UNIT 10

Romanticism 1780–1830

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Introduction

This unit engages in a thematic treatment of Romantic literature in Britain, during the period 1780–1830. It begins with a survey of the unsettling effects produced by the various 'Revolutions' at the end of the eighteenth century, and emphasizes that the reactions of writers to these events were by no means unanimous or unequivocal. These events sparked an astonishing change of sensibility, irrevocably altering established ideas about the nature of the individual in society, the role of art and the artist, and affecting the very modes of expression available for literary production. In exploring these monumental questions the unit will investigate Romantic assumptions about genre, language, and the sources of literary inspiration; it will also show how Romanticism is difficult to identify because of its eclectic nature. Throughout the unit will emphasize the energy, freshness and excitement engendered by the texts and their subjects; it will simultaneously point to uniqueness and continuity, as writers engage with the great debates initiated by their changing circumstances.

Most studies of Romantic literature concentrate on six canonical writers: Blake, Wordsworth, Coleridge, Byron, Shelley, and Keats. In attempting to communicate a legitimate understanding of the period, the contribution of these figures must be acknowledged; however, the interpretation offered benefits from an engagement with recent critical discourses including new historicism, intertextuality, psychoanalysis, deconstruction and gender studies, thus providing a useful re-examination of established texts. To them this unit adds other voices: Mary Shelley, to introduce the contribution of women to writing of the period, and Thomas De Quincey, the essayist and opium-eater, to indicate the radical departures from the established norms which distinguish the age of Romanticism.

The Romantic period has certain characteristics that set it apart from its predecessor, the age of Sensibility, and its successor, the Victorian era. It is clearly distinguished by a turbulent social and political history, which profoundly affected the lives of people across the European continent and beyond. The age was one of revolutions – not only the emancipatory turmoils in America and France, but also the massive expansion of the industrial base in Britain, which changed the whole pattern of labour and social structure.

The French and American Revolutions represented the culminations of an eighteenth-century process of agitation for social and political change. French reformatory rhetoric was inspired by Jean-Jacques Rousseau (1712–78), whose work was concerned with the love of freedom, the state of human being in society, an interest in the self, and the admiration of nature. His idea of the sovereignty of citizens as the only form of legitimate government assisted in creating a climate conducive to popular insurrection. America too contributed to the oratory of change: the increasing dissatisfaction of the colonists, and their successful resistance of British tyranny, resulted in the development of a vocabulary of liberty which appealed to radical sensibilities. After the Declaration of Independence in 1776 the American states not only created a new political system, but also drafted a Constitution and Bill of Rights which served as markers for the country's citizens' rising to their full stature and entitlement as free human beings.

While events in France and America contributed to the discourse of change, the Industrial Revolution played a more significant role in transforming the lives of the British people. Since the development of the steam engine by James Watt in 1765–9, the small-scale production of cottage industries was rapidly replaced by collective manufacturing processes, bringing many workpeople to concentrated centres of production, and actuating a revolution in both ergonomics and economics for the country. The increase in manufacturing on a large scale led to a rise in demand for labour, and thus initiated a steady flow of population towards urban centres. The conditions of employment for workers varied tremendously: some employers provided humane conditions of employment and good housing, while others provided poor accommodation and inadequate sanitation. In general the physical conditions were poor, and the situation was exacerbated by a widespread sense of dehumanization brought on by the experience of living in cities and the repetitive processes of industrial production.

Libertarian writers in Britain were sensitive to the potential impact of each of these revolutions on its citizens, though the character of their responses was by no means unanimous. The independent republican Thomas Paine (1737–1809) supported both the American and French Revolutions, making friends abroad and enemies at home through the publication of his *Common Sense* (1776) and *The Rights of Man* (1791, 1792), which advocated constitutionally defined rights and liberties. The rationalist and republican William Godwin (1756–1836), who wrote the *Enquiry Concerning Political Justice* (1793), advocated human happiness and social well-being as the sole purpose of existence, and rejected Paine's idea of inherent natural rights. Godwin's wife Mary Wollstonecraft (1759–97) was an active member of a radical circle, and in 1790 published *Vindication of the Rights of Men*, a treatise which defended the French Revolution by attacking the system of aristocratic values which kept the greater portion of humankind in subservience. This was followed in 1792 by her *Vindication of the Rights of Woman*, which adapted and extended French revolutionary rhetoric to embody the universal needs of women. Writers also emerged who fundamentally questioned the aims of revolution. Edmund Burke, who in 1790 published *Reflections on the Revolution in France*, recognized the increasingly uneasy state of political affairs on both sides of

the English Channel; he attempted to temper the optimism which greeted the French 'Declaration of the Rights of Man' in 1789. While understanding the excitement which some Britons felt had been growing since the time of Rousseau, Burke wished to restrain and condition the emerging libertarian optimism by an appeal to tradition and the status quo in order to maintain political balance.

This range of reactions among prose writers points to a fundamental characteristic of Romantic expression – whether enunciated by essayists, politicians, or imaginative writers: individuality. Such a statement, however, must take account of several contributing factors. First of all, the individuals concerned were bound together by the same range of social and political conditions to which they responded. Also, many were powerfully conscious of their agreement or disagreement with others. Some, such as William Wordsworth (1770–1850) and Samuel Taylor Coleridge (1772–1834), read each other's work, and occasionally collaborated in composition and publication. Consistent patterns of practice are, however, difficult to discern, and thus raise fundamental questions about the use of a term such as 'Romantic' to describe a corporate identity for writers of the period.

The novelty and experimentation apparent in Romantic writing was affected by the new political initiatives noted above, thus pointing to the strong affinity between the 'new' literature and the attempts to refashion society. In certain cases the two spheres intersected: Wordsworth, for example, spent some time in the years 1790–2 in France; and showed great enthusiasm for the Revolution (though this waned after the Terror); Coleridge and his friend Robert Southey (1774–1843) planned a utopian scheme of emigration to America called 'Pantisocracy'. In most instances the expressions were imaginative rather than experiential, and produced a variety of poems reflecting popular feeling. One anonymous lyric celebrating both the French and American Revolutions, 'The Trumpet of Liberty', included a chorus which began 'Fall Tyrants! fall! fall! fall!'. Another by John Wolcot ('Peter Pindar') entitled 'Hymn to the Guillotine' even welcomed this instrument of death, personified as the 'Daughter of Liberty', to England, where she would have much work to perform. The Industrial Revolution was also addressed, most famously by William Blake (1757–1827) in collections such as *Songs of Innocence* (1789) and *Songs of Experience* (1794), which point to the vulnerability of humankind, and outline the consequences of exploitation in such poems as 'Holy Thursday' from *Experience*, which identifies Britain as a 'land of poverty', and 'London', which points to the psychological degradation of the industrial classes, fettered in 'mind-forg'd manacles'.

In order for reformist sentiments to be disseminated, Romantic writers wished to give the impression of dispensing with class distinction, and to imbue their writings with a universal appeal and identification. Robert Burns (1759–96), the son of an Ayrshire tenant farmer, effected this association through his poems in Scots vernacular and his self-conscious attention to an ideal of human community. Wordsworth, who came from the Lake District, used his understanding of rural communal relationships to elevate the country dweller as an object for poetic contemplation. For his *Lyrical Ballads* (1798) he chose to describe and sentimentalize 'humble and rustic life', because in that condition 'the essential passions of the heart find a better soil in which

they can attain their maturity'; he claimed in his celebrated preface to the collection that the types depicted 'speak a plainer and more emphatic language'. Unlike Burns Wordsworth did not use dialect; instead he emphasized passions and values which he believed bore little resemblance to those formulated in sophisticated or urban spheres. The novelty of his presentation lay not in poetic form (many of the poems derive from traditional genres such as ballad), but rather in the attempt to divert attention away from the eighteenth-century appeal to gentility and artificiality.

In many cases Romantic poets wished to consider expected or established responses to the peasantry before departing from convention to present an original view. In Burns's 'The Cotter's Saturday Night' of 1786 (a poem which enters into a dialogue with Thomas Gray's 'Elegy Written in a Country Churchyard'), the poet uses the cottage dweller to represent the poor, who are not responsible for either disasters or achievements; yet he simultaneously employs this figure to represent the noble, religious, and familial Scottish sensibility. Thus these verses go far beyond mere adulation of the peasantry to evoke a desire for Scottish political autonomy. Wordsworth also overturns conventional assumptions. In such poems as 'We are Seven' and 'The Idiot Boy' (both 1798) expectations are raised concerning conventional responses of rural inhabitants; these remain unfulfilled, owing to the inability of the 'sophisticated' narrators to understand the alternative wisdom communicated by the rustic poor.

