Coleridge famously didn't speak to each other for over a decade! In *Biographia Literaria* ch 14, Coleridge refers to 'the acrimonious passions' (Norton p.388) between himself and Wordsworth, partly due to professional differences concerning *Lyrical Ballads*. He criticises the *Preface to the Lyrical Ballads*, which he refers to as Wordsworth's 'poetic creed':

'With many parts of this preface...I never concurred; but, on the contrary objected to them as erroneous in principle, and as contradictory (in appearance at least) both to other parts of the same preface and to the author's own practice in the greater number of the poems themselves'(p.389 Norton). However, we can't trust his voice either since he was the mastermind behind the *Preface* and its fundamental principles were drawn largely from his reading. [Blake disagreed with Wordsworth's *Preface to The Excursion*, complaining that reading it had caused 'a bowel complaint' that nearly killed him.]

Keats admired Wordsworth but criticised him for his didacticism: 'for the sake of a few fine imaginative or domestic passages, are we to be bullied into a certain Philosophy engendered in the whims of an Egotist - Every man has his speculations, but every man does not brood and peacock over them...We hate poetry that has a palpable design upon us'. Letter to Reynolds, 1818, Norton, p.832.

Shelley criticised Wordsworth on a more serious level for seemingly turning his back on the radical idealism of his youth, for having turned from radical icon to conservative disappointment. In 'To Wordsworth' (1816) we read:

'In honoured poverty they voice did weave
Songs consecrate to truth and liberty
Deserting these, thou leavest me to grieve,

Thus having been, that thou shouldst cease to be'(Norton, p.648).

Wordsworth saw himself as the great bard who could save the nation. In *Prospectus to The Recluse* (wr 1799, pub 1814, Norton pp.203-5) he articulates his view of his role as a poet:

'Be not this labour useless'(l.99)
'may my Life
Express the image of a better time,
Desires more wise and simpler manners'(l.102-4).

Shelley in 'To Wordsworth' sees Wordsworth as betraying this role. Shelley deliberately appropriates Wordsworth's style and subject matter here, writing of nature, childhood and loss, mourning Wordsworth, whose poetry is often mournful. In adopting Wordsworth's mode of writing he is in one sense adopting Wordsworth's role as poet and in his own eyes at least is more Wordsworth than Wordsworth!

Although they were not working as a school of writers with a common literary and political agenda the Romantics were aware of each other's work and poetic theories.

[When Shelley drowned they found a copy of Keats's poems in his pocket. Shelley of course wrote a powerful elegy after Keats's death - *Adonais*, Norton, pp.718-31]

Wordsworth and Coleridge collaborated on the *Lyrical Ballads* and their work was discussed by the second generation Romantics. Keats writes of 'sharpening one's vision into the heart and nature of Man', leaving the Chamber of Maiden-Thought to a darker place, where 'We are in a Mist...We feel the "burden of the Mystery"'(Letter to Reynolds, Norton p.835), revealing conscious echoes of the notion of progression from childhood to maturity and wisdom expressed in *Tintern Abbey*. The reference to 'the burden of the mystery' is a direct reference to l.38 of *Tintern Abbey* (Norton, p.137).

Keats admired Wordsworth but differentiated between himself and Wordsworth as poets: 'As to the poetical Character...I am a Member...distinguished from the wordsworthian or egotistical sublime'. Much of Wordsworth's poetry is rooted in himself. For Keats, the poetical character 'has no character...it lives in gusto, be it foul or fair, high or low'(Letter to Woodhouse, Norton, p.836) ie the poet lives in his subject through his imagination.

In spite of personal and professional differences, there are certain **thematic preoccupations** which recur in the work of those we call Romantic and therefore the term may be helpful.

Nature - as moral guide, as interactive force, as a powerful symbol, a vision of life as it should be

Primitivism - simplicity, anti-intellectualism, cf Rousseau and the noble savage

The self - individualism (the most typical Romantic attitude), psychology (hence explorations of melancholy, the ultimate temptation for the Romantic poet: the danger is that in its weariness the human spirit will turn away from struggle, from life itself), transcendence, imagination

The **imagination** is represented as a power, associated with sensation, intuition and visionary insight. Shelley believed in the perfectibility of man (cf Rousseau) and regarded the imagination as a means of essential change. In *A Defence of Poetry* he argued 'A man, to be greatly good, must imagine intensely and comprehensively; he must put himself in the place of another...The great instrument of moral good is the imagination...Poetry enlarges the circumference of the imagination'(Norton, p.759).

[His desire to be 'good' didn't stop him hating cats. Apparently he once used one in an electrical experiment, tying it to a kite string and flying the kite in a thunderstorm; amazingly, the cat wasn't harmed.]

Politics - radicalism, utopianism (imagined state of political perfection), revolution

The child and childhood. Previously in the 18thc the child was viewed as a mini adult, contaminated by original sin, who had to be 'disciplined' into moral behaviour. It was widely believed that the capacity to develop reason came some time after puberty; therefore adults had to reason for children and impose their views. Compare this with the view of childhood found in the early books of *The Prelude*, Wordsworth's 'We are Seven', *Ode: Intimations of Immortality* (delightfully misspelt by a candidate in an exam two years ago as *Ode to Immorality* - written thus consistently throughout the essay). In this poem (Norton, p.190), Wordsworth writes:

Heaven lies about us in our infancy!
Shades of the prison-house begin to close
Upon the growing boy'

Think also of Wordsworth's 'My heart leaps up' (sometimes referred to as the rainbow poem), where he argues 'The Child is father of the Man', exploring the child's instinctive impulse to demonstrate truths about rainbows (ie the natural world) and our response to them. We learn the capacity for such pleasure in childhood; Wordsworth wants us to carry this primal response forward into adulthood. Adolescence isn't simply a state to be got through as quickly as possible but a necessary part of the adult being, a power to refresh and recreate. Wordsworth tends to focus on the creative power of childhood; Keats on the creativity of adolescence. Compare Blake's representation of the necessary energy for change in *Songs of Experience*. Wordsworth's poetry celebrates childhood and the child's view of life, rather than trying to impose the adult view, as contemporary education sought to do. Byron refers in *Childe Harold's Pilgrimage* to

'The drill'd dull lesson, forced down word by word
In my repugnant youth!' (Canto IV, stanza 75)

For Wordsworth, the child represents spontaneous and natural feeling, a kind of essential wisdom which sees truths which adults may have lost sight of. Think of 'We are Seven', where a child who clearly knows that her siblings are dead insists 'we are seven', recognising that they are still a part of her life in a way that makes the adult uncomfortable. She's not 'in denial'; she simply sees death differently. See also Coleridge's *Frost at Midnight*, Blake's *Songs of Innocence and Experience* eg 'The Schoolboy' (from *Experience*):

'How can a child that is born for joy
Sit in a cage and sing?'

Coleridge argued similarly for the need 'to carry on the feelings of childhood into the powers of manhood'.

The role of the poet - bard, public figure articulating truths which we may half understand but be unable to articulate for ourselves. Keats wrote in *The Fall of Hyperion*:

'a poet is a sage;

A Humanist, Physician to all men'

and argued that poetry 'should strike the Reader as a wording of his own highest thoughts'(Letter to Taylor, 1818, Norton, p.833). Blake declared in the 'Introduction' to *Songs of Experience*: 'Hear the voice of the Bard! / Who Present, Past and Future sees'.

Wordsworth argues in the *Preface* to the *Lyrical Ballads* that a poet 'is a man speaking to men' but that he 'has a greater knowledge of human nature, and a more comprehensive soul, than are supposed to be common among mankind'(Norton p.147).

Hence the necessity of deep feeling: 'the excellence of every Art is its intensity'(Keats, Letter to George and Thomas Keats, 1817, Norton, p.830) but also deep thought / wisdom / genius. Shelley argued in *A Defence of Poetry* (1821, published after his death in 1840) that 'Poets are the unacknowledged legislators of the world.' (Norton, p.765) and that 'poetry acts to produce the moral improvement of man' (Norton p.759).