Such poetic expression leads to the conclusion that some writers believed they could offer a deeper insight into recognizable situations, and speak with an authentic, authoritative voice. Poets such as Wordsworth, Coleridge, Percy Bysshe Shelley (1792–1822) and John Keats (1795–1821) were keenly aware of their roles and responsibilities, and used their writings as opportunities for self-expression at the deepest level. Wordsworth, for example, expended great effort in his preface to *Lyrical Ballads* in answering the question 'What then does the Poet?' His answer focused on an individual with acutely tuned powers of observation, regarding the external world, and celebrating particular moments of existence. The poet 'rejoices more than other men', he claimed, 'in the spirit of life that is in him'. Coleridge, in the *Biographia Literaria* (1817), claimed that the poet employs the 'magical power' of the imagination to produce his work. Shelley, in *A Defence of Poetry* (1821), ascribed to poets a set of extraordinary qualities which made them 'the unacknowledged legislators of the world'. Keats wrote about the role of poets and poetry in his letters, and identified the work of Wordsworth as embodying the quality of the 'egotistical sublime'. He also carefully considered his own role: he made a conscious decision to give up an honourable career as a surgeon's dresser to devote his life to poetry. His goal was to be 'among the English Poets' – thus indicating not only his ambition but also his faith in himself. Like Wordsworth, Keats was sure that he possessed 'Abilities greater than most Men'.

This self-consciousness about the processes of poetic production gave rise to evocations in which the individual played a prominent – even supreme – role. In part this preoccupation can be explained by the changing nature of the response of poets to crucial events. While Wordsworth, in *The Prelude*, proclaimed of the early 1790s, 'Bliss was it in that dawn to be alive', his support for the Revolution

dissipated as the initial anticipation of reform gave way to the Terror of 1793. This event led to a moral crisis: the expectations of revolutionary reform were transformed into hopes for improvement by means of education and reason; for Wordsworth (and Coleridge) in particular, this led to a quest for revolution within the 'mind of man'.

The emphasis on the individual 'I' had significant implications: in addition to being highly selective, the concept was gendered. The answer to the question 'Who am I?' was affected by psychological, anthropological and political considerations. Since the time of John Locke's *An Essay concerning Human Understanding* (1690) it was believed that the intellectual, moral and spiritual senses were developed by associating sensations with ideas. In addressing the problem of 'What makes a human being?' scientific studies used essentialist arguments to discuss children, as well as so-called 'noble savages': that is, representatives of human beings in their pristine states, unaffected by adverse effects of socialization. Politics, through the writings of Rousseau, provided an answer to the question 'Who is fit to rule?' by advocating that democracy, regulated by rational 'man', was preferable to despotism.

Such considerations gave the 'I' visionary power to transcend the terrestrial limits of human existence for prophetic, momentary glimpses of a better world beyond. In order to sustain this appeal to the poet's mind, feelings, and ideas, an intuitive appeal to nature was seen as fundamental. Its treatment went beyond mere loco-description or appeal to the picturesque, to encompass the relationship between the perceiving mind and the object of perception; such contemplation could, in certain circumstances, be elevated to a state of consciousness which transcended the beautiful, and encompassed the 'sublime'. This is the process which is at work in Wordsworth's poem 'Lines Written a Few Miles above Tintern Abbey' (1798); the perceived intensity of the transcendent experience in the poem assists in explaining the long-cherished perception that Romantic poetry was primarily concerned with 'Nature' (usually capitalized).

The rhetorical strategy employed by many Romantic subjects implies that their objects occupy positions of silence, separateness, and otherness. This separation is true not only of the poet–nature duality, but also of the writer in relation to the silent auditors and addressees of Romantic literature, from Wordsworth's 'Tintern Abbey', where his sister Dorothy is the listener, to Coleridge's 'conversation poems' such as 'The Eolian Harp' (1795) and 'Frost at Midnight' (1798), which turn out to be blank verse monologues. While such works claim that a stable relationship exists between subject and object, the absence of opportunity for the listener to answer back problematizes the alliance.

The cases where the subject–object duality is questioned are revealing. Many of those which challenged the relationship directly were by women, and include Amelia Opie's 'The Maniac' (1808) and Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein* (1818). In Opie's poem the gap between the speaker and the listener/object is openly acknowledged, while in Shelley's novel the object (Frankenstein's creature) gains a voice, and offers a powerful critique of Romantic patriarchal egotism. Interestingly, it goes beyond this simple opposition: each of the major characters – Walton, Frankenstein, and the

creature – serves as both narrator and listener, in an effort to seek out points of identification to relieve keenly felt anxieties. This duality was inherited and variously transformed by the Victorians, as you will find in the discussion of subjective–objective tensions in Unit 12.

Recent gender studies have forced a re-examination of canonical Romantic texts in ways noted above; the new critical climate has also allowed for the unearthing of a significant number of previously silenced women Romantic writers, including Felicia Hemans (1793–1835) and Laetitia Landon (1802–38), whose agendas are strikingly different from their male counterparts. There are, however, other means of revealing perceived fallacies in traditional assessments of Romantic literature. The assumption that Romantic writers expressed unabashed confidence in the supremacy of individual consciousness through the 'I' may be challenged by examining what Coleridge, in the *Biographia Literaria*, calls the 'anxiety of authorship'. Many Romantic texts become actively involved in the processes of reading by providing prefaces (as in the cases of Wordsworth's *Lyrical Ballads*, and *Poems* of 1815, as well as Coleridge's 'Kubla Khan' of 1816) or marginal notes (such as those for Byron's *The Giaour*, 1813, and Coleridge's 'Rime of the Ancient Mariner', added to the poem in 1817); such authorial commentary implies that writers were anxious to educate their readers in 'correct' ways of reading. In each case the prefatory material or marginalia prepares the reader for unfamiliar texts, providing a 'key' to understanding.

It would seem that writers such as Wordsworth, Coleridge, and Byron, in their roles as cultural arbiters or prophets, were apprehensive about whether or not their audiences were actually there. It should also be remembered that Coleridge published part of the *Biographia Literaria* for the same reason as Wordsworth had published his preface to *Lyrical Ballads*: to refute adverse criticism. The self-consciousness of writers extended to their questioning the nature of their addressees: while in many cases the listeners were denied speaking positions, in other instances the addressees were other writers: Coleridge, for example, addressed 'This Lime-Tree Bower my Prison' (1800) to Charles Lamb; Shelley addressed his elegy 'Adonais' (1821) to the dead Keats; Wordsworth's monumental poem *The Prelude* (1798, 1805, 1850) was addressed to his 'beloved Friend' Coleridge. This pattern indicates that writing to and about friends creates an ideal audience, which supposedly understands and sympathizes with the aims of the writer, and does not need to answer back. Yet fears do remain, and are most clearly enunciated by George Crabbe (1754–1832) in his verse tale 'The Patron' (1812), which presents the horror of the breakdown between writer and audience; the poet is seen as a kind of pet, who receives 'siren-flattery' from the aristocratic audience he is amusing. The narrative ends with his untimely death and descent into eternal silence.

The anxieties described represent another facet of the Romantic preoccupation with selfhood. When the individual personality is minutely examined in texts, writers often reveal a preoccupation with psychological struggle or conflict. The working out of a problem is directed inwardly, examining errors, guilt, division of allegiance, and a splitting of the ego-image. The Romantic art of confession is often depicted as a struggle within the character of the narrator or protagonist, and occasionally

involves the internalization and reworking of biblical or classical texts. Such is the case in Wordsworth's 'Nutting' (1800), which engages with Genesis 2 and 3 and Milton's *Paradise Lost* to trace a four-stage process through transgression, recognition of error, admonishment and recovery. Another internalized study of motivation is Byron's *Cain* (1821), which examines the Fall and the first murder; here the struggle is seen as a battle of wills between the 'hero' Cain and the anti-heroic Lucifer. Byron (1788–1824) uses the Fall as the occasion for providing humankind with the 'gift' of reason, and generating the potential for inner conflict. Extended examinations of troubled states of mind are also provided by James Hogg (1770–1835) in his novel *The Private Memoirs and Confessions of a Justified Sinner* (1824) and Thomas De Quincey (1785–1859) in his autobiographical account of drug addiction, *Confessions of an English Opium-Eater* (1821).

Division within the self also inspires contemplation of ideal objects on which to rest hopes and aspirations; such is the case in Keats's 'Ode to a Nightingale' (1819), and Coleridge's 'Constancy to an Ideal Object' (1828). In each case the object of contemplation is an ideal, which does not exist in the material world. Keats represents himself as a figure of pain and melancholy, and the poem is an opportunity to consider whether or not the nightingale can serve as a vehicle for achieving spiritual and mental health. Coleridge's object is an elusive 'Thought', seen initially as 'The only constant in a world of change'. In each case the object departs, leaving the poet in a state of ambiguity, self-doubt and solitude. Another interesting example of Romantic struggle is Keats's 'Ode on a Grecian Urn' (1820), in which an imaginary object is contemplated, but with the added complication of the urn's enigmatic reply – 'Beauty is truth, truth beauty'.

As well as revealing anxiety and an occupation with inner struggle, Romantic treatments of psychological states could incorporate more sinister – even terrifying – impressions. Such is the character of gothic literature, a genre emerging as a response to the revolutions of the period, and characterized by a shift from the earlier eighteenth-century reliance on the enlightened rationality of humanity, to the questioning of the self and acknowledgement of the unconscious and darker side of the human psyche. It is firmly rooted in the psychology of the self, especially as manifested in altered or irrational modes of consciousness, such as sleeping, dreaming, and drug-induced states of mind. The works arising out of this interest represent a reaction against comfort, security and intellectual stability; above all, they resist the confining fetters of the reasonable, rational faculties.

Romantic texts containing features of the Gothic included ballads, such as William Taylor's 'Ellenore', Matthew Gregory Lewis's 'The Erl-King' (both 1795) and Coleridge's 'Rime of the Ancient Mariner' (1798); there were also real or imagined fragments, such as Coleridge's 'Christabel' and 'Kubla Khan' (both 1816). However, the genre which became the clearest embodiment of gothic elements was the novel, whose range was extended far beyond the eighteenth-century concern with sensibility to allow for extended treatment of deeply disturbing subjects. Some novels, such as Horace Walpole's *Castle of Otranto* (1764), William Beckford's *Vathek* (1786) and Lewis's *The Monk* (1796) offered limited psychological insight, and catered amply to the popular taste for the sensational and supernatural; others,

including Shelley's *Frankenstein* and Hogg's *Justified Sinner*, went beyond merely satisfying the literary consumer to investigate the psychological motivations of the protagonist, and to probe the construction of moral responsibility. A discussion of the gothic novel in the eighteenth century will be found in Unit 9.

While the gothic exposed fallacies in the construction of a unified conception of selfhood, an alternative process was at work to sustain a synthesized image of both the human person and the national consciousness in the Romantic period. The ideology of Orientalism served as a public discourse which distinguished between a technologically advanced, morally validated, and comfortably domesticated West, and its opposite – the supposedly backward, silenced, and exotic East. While Egypt, India, Syria, Palestine and China interested travellers and scholars in the early nineteenth century, the nature of the published reports about the 'mystic' Orient disclosed a Eurocentricity which produced an unequal relationship, in which the 'Other' is silenced, spoken about authoritatively and has no opportunity to answer back. This statement applies to literary, political and architectural expressions: in each case interest was focused not on exact reproductions but rather on Western constructions of Eastern subjects.

The artificial nature of Orientalism can be seen in the work of William Jones (1746–94), a translator of Sanskrit and high court judge in Calcutta, who was avidly read by Byron and other Romantic poets; his poems, such as the 'Hymn to Na'ra'yena' (1785), represent a European appropriation of the Orient. For him the study of Eastern culture and languages strengthened the commercial relationship between Britain and colonies like India. In the process he domesticated what was perceived as foreign by pointing to affinities between the Indian tradition of epic and myth, and that of Europe, represented by the work of Hesiod and Milton.

Other writers paid more attention to the 'Otherness' of Eastern texts. Coleridge, for example, recognized the problems of interpretation posed by the perplexing visions in 'Kubla Khan'. Southey accentuated the foreignness of Oriental subject matter by using an unusual metre for *Thalaba, the Destroyer* (1801), and describing it as 'the Arabesque ornament of an Arabian tale'; so too did Walter Savage Landor (1775–1864) in *Gebir* (1798). These writers recognized that an unusual form was demanded to represent unfamiliar subject matter. At the same time, however, these texts served as opportunities to make political statements. *Gebir*, for example, condemns British foreign policy, while supporting Napoleon's invasion of Egypt. Byron (who advised his friend Thomas Moore to 'stick to the East' because 'the North, South, and West, have all been exhausted') published *The Giaour* to raise questions about the certainty of the British imperial project; in the process he revealed absences and frailties in Western constructions of identity, thereby offering a vision of a society in crisis.

Instead of offering an impression of synthesized literary response to social, political, and cultural developments in the years 1780–1830, this assessment of Romanticism has demonstrated that this relatively brief period was one of turmoil and disquiet, punctuated by feelings of restlessness, anxiety, and uncertainty. The responses were more individually motivated than corporate, dissonant rather than consonant. Canonical literary history has attempted to collectivize these views into

recognizable and abiding patterns; more recent studies have, however, tended to discount such approaches. Nevertheless the period stands out as one of great energy, freshness and excitement, in which writers engaged with the great questions raised by the self and the world.

The best recent general studies of Romanticism are by Butler (1981), Everest (1990) and Chase (1993); Watson (1985; 2nd ed. 1992) on Romantic poetry is also highly recommended. The European context is ably surveyed by Furst (1976, 1979). The French Revolution and other political events are covered by Butler (1984), Roe (1988) and Everest (1991). Major themes are considered in collections by Aers (1981) and Curran (1993). On Romantic aesthetics, Abrams (1971) and Weiskel (1976) are useful. A detailed account of the problematic relationship between Romantic poets and genre can be found in Curran (1986). Canonical assumptions about the period are interrogated in McGann (1983) and Johnston et al. (1990). Studies which encourage rereadings based on recent critical discourses also abound: these include Levinson et al. (1989) on new historicism, Punter (1989) on psychoanalysis, Leask (1992) on Orientalism, and Mellor (1993) on gender. The collection by Wu (1995) contains a number of useful reassessments of individual authors. Two recent alphabetically arranged compendia by Dabundo (1992) and Raimond and Watson (1992) provide excellent and concise coverage of the major figures and issues of the period.

Texts, authors, contexts

Blake, Wordsworth and the novelty of Romantic expression

> O Rose thou art sick.
> (Blake, 'The Sick Rose', 1794)

> 'How many are you then,' said I,
> 'If they are two in heaven?'
> The little Maiden did reply,
> 'O Master! we are seven!'
>
> 'But they are dead; those two are dead!
> Their spirits are in heaven!'
> 'Twas throwing words away; for still
> The little Maid would have her will,
> And said, 'Nay, we are seven!'
>
> (Wordsworth, 'We Are Seven', 1798)

These two passages are characteristic of the ways in which Romantic poets reshaped ostensibly familiar subject matter for new purposes. Both Blake and Wordsworth wished to communicate an inadequate fit between real and apparent in the turbulent 1790s, by using the established and popular genres of ballad and song to examine contradiction and ambiguity in constructions which were supposedly secure.

'The Sick Rose' was part of a collection entitled *Songs of Experience* (1794) which, when joined to the earlier *Songs of Innocence* (1789), represented for Blake, as he noted in his subtitle, 'Two Contrary States of the Human Soul'. The poems are lyrics, or short, non-narrative verses presenting a single speaker expressing a state of mind. There is ample intertextual influence from the Bible, Milton and Dante, and moralizing children's poetry and hymnody; yet despite the apparent simplicity of subject matter and rhythm, Blake's poems contain complex religious and mythological associations which form an elaborate infrastructure for the collection. The *Songs* do not reflect merely oppositions, but a series of shifting perceptions pointing to a dialectic between Edenic innocence and worldly experience, in which an awareness of the shifting tensions of both states is essential.

Some poems in the collection are paired, and even display the same title (for example 'Holy Thursday' or 'The Chimney Sweeper') in order to examine a situation from different perspectives. Contrasts are rendered even more striking in the coloured plates which Blake (an engraver by profession) designed to accompany the text. 'The Blossom' from *Innocence* is the companion to 'The Sick Rose', and whereas long rhythmic lines of 'The Blossom' advocate the acceptance of happiness and sorrow unreservedly, the short, staccato effect produced by 'The Sick Rose' suggests destruction.

On a literal level, the discovery of meaning in the poem is problematic. While Blake's diction is easily understood, he is not engaging in simple botanical depiction which can be related to everyday experience. His frame of reference has shifted from non-verbal experience to literature, and it is only by considering other manifestations of literary roses that this poem can be understood. He assumes that his literate readers bring to their reading experience an intertextual awareness of a myriad of meanings for the word 'Rose'. The strong convention of the rose in literature has endowed it with standard, supposedly secure connotations of love, order and beauty. The reader thinks of the *Romance of the Rose*, Dante's Rose of Heaven, and Burns's poem 'O my Luve's like a red, red rose', to name but a few instances where the rose accords with expectations. Blake turns the conventional world of the rose upside down by identifying it as 'sick'; he challenges an established literary symbol by making it the opposite of what it should be.