Keats is less overt in his agenda but commented in a letter to Woodhouse in 1818, 'I am ambitious of doing the world some good'(Norton, p.836).

The Influence of the Romantics

John Stuart Mill (1806-73) was profoundly influenced by Wordsworth. A brilliant man, he had been brought up according to Utilitarian doctrines, which privileged fact over imagination and feeling. He could read Greek and Latin as a young child! Perhaps not surprisingly, he had a mental breakdown. He recounts in his autobiography that on reading Wordsworth, 'I for the first time, gave its proper place, among the prime necessities of human well-being, to the internal culture of the individual' (Norton p.1022). One of the most profound ways in which Romanticism has influenced subsequent generations (and not just writers) is because of this focus on 'the internal culture of the individual' ie not seeing man as part of society, where what counts is that we each do our bit for

society: the Romantics focused on the needs and rights and thoughts of the individual. If you want one word to sum them up, it's 'individual.'

By Shelley's time (J.S.Mill and Wordsworth still very much alive) poetry had become associated with human creativity and opposed to Utilitarian philosophies that were a product of the Industrial Revolution. Utilitarians evaluated everything in terms of usefulness ie extreme rationalism, rejecting the significance of imagination and feeling in life ie education, social welfare etc.

Matthew Arnold, an influential critic and poet himself, argued in a collection of Wordsworth poems 'The noble and profound application of ideas to life, is the most essential part of poetic greatness' (If you want to read his analysis of Wordsworth, look at pp.1410-1418 in the Norton). This is crucial to understanding the Romantics and their legacy: they sought to apply ideas to life - the focus wasn't on intellectual debate for the sake of it but on human beings and how we may best live. Wordsworth wrote in a letter to Lady Beaumont (May 21st, 1807) that his poems 'will co-operate with the benign tendencies in human nature and society, and will, in their degree, be efficacious in making men wiser, better, and happier'(Norton, p.1418), which brings us to the political context.

Political Background

It's worth noting at the outset that at the beginning of the Romantic period almost all political writing was by and for the middle and upper classes. Romantic literature may be regarded as democratic in that it gave a voice to the 'lower' classes (rustic characters actually speak in Wordsworth). It was democratic politically in that it argued for greater political rights for the lower classes and greater political accountability (ie the people should have a say in the way that they're governed). However, the writers themselves were generally upper middle and upper class and well educated. In this sense one can argue that poets like Wordsworth, though democratic in their politics, may be elitist. However, they were radical for the position of their own class.

By the end of the period, the Industrial and agricultural workers had become politically conscious, due partly to the popular language used in political writing by men like Thomas Paine. Paine argued for universal suffrage (ie the vote for all) and the abolition of the monarchy. Paine's book *Rights of Man* was very influential and helped to encourage lower class radicalism.

Edmund Burke articulated the conservative argument, denouncing revolutionary change. In his influential *Reflections on the Revolution in France* (1790) he attacked the radical ideas of the French Revolution and defended the British political system. Marilyn Butler highlights the significance of Burke's writing in *Burke, Paine, Godwin and the Revolution Controversy*:

'Its phrasing passed immediately into English political discourse, with notions of chivalry and of rich, organic nationhood...its hatred of system and argument, its reverence for the family, neighbourhood, and native country - recur in English and German literature around 1800, at the point where 'Romanticism' first makes a distinct appearance.'

This debate over whether or not the people should have political rights split the nation; since the Romantics saw themselves as public figures / bards, it was inevitable that they should concern themselves with the major political debates of the age.