In the context of the Romantic age 'The Sick Rose' can be seen to offer a critique of the adverse effects of the 'age of revolution' on a previously innocent, untainted agrarian population. The 'howling storm' in which the 'invisible worm' (another multivalent image) advances serves as an indication of the effect which the advancing forces of industrialism and materialism had on Britain's citizens. The poem can also be interpreted as an examination of the troubles engendered by sexual relationships, in which the 'dark secret love' of the worm finds the 'bed/Of crimson joy', and annihilates the Rose. While the message is rendered acceptable or more palatable by the use of the lyric mode, the subject matter is presented in a novel fashion, through the concept of a 'sick' rose. In this way Blake overturns the expectations of his readers and, through his extraordinary sensitivity to the conventional associations of words, provides a novel response to his changing times.

Wordsworth was also interested in the overturning of convention in his *Lyrical Ballads* (1798). In his preface to the collection he claimed that his aim was to choose incidents and situations from 'humble and rustic life', and present 'ordinary things' in an 'unusual aspect'. For this he was well qualified, owing to his intimate understanding of the rural community into which he was born. Like Blake he employed a familiar genre – the ballad – and embellished it with what he called the 'language really used by men' in order to celebrate a system of values which he believed was waning in his increasingly industrialized country. 'We Are Seven' is a characteristic example of the working out of Wordsworth's project. It presents an unimaginative, unfeeling narrator (who should not be identified with the poet), confronted with the intuitive vision and imaginative instinct of a rustic child, who insists that there are seven in her family; the rational narrator, obsessed by mathematical accuracy, counters with the assertion that two of them are dead, and there are therefore five. By the end of the poem there is a deadlock: neither character is willing to modify what was originally asserted. The situation is ostensibly simple, yet communicates knowledge which overturns conventional expectations.

Wordsworth was well aware of the eighteenth-century tradition of adulation of the peasant, and the idealization of this figure as the representative of a common humanity. Writers such as James Thomson and Thomas Gray observed rustic life from a sophisticated, elevated perspective, which provided a false impression of the subjects under observation. Wordsworth wished to break with the artificialities of this inherited tradition, and allow the rural inhabitants to speak for themselves in his poems. 'We Are Seven' departs from established tradition by depicting a confrontation between the educated, sophisticated adult narrator, who appears with long-cherished conventional expectations about rural life, and the child, whose power and wisdom stems from feelings and beliefs to which the adult has no access. The narrator's conventional view is marked by his unobservant description of the girl: 'She had a rustic, woodland air'; he also believes that the child's assertion of 'we are seven!' is nonsense, because her brother and sister lie buried in the churchyard. The questions he asks are typical and patronizing, and he does not like the answers he receives.

The poem depicts the narrator in the role of tourist, who hopes to appreciate something of nature and rural life which conforms to an established – and false – pattern. His disappointment serves to indicate the distance between himself and the child, who is Wordsworth's authentic image of a rural inhabitant, and who has developed an intimate relationship with the land, which is not disturbed by such considerations as death, seen here as a natural extension of life. For the girl the graves are incorporated into her domestic environment, and she goes there to knit stockings and hem kerchiefs. Her idea of community contrasts markedly with the isolation occasioned by life in the city, a place where, as Wordsworth was later to remark in *The Prelude*, next-door neighbours are strangers, and do not know each other's names. Rural environments, on the other hand, provide a location where community and family allegiances are strong; if the representative urbanized interlocutor (whom Wordsworth means his readers to recognize) divests himself of the exigencies of taste and accepts the rural inhabitant's pronouncements, he

will recognize the meaningful, unconventional wisdom which such expression embodies.

The two poems examined are not radical because they embody revolutionary thought, or because they evoke sentiments of the underprivileged in society. Instead they operate by shifting their perspective away from gentility and false sophistication in order to force a self-conscious examination of the process of poetic production, as well as the situations described. Both Blake and Wordsworth were aware that in order to attune their audiences to what they saw as the pressing difficulties of their time, they had to move cautiously in order to overcome the pressing weight of tradition. Both employed established genres for new purposes, and in the process diverted attention away from canonical assumptions in order to force a re-examination of both the form and subject matter of poetry.

The best studies of Blake are by Frye (1967), Gleckner (1959) and Raine (1970). There are inexpensive editions, with coloured plates, of the *Songs of Innocence* (1971) and *Experience* (1984). Hilton (1986) has edited an essential collection of articles. Wordsworth's *Lyrical Ballads* are thoroughly examined by Jacobus (1976), Parrish (1973) and Sheats (1973). The 'humanity' in his poetry is explored by Beer (1978). A detailed study which contextualizes both Blake's *Songs* and Wordsworth's *Lyrical Ballads* is by Glen (1983).

Wordsworth and the construction of the Romantic subject

> And I have felt
> A presence that disturbs me with the joy
> Of elevated thoughts; a sense sublime
> Of something far more deeply interfused,
> Whose dwelling is the light of setting suns,
> And the round ocean and the living air,
> And the blue sky, 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.
>
> (Wordsworth, 'Lines Written a few miles above Tintern Abbey', 1798)

'Tintern Abbey' is a poem which embodies many of the features commonly associated with Romantic poetry: egotism, prophecy, the Sublime, Nature and transcendence. It was composed by Wordsworth during a ramble with his sister Dorothy in the Wye Valley, and first appeared at the end of the 1798 edition of *Lyrical Ballads*. Its full title, 'Lines written a few miles above Tintern Abbey, on revisiting the banks of the Wye during a tour, July 13 1798', excites expectations of picturesque description; however, as in 'We Are Seven', conventionality is abandoned in favour of something more fundamental: the poet, writing in autobiographical mode, wishes to explore the effects of memory, time and landscape

upon the imagination. It is also unlike many of the other ballads in that it is written in blank verse paragraphs, and intended, according to Wordsworth's note, to recall the manner of the ode.

The poem contains several movements, emphasizing what the poet called 'the impassioned music of versification'. It opens traditionally, and lines 1–22 present the verdant landscape, composed of 'pastoral farms' and 'plots of cottage-ground', first visited five years before, in 1793. There then follows an exposition of the restorative powers of memory which, when recollected in tranquillity ('that serene and blessed mood'), produces an extraordinary power of joyful and harmonious vision to 'see into the life of things' (ll. 23–49). In an attempt to substantiate the source of this power, lines 50–112 reassert the conviction that it stems from a recollection of the Wye, which has evolved over time, from childhood (when nature was 'all in all') to adulthood, when he can perceive 'The still, sad music of humanity'; this feeling is not communicated entirely through the senses, but rather through an awareness of transcendence, that visionary intensity which allows the individual who has been burdened by the mechanism and empiricism, of terrestrial existence, to go beyond these limits to catch a momentary glimpse of a better world beyond. In the final paragraph (ll. 113–60) the poet addresses his 'dear Friend', his sister Dorothy, who has not reached the same level of development as he has, and so serves as the 'anchor' or touchstone from which he can depart for the sublime region of transcendence.

The pattern to which this poem adheres allows Wordsworth to subvert convention by transforming an eighteenth-century loco-descriptive poem into complex, revolutionary testimony to self-discovery. In the process he exhibits characteristics common to many Romantic poets, who wish to emphasize the position of authority occupied by the Romantic subject. Blake, for example, endorsed the idea of poet as prophet, or bard of imaginative and spiritual visions; Coleridge sanctioned the impression of the poet as imaginative seer, and as sufferer of dark visions of remorse; Shelley cast the poet as political visionary and spirit of radical change. While individual poems may express doubt or depict a troubled soul, in almost every case the authority of the individual – and the inability of the addressee to answer back – are confirmed. In 'Tintern Abbey' Wordsworth uses sensations of remembered natural scenery to contribute to an expression of joy at being able to apprehend the sublime sense of a living presence in the active universe. There is an awareness, however, that such perception is selective, and he is one of the chosen few.

'Tintern Abbey' has long been admired for its appeal to Nature (the capitalization is Wordsworth's). While Wordsworth was deeply absorbed by the revolutionary atmosphere and rhetoric in the 1780s and early 1790s, in these verses (which may be seen as an early poetic manifesto), the intensity of his love of nature precludes other concerns, such as class division, the effects of industrialization, or indeed the social enquiries prompted by the age of revolution. Here 'emotion recollected in tranquillity', as he notes in the preface to *Lyrical Ballads*, is singularly stimulated by Nature, then released in joyous confidence, and variously applied or illustrated by moral and social incident. The poem marks a subordination of social concerns in favour of an essentialism grounded in nature, which was in Words-

worth's day still largely untainted by human mismanagement, and therefore reliable as a touchstone for human experience.