Marilyn Butler points out in 'Romanticism in England':

'It was the public success of poetry and the general professionalising of literature in the early nineteenth century that opened doors to middle class writers without patronage [ie financial support from wealthy and influential people], but much less often and less widely to working men and to women...Poets from [James] Thomson [mid 18thc patriot poet] to the Wordsworth of the *Lyrical Ballads* could claim to be speaking for the 'real' nation, that is for the majority of the people, by defining them in contradistinction to the minority who spoke for the 'official' nation in the capital. The sense of class was not yet so general or well-articulated that it exposed the fallacy of a middle-class writer's claiming an identity of interest with the illiterate masses...For the purposes of writing poetry, it perhaps did not matter that such claims to representativeness were spurious, or that the poets' rhetoric was more radical than their practical politics, as the testing times of the 1790s

showed. Merely to believe in a community of shared interests, in the reality of 'the patriot nation' or alternatively 'the republic of letters' [ie literature] was inspiring enough, especially for individual writers who might in real life be isolated and socially obscure'(pp.64-5).

Specific Political Context

The American Revolution (1775-83) was of tremendous significance to Europe. French soldiers fought in the war and the Declaration of Independence (1776) was published in France. In Britain, there was some sympathy for the colonists before the war: Edmund Burke argued for conciliation with the colonies to protect commerce and avoid revolution. He recognised the injustice meted out by the government to the colonists and warned that if it continued to oppress them in the name of the British King, it would 'teach them by these means to call that sovereignty itself into question' ('Speech on American Taxation', 1774). The colonists' cry, 'No taxation without representation', struck a chord in Britain too, where most people didn't have the right to vote but were still heavily taxed by a government over which they had no control. The colonists spoke of liberty, a powerful rhetorical tool. After the war America became an image of a land of freedom; we see this in the work of Blake and Coleridge in particular.

The French Revolution (1789-92)

Britain was almost constantly at war with France during the Romantic period: from 1792-1802, from 1803-1814, and during the "hundred days" in 1815. France was an object of fear, largely fear of invasion, both on a literal level and on the level of ideas. The Revolution was influenced partly by Rousseau, who argued that the people were the only legitimate foundation of government; the principles of the French Revolution challenged every monarchy in Europe, including Britain. The monarchy was increasingly criticised in France because of economic crisis, particularly in 1788: they suffered a bad harvest, an appalling winter, followed by inflation of prices and the risk of famine. This, together with increased unemployment in the textile industries (largely because of competition from Britain), led to increasing poverty, which made existing class tensions more apparent and more dangerous.

In 1789 the French people stormed the Bastille, the ultimate symbol of tyranny and feudalism. Their demands were simple but profound: abolition of class privilege, more equitable taxation, and human rights. The King (Louis XVI) was tried (unjustly - a parody of a trial) as a traitor against the revolution; he was executed in January 1793. Later that year the revolutionaries turned on each other. This 'Reign of Terror' as it became known saw thousands of people guillotined, including Marie-Antoinette.

Wordsworth spoke of the bloodlust or 'heinous appetites' of the mob in book 10 of *The Prelude*: 'Head after head, and never heads enough / For those that bade them fall'(l.362-3). Robespierre came to represent the tyranny of the revolutionary powers in 1793-4. He, like Danton, was killed by this monster of his own creation.

Wordsworth, Coleridge and Robert Southey were all enthusiastic about the Revolution in the early 1790s. Wordsworth articulates this youthful idealism in book 11 of *The Prelude*, 'Bliss was it in the dawn to be alive'(l.108, Norton, p.263). Blake articulated his revolutionary feeling in 'prophetic' books such as *The French Revolution* and *The Marriage of Heaven and Hell*. Coleridge and Southey even planned to emigrate to Pennsylvania (regarded by many English people at the time as a land of democratic liberty) to establish a truly egalitarian community which they called 'Pantisocracy'[spell], meaning equal rule by all.

Wordsworth, Coleridge and Southey's enthusiasm for the early revolution changed when they saw the ideals of the Revolution corrupted. Byron and Shelley, however, remained radical in their politics. Byron wrote 'Who would be free themselves must strike the blow' in *Childe Harold II* stanza 76. Byron fought in the Greek war of independence so was prepared to put his principles into practice. [Byron was an odd mixture of genuine political idealism and extraordinary personal conduct. After recovering Shelley's body, the poet Trelawny wrote: "Byron asked me to preserve the skull for him; but remembering that he had formerly used one as a drinking cup, I was

determined Shelley's should not be so profaned". He did give the ashes of Shelley's heart to his wife to carry aound, though!]

You will be familiar with the revolutionary sentiment in Shelley's poetry for example 'A Song: Men of England' and 'England in 1819'(Norton pp.673-4). Yet he was aware that as an exiled commentator on England, he was scorned by those for whom he saw himself speaking. He had little faith in the wisdom of an enslaved populace; slavery breeds the same evils in the slave as in the tyrant. [Not only was Shelley a social outcast but his father was so ashamed of him that when he visited the family home he made him wear a soldier's uniform and go by the name of Captain Jones.]

William Godwin (Mary Shelley's father) testifies to the difficulty of resolving tension between revolutionary principles and their practice: he commented in 1800 'My heart beat high with sentiments of liberty [in1789]' but 'I never for a moment ceased to disapprove of mob government and violence'. Godwin was an influential English radical in the early 1790s, arguing against government and believing that revolutionary violence may be useful but what he really wanted was gradual progress towards a state where men were rational and just and so government would be unnecessary. Mary Shelley articulated the tension between sympathy with the poor and fear of mob power leading to violence in the figure of the monster in *Frankenstein*.

In 1795 Coleridge argued in a lecture: 'The Example of France is indeed a "Warning to Britain". A nation wading to their Rights through Blood, and marking the track of Freedom by Devastation...Let us not indulge our malignant Passions under the mask of Humanity...French Freedom is the Beacon, that while it guides us to Equality should shew us the Dangers, that throng the road' (*A Moral and Political Lecture*).

Wordsworth was affected in a very personal way by the Revolution and subsequent wars between Britain and France. He spent much of 1792 in France observing the Revolution (depicted in books 10 and 11 of *The Prelude*). He had an affair with Annette Vallon, who gave birth to his child. In 1793, when he first visited Tintern Abbey, he was living in London trying to sell poetry to raise money to support Vallon and return to France. The onset of war made it impossible for him to return. This led to personal turmoil: he was torn between England and France, possibly under threat in England because of his radical politics, aligning himself too closely with the French, tormented at seeing his political principles betrayed and corrupted, working and living in London, which he hated and on a private level, filled with remorse and love for Annette Vallon. By 1798 when he revisited Tintern (and wrote the poem) many of these problems had been resolved. He had begun a very productive period in his poetic career and he had a group of supportive friends such as Coleridge and Godwin. He had been left a financial legacy which enabled him to help to support Vallon and enabled him to live away from London in Dorset and he had modified his political views.

Shelley, Keats and Byron are second generation Romantics, writing after the American and French Revolutions but during a time of continuing political unrest in England. The first generation's experience of the violence of the French revolution led to them being horrified at the revival in England of popular political radicalism after 1815 but the second generation was at best ambivalent towards the prospect of mass revolution. Byron acknowledges in *Childe Harold* 'France got drunk with blood to vomit crime'(Canto IV, stanza 97), in brutal language reminiscent of the (as yet unpublished) books 10 and 11 of Wordsworth's *Prelude*.

In that same stanza he refers to the corrupted Revolution as 'man's worst - his second fall' (Wordsworth also uses images of the Fall of Man when speaking of the Revolution). Yet Byron still advocates radicalism:

'Yet Freedom! Yet thy banner, torn, but flying,
Streams like the thunder-storm against the wind' (stanza 98).

Byron and Shelley were both discontented with the state of British society, sympathetic to revolution and change. Keats's political views are less obvious, although in the late 1810s he was linked with radical thinkers such as Leigh Hunt and William Hazlitt.

Writers of the period do not necessarily deal directly with war or the storming of the Bastille

(they don't need to - it dominated the English imagination for decades) but they do engage with the principles of the revolution as they relate to contemporary England, where class tensions erupted into riots but had not yet caused the revolution many feared.