Wordsworth's rhetorical strategy illustrates the common tendency in masculine Romanticism to delineate carefully between subject and object. In this poem both nature and Dorothy are objectified and silenced, thus having no presence or vitality of their own: they only exist in so far as they are of use to the poet. Feminized nature paradoxically serves as both mother and lover, with the power to create as well as arouse: she nurtures and cares for the masculine subject, relieving him of his 'heavy and weary weight', and providing the 'power/Of harmony' for his contemplation; she is also an object of desire, who helps him to achieve a climax which fills him with a 'sense sublime'. Dorothy, the addressee, is also objectified: she does not appear until the last paragraph, and serves as a mirror of what the poet once was – a steadfast point of reference. She is subordinated both physically and intellectually, left behind while her brother experiences 'elevated thoughts'. Like nature, she too is the archetypal victim of Romantic egotism.

The narrator seems to believe that the relationship between listener and addressee is stable; but there are hints of anxiety, elicited in the frequent use of 'if', as well as in the strong exhortations to Dorothy to remember his discourse with 'tender joy'. Such clues point to an uneasiness about the potential acceptance of the poet's statements by his audience. Although he yearns for responsive listeners, there is an innate awareness that the fragile relationship between speaker and listener might break down.

A greater degree of instability, anxiety and even self-pity is apparent in Coleridge's poem 'Dejection: An Ode'. It was the last of the 'conversation poems', and written in April 1802, when Wordsworth was composing his 'Immortality Ode'. 'Dejection' represents a stark contrast to 'Tintern Abbey', in its exploration of an 'affliction': the poet's failure to respond to the stimuli of natural phenomena, and the decay of his 'shaping spirit of Imagination'. The poem is a particularly interesting example of the insecure relationship between the speaker and listener, because in its several versions the identity of the addressee changes: when first drafted in April 1802 it was addressed to 'Sara' Hutchinson; by July 1802 it was directed to 'William' Wordsworth; in October 1802, when published in the *Morning Post* on Wordsworth's wedding-day, it was addressed to 'Edmund' (a pseudonym for Wordsworth); finally in 1817, when issued as part of *Sibylline Leaves*, attention reverts to Sara, who is called 'Lady'. Such indecision about the listener's identity points to Coleridge's fundamental inability to find an adequate repository for his particular vision. It would seem that the poet is effectively addressing the only stable consciousness in this desperate situation – himself, for only he can appreciate and respond to the correlatives he identifies in the poem: grief and joy, darkness and light, death and life, sterility and creativity – as he examines his own shifting, anxious condition.

Wordsworth's 'Tintern Abbey' is a far more confident poem than Coleridge's 'Dejection', and also a pivotal one: coming at the end of the *Lyrical Ballads*, it celebrates the distinctiveness of the watching and receiving heart. Like Coleridge's 'Frost at Midnight' (to which Wordsworth's poem responded) it contains assessments of past, present and future. It looks back five years to the poet's former self,

as well as to the eighteenth-century loco-descriptive tradition from which it departs (for a discussion of the landscape poetry of Thomson, Akenside and Dyer, see Unit 8, pp. 183–7); it also addresses the way in which memories recalled in the present rescue experience from the ravages of time; finally it looks forward to a time when the poet can confidently incorporate the physical and psychological disturbances of his earlier years into a pattern of ultimate good.

The fulfilment forecast in 'Tintern Abbey' is finally achieved in *The Prelude*. Addressed to Coleridge, this long autobiographical poem in blank verse, first drafted in 1799, expanded in 1805, revised at intervals until 1839, and finally published posthumously in 1850, records the 'growth of a poet's mind', and shapes a set of momentous incidents in a poet's life into an ideal pattern of self-representation. It differs from 'Tintern Abbey' both in scope and in point of termination. In both cases there is celebration and elevation of the 'I' figure, but it is only in *The Prelude* that Wordsworth's mature thinking can be understood. Hope and vision are mingled with sorrow and disappointment; public appears alongside private. The self-declared theme is 'no other than the very heart of man', and in the course of the poem he considers nature, time, memory, and the building of the self. When he, 'foremost of the Band', reaches the top of Mount Snowdon in the climactic passage in book XIV (1850; XIII in 1805), climbing out of the mist into the moonlight to view the illuminating and symbolic chasm, he declares triumphantly: 'it appeared to me/The perfect image of a mighty mind'. It is here that Wordsworth experiences the profundity and sublimity of the poetic imagination, and stands as the epitome of the Romantic subject: authoritative, confident, and transcendent.

Of particular note is the essay by Hartman (1966) on *Lyrical Ballads* as well as the study by Gill (1991) on *The Prelude*. Also useful is the work by Hartman (1964) on the self and the external world in Wordsworth. Coleridge's 'Dejection: An Ode' is carefully considered by Dekker (1978). Identity and self-expression are considered by Ball (1968), and the question of authority is examined by Simpson (1979); the Romantic imagination is thoroughly interrogated in the casebook edited by Hill (1977). Gender issues in Wordsworth are given careful consideration by Mellor (1993); Dorothy in particular is examined by Barrell (1988).

Frankenstein and the interrogation of Romantic individualism

> When I reflected on the work I had completed, no less a one than the creation of a sensitive and rational animal, I could not rank myself with the herd of common projectors. But this thought, which supported me in the commencement of my career, now serves only to plunge me lower in the dust. All my speculations and hopes are as nothing, and like the archangel who aspired to omnipotence, I am chained in an eternal hell. My imagination was vivid, yet my powers of analysis and application were intense; by the union of these qualities I conceived the idea and executed the creation of a man. ... I trod heaven in my thoughts, now exulting in my powers, now burning with the idea of their effects. From my infancy I was imbued with high hopes and lofty ambition; but how I am sunk! Oh! My friend, if you had known me as I once was, you would not

> recognize me in this state of degradation. Despondency rarely visited my heart; a high destiny seemed to bear me on, until I fell, never, never again to rise. (Mary Shelley, *Frankenstein or, the Modern Prometheus*, [1818] 1985, p. 254)

An examination of Wordsworth's poetry demonstrates the extent to which masculine Romantic ideology was imbued with patriarchal rhetoric, radical politics, and the unquestioned authority of the subject. Feminine Romantic discourse, on the other hand, offered an alternative mode of expression based on the family politic, and promoted the idea that reform evolved gradually and rationally under the mutual guidance and nurturing of parents. Felicia Hemans, for example, demonstrated her support for domestic, social and spiritual pieties in poems such as 'The Graves of the Household' and 'The Homes of England' (both 1828). Laetitia Landon expressed a similar attitude in such sentimental lyrics as 'The Enchanted Island' (1825). Such themes may also be found in women novelists of the period, including Maria Edgeworth (1767–1849) and Jane Austen (1775–1817). Mary Shelley too was concerned with questioning many canonical assumptions about the value of individual ambition and endeavour, and the appropriate mechanisms for change; she extended her argument beyond those of her contemporaries, to challenge prevailing ideas concerning science, procreation and the constitution of selfhood.

Mary was the daughter of Mary Wollstonecraft (who died shortly after the child's birth) and William Godwin; she grew up in a household imbued with the principles of liberty and human rights. In 1814 she eloped with Percy Shelley (who was then still married), bore a daughter in 1815 (who died shortly after birth) and a son in early 1816; then, after the suicide of Shelley's wife Harriet, Mary and Percy married. *Frankenstein* was conceived in Switzerland during the summer of 1816, while in the company of her husband, Byron, and a Dr Polidori, and at a time when the works of Milton and Coleridge formed the staple of her reading programme. As she notes in her introduction to the novel, the narrative grew out of conversations on philosophy, nature, the myth of Prometheus, science, electricity, galvanism and 'the principle of life'. What emerged as her novel is a complex amalgam of these ideas, interwoven into a text of great psychological and moral insight.

The novel is narrated from three points of view, thus separating several levels of experience, and allowing for a delineation between the safe, domestic, familiar locations, and those which contain elements of the sublime and the gothic. The first narrator is Robert Walton, who dispatches matter-of-fact letters to his sister in England; he describes his journey towards the North Pole and his meeting with Victor Frankenstein (who is in search of the monster he has created, and now wishes to destroy). His function is to enclose the various narratives within a frame of realism, in order to decipher the occurrences for the domestic sensibilities of his sister, and to signal that such values must be left behind when men embark on their quests for adventure, passion and individual achievement.

The second narrative voice is that of Frankenstein, a Genevese student of natural science, disappointed by the unresponsiveness of social institutions to individual needs, and motivated by extravagant selfhood; he embarks on a confessional concerning his retreat from society and his creation of the monster, a Promethean accomplishment motivated by the elation he feels after discovering the

secret of imparting life to matter (Shelley's response to the contemporary interest in galvanism and in the work of Erasmus Darwin). Horrified by the grotesque appearance of the creature (who serves as Victor's alter ego), he abandons it. The unnamed monster, who discovers impediments to his forming successful human relationships, then turns to murder and revenge, killing Frankenstein's friend Clerval, his brother, and his bride Elizabeth. This series of events represents a challenge to Victor's authority by his creation, who exclaims, 'You are my creator, but I am your master'.

The innermost narrative is that of the creature (identified by Frankenstein as a 'monster' and an 'abortion') who tells of his own misery at being continually rejected by society; he laments: 'Everywhere I see bliss, from which I alone am irrevocably excluded. I was benevolent and good; misery made me a fiend.' Although initially he is the epitome of the essential human being in the manner envisioned by Locke and Rousseau, untainted by the negative effects of social conditioning, he quickly realizes that those around him perceive him as representing a threat to their existence; indeed even virtuous and enlightened individuals like Frankenstein and Felix De Lacey fail to perceive his inner worth because of his outward appearance. This individual, like Frankenstein and Walton, is a victim of anxieties engendered by a society which cannot accept this individual it has helped to create. Shelley also draws intertextual parallels between the creature and Adam, whose creator gives him Eve as a companion on account of his lonely wretchedness. There are also echoes of Milton's Satan from *Paradise Lost*, who embarks on a course of jealous destruction in order to vindicate his dissociated existence. The connection is confirmed by the creature who, after reading Victor's journal, and thus confirming his real identity, exclaims: 'Accursed creator! Why form a monster so hideous that even you turned from me in disgust? ... Satan had his companions, fellow-devils, to admire and encourage him, but I am solitary and abhorred.'

The narrative structure resembles a set of three Chinese boxes, each contained in the other, and each with a similar moral: passion – that motivation of social progress envisioned by the Enlightenment, and that inward imperative and sign of authentic selfhood in Romantic fiction – serves to isolate the individual from society; it destroys the domestic affections, and brings the individual to the edge of self-obliteration. *Frankenstein* illustrates negatively what Percy Shelley identified as the work's chief concern: 'the exhibition of the amiableness of domestic affection, and the excellence of universal virtue'.

For nature and womanhood – the objectified, silenced receptors of masculine Romantic expression – the novel has special resonances. Frankenstein is imbued with scientific ambition and machismo; he is determined to 'penetrate into the recesses of nature and see how she works in her hiding-places'. He may be seen as wishing to dominate in a power relationship with nature, seeking (like Wordsworth) to achieve transcendental knowledge. Yet the 'unnatural' character of the experiment emphasizes the disparity between the ideal and the real, or the ambition and the accomplishment. Frankenstein's enterprise is misdirected: his attempt to achieve control over natural processes, to create a 'new species', goes horribly wrong. Not only is the monster (who should have served as the object of masculine Romantic

ambition) given an identity, he is also permitted to speak and act independently, in a manner never envisioned by his creator. This usurpation of the position of the Romantic subject is used by Shelley to demonstrate the dangers inherent in the excesses of individualism.

The patriarchal structures of families and institutions are everywhere evident in the text, and there is a distinct lack of female presence; those who do appear, such as Justine Moritz and Elizabeth Lavenza, are weak, passive, and eventually killed. The case of Elizabeth (who is raised as Victor's sister) is particularly significant: she dies at the hands of the creature, on the night when her marriage to Victor should have been consummated. By not allowing Victor to experience a sexual union Shelley reinforces the degree to which he has removed himself from human companionship and sexual means of procreation. His becoming sole progenitor, thus usurping the one special power given to women, serves as an emblem of his complete dissociation from human community.

Useful studies of Shelley's life and work are those by Spark (1988) and Mellor (1988). Kiely (1972) and Kelly (1989) consider her fiction in the wider context of the Romantic novel in England; the collection by Knoepflmacher and Levine (1979) considers the enduring popularity of the work. Feminist approaches include those by Poovey (1984), Jacobus (1984) and Winnett (1990). The monster in particular is examined by Musselwhite (1987) and Baldick (1987), and the narrative structure is examined by Newman (1986).

Coleridge and the Gothic

> 'God save thee, ancient Mariner!
> From the fiends, that plague thee thus!–
> Why look'st thou so?' – With my cross-bow
> I shot the albatross.
>
> (Coleridge, 'The Rime of the Ancient Mariner', 1798)

> Then drawing in her breath aloud,
> Like one that shuddered, she unbound
> The cincture from beneath her breast:
> Her silken robe, and inner vest,
> Dropt to her feet, and in full view,
> Behold! her bosom, and half her side–
> A sight to dream of, not to tell!
>
> (Coleridge, 'Christabel', 1816)

Frankenstein analyzes the complex constitution of personality by considering the inadequate fit between real and apparent. Certain experiences or situations in the novel, such as the search for hidden knowledge, cannot be linguistically validated through rational discourse, and must therefore be represented alternatively through an investigation of the darker aspects of human existence. The literary genre which evokes such altered states of consciousness has come to be known as the gothic.

'Gothic' was a term used originally to deride anything barbaric or uncouth. It is now applied to a particular form of literature and art which arose during the late eighteenth century, a time of revolution and changing intellectual attitudes, involving a shift from a reliance on the enlightened rationality of humanity, to the questioning of the self and acknowledgement of the darker side of the human psyche. The gothic is firmly rooted in the psychology of the self, especially the unconscious, and it is important to note the large number of writers working in the gothic mode (including Coleridge and Mary Shelley) who attribute their inspiration to dreams.

'The Rime of the Ancient Mariner' represents an attempt to depict the rhythms, forms and images of the dream world as part of a quest for new frontiers of consciousness. It uses the traditional ballad form to narrate a strange sequence of events: the mariner stops a man who is on the way to a wedding, and then relates a literal and figurative voyage of discovery, during which he arbitrarily shoots an albatross, then experiences guilt and immeasurable psychological suffering. The poem permits access to the unconscious mind, that pathway to a deeper exploration and realization of individual personality. The secrets of this mode of being are repressed during the rational, waking state, and can only escape in the world of sleep and dreams, where the psyche is unfettered from the restrictive demands of rationality and ordered social interaction. The literary dream text thus tends to free itself from all logical structure, and presents itself as a sequence of strange, anxiety-generating events (Coleridge's 'Christabel' and 'Rime of the Ancient Mariner') or as a sheer flow of intense images (Coleridge's 'Kubla Khan') .

The 'Rime' originally appeared as part of *Lyrical Ballads*, which Wordsworth and Coleridge published jointly. Coleridge defines the character of the poem in his *Biographia Literaria*, where he classes it with others whose 'incidents and agents were to be, in part at least, supernatural'. The seascape in which the events take place is free of identifiable landmarks, and so becomes the setting for a psychodrama which is difficult to relate to worldly experience. In this environment the troubled mind of the mariner conceives of burning seas, ghost ships, spectres playing dice, and water snakes. The wedding guest can only respond to these other-worldly experiences with alarm, exclaiming 'I fear thee, ancient Mariner!' He cannot, however, deny the substance or power of things which he clearly fails to understand; his experience, ruled by the social dictates of a communal ethos, is diametrically opposed to that of the mariner, who bemoans his solitude: 'Alone, alone, all all alone/Alone on the wide wide sea'. In this respect the poem bears some resemblance to *Frankenstein*: it describes a man no longer at peace with himself, and no longer an integrated member of a community, who attempts to expiate his guilt through the confessional mode, revealing in the process deep-seated suffering, perplexity, loneliness, longing, horror, and fear. The strange sequence of events brings the mariner to the fringes of madness and death; tranquillity and domesticity have given way to guilty and nomadic restlessness.

The mariner's experience is perplexing, and the reason for his suffering is elusive. To call the shooting of the albatross a crime is an over-simplification; for Coleridge it was an appropriate bird: rare, of exceptional size, haunting a limited,

strange and evocative zone, harmless and by tradition beneficent. The mariner's crime was wanton and unintentional; the consequences are only realized when it is too late. Ultimately the search for meaning proves inconclusive; this enigma is in keeping with the spirit of the poem, which recognizes that the Mariner should not be judged by the ordinary standards of social life (represented by the wedding guest) for the breach of ordinary, rational obligations. Here the worldly order is transcended in order to explore feelings of guilt, loneliness and pathological misery, which are out of all proportion to any conventional human action.