Traditionally in England there was a kind of unwritten contract between the landed classes and those lower down the social scale: the landed classes, who ran both the legal and political systems, would be gracious and just in return for obedience and deference, resulting in at least a facade of peaceful relationships between the classes. This ideal is represented in works such as Austen's *Pride and Prejudice* (published in 1813); one of the things that influences Elizabeth's opinion of Darcy is his reputation as an active and responsible landowner - that and a rather impressive estate and lots of money!

This earlier 18thc ideal didn't measure up to the reality of events in contemporary England: between 1790 and 1810 there were 500 riots protesting about the price of bread. 1811 - 1813 saw the Luddite risings (unemployed workers smashing knitting frames). It wasn't until 1832 that the Reform Bill gave the vote to sections of the middle (but not working) classes. Before 1832, voting was restricted to men of property - out of a population of 8.5 million, only 11,000 men could vote. Mary Wollstonecraft (Mary Shelley's mother for those of you who've done the Gothic course) described the elitist voting system of her time as 'a convenient handle for despotism' (*A Vindication of the Rights of Woman*, 1792). Although the government did introduce legal restrictions on individuals' rights eg the suspension of habeas corpus, in theory at least the landed classes governed by a system of voluntary deference, not force.

Abolition of class privilege was one of the main demands of the French people in 1789. This is one of many volatile issues which Romantic writers sought to address, reflecting dangers contemporary poets perceived, not simply from revolutionary ideas from France but from inside their own society for example Peterloo (1819). The events at Peterloo have become a powerful symbol of the struggle in England between revolutionary and repressive government forces. It's the myth of Peterloo ie its symbolic significance that Shelley is concerned with in 'England in 1819' and 'The Mask of Anarchy' (written in 1819 but not published until 1832).

The myth is that peaceful people arguing for political reform were attacked by the cavalry armed with sabres, on the orders of the government. In reality, the local magistrates allowed the crowd to assemble but decided to arrest the speakers. The yeomanry, called in to help with the arrests, were rather lost in the crowd so called in the Hussars (professional soldiers) to disperse the crowd. The Hussars were wearing the colours they had worn at Waterloo; hence the name 'Peterloo'. The killing (11 died, 500 or so were injured) seems to have been the result of chaos and ineptitude rather than political design.

What made this dreadful incident truly appalling and led to the creation of the myth of more deliberate political action was that the government supported the magistrates' actions and passed repressive legislation as a result in 1819, among other things, forbidding meetings of more than 50 people without permits and increasing the penalties for sedition ie speaking against the government. We need to remember that there was no universal right to freedom of speech in England at this time.

Romantic writers also engaged with a different kind of Revolution, which was having a profound impact on their society: the **Industrial Revolution** (1750-1830ish)

This refers to the invention of machines to speed up production and therefore make it more efficient and cost effective. James Watt developed the steam engine in 1760s, which led to the development of factory work. Some factory owners were decent for example Robert Owen created model villages where workers had decent housing and education. However, housing was often poor and inadequate sanitation led to disease. NB textile workers in particular were more prosperous than the agricultural poor but the working process was becoming increasingly mechanised and workers had to move to the cities to find work; hence feelings of rootlessness, of being cut off from home and family environment and the traditions that went with it. This is why Wordsworth stresses the importance of family and community, for example in *Michael*.

Burns summed up the feelings of many in what he wrote at the door of the Carron ironworks:

We cam na here to view your warks,
In hopes to be mair wise,
But only, lest we gang to Hell,
It may be no surprise'

Compare this to Blake's use of the association of Industrial imagery with Hell in *The Tyger*:

'What the hammer? What the chain?

In what furnace was thy brain?' (Norton, p.37).

In the early 1800s Wordsworth and Coleridge became increasingly hostile to industrialisation. The Romantic focus on the natural world is of course partly a critique of the Industrial Revolution and its effects on the individual, the community and the landscape.