There are other poems which evoke aspects of Coleridge's interest in the gothic. 'Christabel' is an enigmatic work, which was intended for the second edition of *Lyrical Ballads*, but was excluded, partly because of Wordsworth's dissatisfaction, and also because Coleridge left it as a fragment. It serves as an interesting complement to the 'Ancient Mariner' on account of its adherence to the ballad tradition and its linking of Christabel's experience to that of the mariner in its treatment of several levels of experience.

The precise nature of the action and relationship between Christabel and the beautiful Geraldine is difficult to discern. The other-worldly nature of the experience is enhanced by the poem's setting, which is suggestive of a mindscape or region of the dream world. Christabel, the daughter of Sir Leoline, who first appears at night in the wood, praying for her betrothed lover, is a solitary, lonely, vulnerable figure. With a mother dead, father in weak health, and lover far away, she has no defences against the machinations of Geraldine, who appears to embody sinister qualities (confirmed when the mastiff bitch moans and the light flickers as she passes by), and who seems to be completely in control of Christabel. The strongly sexual nature of the imagery is confirmed at various points; Geraldine is described as 'beautiful exceedingly', and when she undresses the narrator exclaims, 'Behold! her bosom and half her side –/A sight to dream of, not to tell!'

The entrance of Geraldine engenders a complexity of consciousness in the ballad, and suggests (as in the case of the 'Ancient Mariner') a state of calm threatened, a paradise about to be lost; yet her precise disposition and motivation remain a mystery. Her presence is made more effective by its ambiguity, as well as by the undescribed and unspecified occurrence in Christabel's bedroom. Critics have been divided over the nature of the incident: it is either something mystical/magical, or something physical/sexual. Geraldine might embody both benevolence and malevolence, thus displaying an awareness on Coleridge's part that good without evil (or, in the terminology of Blake, innocence without experience) is not desirable. The complexities are infinite, and allow the poem to balance two contrasting motivations and aspects of human nature.

There are useful general introductions to the gothic by Punter (1980) and Miles (1993). Wheeler (1981) provides an excellent introduction to Coleridge's work. The 'Rime' is the subject of scrutiny in Harding (1941) and Bostetter (1962). Beres (1951) provides an interesting psychoanalytical interpretation of the poem; the reasons for shooting the albatross are explored by Whalley (1946–7). 'Christabel' has received extensive critical examination, most notably by Edwards and Emslie

(1971), Emslie and Edwards (1970) and Swann (1984, 1985). The Romantic fragment poem is ably considered by McFarland (1981) and Levinson (1987).

De Quincey, opium, and the exploration of altered states

> I took it:– and in an hour, oh! Heavens! what a revulsion! what an upheaving, from its lowest depths, of the inner spirit! what an apocalypse of the world within me!
> (Thomas De Quincey, *Confessions of an English Opium-Eater, being an Extract from the Life of a Scholar*, [1821] 1985)

While Shelley and Coleridge attempted to examine the divided self and the troubled consciousness of the individual by representing the struggles of fictional gothic heroes, De Quincey claimed to offer something more authentic by producing an autobiographical piece of 'impassioned prose', and claiming an undeniable affinity with his 'decent' English readers.

In an attempt to reproduce accurately the atmosphere and emotions associated with the unconscious, some Romantics attempted to induce such altered states experimentally. For example the painter John Henry Fuesli (1741–1825) was reported to have eaten raw beef or pork chops in order to produce imaginative reveries, which formed the basis of such evocative paintings as *The Nightmare* (1782–91). Southey's inducement of wild raptures through the agency of laughing gas found its way into the *Curse of Kehama* (1810). Coleridge and Crabbe engaged in imaginative exploration through ingesting opium in both liquid and solid form. The liquid form, known as laudanum, consisted of opium mixed with alcohol, and it was under the effects of this drug that De Quincey experienced the dreams which form the basis of the *Confessions*.

De Quincey was born in Manchester, and after attending school in Bath and elsewhere, he went on a walking tour of north Wales. He then ran away to London, where he occupied poor lodgings and lived by borrowing on the security of his father's will from ruthless money-lenders. During his five months in the capital he made friends with outcast women and prostitutes, and gained some of the most vivid and profound experiences of his early life. He was rescued by friends, and in 1803 went to Worcester College, Oxford, which he left in 1808 without taking a degree. It was during this period, on a visit to London (probably in 1804), that he first had recourse to opium, which was initially used as a cure for a dental abscess; soon he began to take the drug regularly. By 1807, when he met Coleridge (who also took opium) he was addicted, and the acquaintance only served to enhance De Quincey's interest in the effects of the drug. While Coleridge allowed himself only rare mentions of opium in his published work, and tried repeatedly to rid himself of the habit, De Quincey's fascination – and addiction – persisted, particularly during his association with Wordsworth and his residence at Grasmere. In 1819 he went to Edinburgh to write for *Blackwood's Magazine*, and in 1820 returned to London, where he finished his *Confessions*, which appeared in the *London Magazine* in October and November 1821, and in book form in 1822.

The work is a remarkable study of the effects of an obsession, which goes far beyond the gothic mode of examining imaginatively the darker aspects of human

identity; it provides personal insight into the nature of the gulf between outward and inward existence. The title is misleading: it raises expectations of an avowal of culpability, of the type found in the work of Byron, Coleridge, or Hogg; yet De Quincey is at pains to point out that the book 'does not amount to a confession of guilt'. It is, rather, a 'report' by a 'scholar', who provides a documentary account of what he has lived through himself; what is clear is that the dream-visions it contains are memorable for their faithful rendering of the circularity, repetition and unexpected emphasis characteristic of the dream experience.

The work defies generic definition and structural analysis. It is a work which speaks about opium addiction openly, and studies its effects with almost clinical detachment. It is both instruction manual and personal history; documentary reportage is intermingled with narrative. Images of pain are juxtaposed with those of pleasure; dreaming is coupled with wakening, guilt with innocence, self-conquest with self-indulgence. The problem is exacerbated by De Quincey's statement that 'Not the opium-eater, but the opium, is the true hero of the tale'. Such oppositions point to a fundamental ambivalence concerning the author's subject, and serve to illustrate the paradoxical nature of opium dreams. De Quincey insists that the effects of the drug differ from those of alcohol. He observes that wine 'robs a man of his self-possession', blurring identity, distorting loves and hates and encouraging a weak, maudlin disposition. Its pleasures are transient, and promote cycles of crisis and decline. Opium, by contrast, induces an intensification of the faculties – especially memory and dreaming – furnishing the user with the apparatus to understand the self. Through its engendering of 'serenity and equipoise' De Quincey learns 'consolations of the spirit', thus lessening his estrangement from the rest of humankind.

The narcotic state also enables him to step outside the confines of chronological time. It is this dispensing with linearity which makes the dream sequences – those symphonic, multivalent displays of imaginative power – so important to De Quincey's study. Through them, and through his vivid recollections from childhood, he develops a higher order of meaning which is imperceptible in the literal unfolding of events in time. The version of experience he presents employs an elliptical syntax capable of formulating the visionary worlds revealed to him by opium; in giving a careful account of them, he believes he is transcending the merely personal, to reveal a truth concerning the growth and structure of the human personality in general. In this sense the *Confessions* represent a prose equivalent to a work which De Quincey had the privilege of seeing in manuscript – Wordsworth's *Prelude*: both texts are intensely personal in the events they recall, yet objective in their mode of observation; through the exploration of autobiographical material, both works hope to offer an analysis of fundamental aspects of the human constitution.

The events recounted in the first part of the *Confessions* follow the events of De Quincey's early life: his flight from school, the itinerant journey through Wales, and the crucial months in London, where he endures hardship, and meets Ann, the 16-year-old prostitute who makes a significant impression on his psyche. There then follows a brief glimpse of his early days at Grasmere with the Wordsworths, and his expression of grief at the death of Wordsworth's 3-year-old daughter Kate. Each of these events is recalled in order to confirm the formative effect of memory on the human personality. He then

embarks on a consideration of the 'pains of opium', of which the worst symptoms are an uncontrollable stream of fearful dreams which affected both his sleeping and waking lives. Yet he recognizes that they provide a 'master key' for unlocking the significant events of his life, providing 'the most exquisite order, legislation, and harmony'.