Nature of course refers to the natural world but it is also the principle which animates this world - hence the idea of 'the laws of nature'; both ideas are relevant to Romantic literature. Rousseau argued that nature was a benevolent force, an idea later articulated by the Romantics. Shaftesbury argued as early as 1711 that the natural world was 'my refuge from the toilsome world of business' (*The Moralists*), describing nature as 'supremely fair and sovereignly good' ie as something of beauty but with a potential moral influence, which surely anticipates the Romantics. The idea of nature as 'good' derives partly from the idea that it was created by God. As Cowper phrases it famously in *The Task* (1.749): 'God made the country, and man made the town'.

Wordsworth celebrates a 'wise passiveness' in which nature can teach us deeper wisdom than books:

'One impulse from a vernal wood
May teach you more of man,
Of moral evil and of good,

Than all the sages can.' 'The Tables Turned', Norton p.136

In the same poem he argues against 'our meddling intellect': 'We murder to dissect', criticising, just as Blake had done, the rather sterile rationality of some forms of science. [Coleridge wasn't against all forms of science - he participated in Humphry Davy's experiments with laughing gas - don't ask! Shelley nearly blew himself up when dabbling with Chemistry at Oxford.]

Though they rejected the mechanical, mathematical aspects of Newton's science, poets such as Coleridge and Wordsworth were attracted by his theory (what we would call Physics) of 'force' eg Wordsworth uses words such as 'motion' to convey his thoughts about nature's 'life'. Coleridge argued that we and the natural world were 'one life'. They both use words such as soul and spirit to convey a sense of this force, this active power in the natural world.

Again, we need to recognise that not all the Romantics react to the natural world in the same way. Keats argues, 'Scenery is fine - but human nature is finer'; he uses natural imagery but the natural world isn't as direct and strong an inspiration as it was for Wordsworth and Shelley and it has no spiritual significance for Keats. Keats enjoyed nature sensuously - he loved sunshine, the sounds and smells of the natural world. Wordsworth accused him of paganism!

Wordsworth has sometimes been regarded as pantheistic in his response to nature (Duncan Wu for example). Pantheism comes from the Greek, meaning 'all is God'. The term was invented by John Toland in 1705. Pantheism rejects the notion of God as distinct from man and the natural world; rather than being transcendent, God is part of the world. Since it conflates God and nature, it has often been regarded as teaching the worship of nature as divine. This isn't the case: pantheists don't necessarily worship but they are conscious of an active power within the natural world. Wordsworth may be articulating such ideas in *Tintern Abbey* when he writes, of a powerful presence:

'something far more deeply interfused,
Whose dwelling is the light of setting suns' ie the natural world
'and in the mind of man:

A motion and a spirit that impels
All thinking things, all objects of all thought
And rolls through all things'(Norton p.138).

He never said that he was a pantheist, although Coleridge criticised him for the 'vague, misty, rather than mystic confusion of God with the world, and the accompanying nature-worship'.

Coleridge uses similar language to Wordsworth in *Frost at Midnight* but the context is Christian. He hopes that his son will enjoy the natural world as a creation of God which reflects His love for mankind:

'so shalt thou see and hear
The lovely shapes and sounds intelligible
Of that eternal language, which thy God
Utters, who from eternity doth teach
Himself in all'(l.58-62, Norton, p.366)

Nature is of course a constant, as is art, which may help man to make some sense of things in a transient world. Coleridge echoes Wordsworth's sentiments when he writes, 'Nature ne'er deserts the wise and pure'(Norton, p.329).

The label Romantic may seem reductive in that it is applied to very different people, sometimes with differing beliefs. Yet it usefully refers to a period when there was a pervasive sense of collapse within the individual subject of the systems of moral, religious and social control which were being shaken apart at the public, political level by the American and French Revolutions. The Romantics addressed this, focusing on the individual as a means of regenerating the social and political body.

In sum, the Romantics seek to challenge us, to remove what Blake referred to as our 'mind-forged manacles', to look at life differently: 'A fool sees not the same tree that a wise man sees'(Blake, *Proverbs of Hell*).

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