The pageant which unfolds includes an Easter Sunday dream; architectural dreams suggesting Giambattista Piranesi's *Carceri d'invenzione* (*Imaginary Prisons*); visionary scenes of the 'pomp of cities and palaces'; water dreams, with their 'tyranny of the human face'; Oriental dreams revealing guilty terrors; and a meditation on 'death and the wintry sterility of the grave'. Each of these visions is related to anxieties in his waking life, and by working through them De Quincey is better able to understand that incidents seemingly forgotten reside in the inner self, in 'chasms and sunless abysses'; by recalling to conscious memory that which was lost in the unconscious, he is able to confront inner anxiety, and overcome deep-seated fears. Opium helps him to recall his lapses as a young man: for example, as a reason for his vision of the 'tormenting' power of the human face, he proffers the missed appointment with the prostitute: 'Perhaps some part of my London life [the search for Ann among the fluctuating crowds] might be answerable for this.' He imagines her seated beneath Judean palms, 'with unusual solemnity of expression', and crying on account of his abandonment of her. On another occasion, when a Malay visitor appears at his cottage, De Quincey gives him a quantity of opium ('enough to kill three dragoons and their horses') which the guest immediately consumes; the anxiety resulting from this negligence is revisited upon him in a dream in which he is 'buried, for a thousand years, in stone coffins with mummies and sphinxes', and 'kissed, with cancerous kisses, by crocodiles'. In both these cases the dreamer learns that he has not fulfilled his obligations to his fellow human beings, and he is punished accordingly. The scenes generate shocks of recognition, in which De Quincey encounters his hitherto unrecognized self, and realizes that he is his own tormentor. Such a revelation is, according to De Quincey, only possible under the influence of opium, that paradoxical substance which intensifies both pleasure and pain, reveals what lies hidden in the depths of the human psyche.

The best studies of De Quincey are by Miller (1963), Davies (1964) and Maniquis (1976). The structure of the *Confessions* is discussed by Ramsey (1978), and its autobiographical aspects are examined by Holstein (1979). Abrams (1934) and Hayter (1968) provide excellent assessments of the effects of opium on the Romantic imagination.

Coleridge and Romantic Orientalism

> In Xanadu did Kubla Khan
> A stately pleasure-dome decree:
> Where Alph, the sacred river, ran
> Through caverns measureless to man
> Down to a sunless sea.
>
> . . . . . .

> But oh! that deep romantic chasm which slanted
> Down the green hill athwart a cedarn cover!
> A savage place! as holy and enchanted
> As e'er beneath a waning moon was haunted
> By woman wailing for her demon lover!
> (Coleridge, 'Kubla Khan, Or, A Vision in a Dream. A Fragment', 1816)

'Kubla Khan' bears some striking resemblances to De Quincey's *Confessions*, in both the circumstances of its composition and its subject matter. As Coleridge explains in a prefatory note, he had been taking opium during a bout of dysentery, and had experienced a 'sleep of the external senses' while reading a sentence from a travel book, *Purchas his Pilgrimage* (1617), concerning Kubla Khan's palace and its walled garden; in a dream this image formed itself into 'two or three hundred lines' of poetry. He roused himself from this reverie, and immediately began transcribing what he remembered of the dream, but was interrupted by the intrusion of 'a person on business from Porlock'; when he later returned to his writing, 'all the rest had passed away like images on the surface of a stream'. It is a fragmentary work, filled with exotic imagery, and lacking a rational structure; its rhythms suggest a mind vacillating between conscious and unconscious modes of being, representing what Coleridge called a 'psychological curiosity'.

Like the *Confessions*, 'Kubla Khan' is filled with contrasts. It opens with a carefully constructed image of a walled garden, containing 'incense-bearing' trees, and forests enclosing 'sunny spots of greenery'. The domesticated orderliness of the scene is reflected in the metre of the lines:

> In | Xanādū | did Ku | bla Khan
>
> A | stately | pléasūre dome | décrée

Metrical scansion reveals that the words 'Xanadu' and 'Pleasure dome' are both stressed as dactyls (´ ¯¯), thereby instilling a serene, pastoral, even paradisal spirit into Kubla's realm. The strongly stressed, 'masculine' endings of the lines help to underline Khan's authority in the place he has created. His world is 'girdled round' and protected from undesirable or unharmonious influences. This scene stands in stark contrast with the opening of the second stanza:

> Būt óh | thāt déep | rōmán | tic chá | sm̄ which | slántēd
>
> Dówn the | gréen hill | a thwart | a cé | dārn cov | ēr!

Here the atmosphere is different: the rational order of the garden has been replaced by a scene outside the walls which is 'savage', 'holy', and 'enchanted'. The dactyls have given way to a series of advancing iambs (¯´) and trochees (´¯), quickening the pace, and instilling in the lines a sense of urgency. The fusion of these two moods into the same poem indicates that there are opposite processes at work, with

seemingly disconnected fragments coming together in an unexpected fashion, as they might in dreams. Also, the fountain which emerges from the chasm, 'As if this earth in thick fast pants were breathing', gives the impression of an involuntary effusion of images characteristic of the dream world. If the individual images are analyzed, it is possible to develop a pattern of associations linking the conscious and unconscious realms in a way entirely consistent with the investigative methods of psychoanalysis.

There is, however, another level on which the poem operates. While 'Kubla Khan' was composed in 1797, it was only published in 1816, on the advice of Byron, who was then publishing a series of *Eastern Tales*, which transformed him into the most popular poet in Britain. Coleridge's poem shares with *The Giaour* (1813), *The Corsair* (1814), *The Siege of Corinth* (1816) and other poems an interest in the Orient: those Asiatic cultures in which Britain had developed a cultural, political and economic interest, and which were becoming important components of the great imperial project of the nineteenth century. Literary interest in the East was stimulated by the translation into English of the *Arabian Nights Entertainment* in the early eighteenth century, which provided attractive settings, full of colour, excitement, magic and mystery for such writers as Samuel Johnson, who produced *Rasselas* in 1759, and William Beckford, who published *Vathek* in 1782. By the early nineteenth century the fashion for Oriental settings and themes had penetrated into the work of many prominent writers, including Wordsworth, Southey, Percy Shelley, Thomas Moore, Walter Savage Landor, De Quincey, and Mary Shelley.

The Orient took on particular characteristics in literary representation. Its distance from the first-hand experience of most of its proponents contributed to its 'exotic' feel, and confirmed the separation between the familiar 'Us' of the European West, and the strange 'Other' of the East. Its geography and inhabitants could be presented to British readers in such a way as to accentuate the separation of the two worlds in terms of culture, language, religion, and morality. This segregation allowed for a process of translation and subjugation of the Orient by the West, in which the 'Other' was objectified and spoken about by a confident, authoritative European sensibility, interested not in authentic representation, but in sublimation. The practice of subordinating the Orient to an Occidental 'centre' played a crucial role in the transformation of Asiatic cultures into European colonies. Coleridge, who had an avid interest in the affairs of state, was well aware of the powerful political and economic effects of this discourse, and a poem like 'Kubla Khan' can be seen as an articulation of anxieties about increasing European intervention in the East, and exploration of the dislocating effect of such incursions on British culture.

In 'Kubla Khan' the Orient is presented as a feminized object of desire, which (from reading travel books like *Purchas his Pilgrimage*) is known to exist, but only accessible to the poet-bard through the world of imagination and dreaming. The setting of the second stanza provides an attractive background for spectacular action, conveyed by means of the strongly sexual image of the rising fountain, accompanied by bursting, dancing, and flying through the air. This passionate upheaval is a profoundly shaking experience, and contrasts strongly with Kubla's

pleasure-dome and its garden. The energy of the Orient is here readily apparent; so too is its danger.

The surrealistic passage describing the 'sunny pleasure-dome with caves of ice' attempts a synthesis of the savage chasm and pleasure garden. The opposites are momentarily reconciled: Orient and Occident are brought together in 'mingled measure'. This fusion demonstrates the instability of the relationship between East and West: the exhilaration felt by the 'centre' because of its interaction with the invigorating Oriental Other becomes confused with its dependence upon (and hence inseparability from) this same subjugated Other. Such blurring of definitions engenders anxiety for the colonizer, who wishes to remain separate from the colonized, but finds that precise delineation is no longer possible.

The poet suddenly remembers the vision of a damsel with a dulcimer, 'Singing of Mount Abora', the mountain compared to Eden by Milton in *Paradise Lost*. The lyrical moment which is celebrated is of such force and beauty that it is too powerful – and dangerous – to contemplate. On seeing the image the poet acquires 'flashing eyes' and 'floating hair', and his observers, filled with 'holy dread', cry 'Beware! Beware!' Like the Ancient Mariner, this solitary figure is isolated from the rest of society, and is marked out as fearful and dangerous because of his unique power of vision, which transcends ordinary, canonical definitions of the Occidental and Oriental, to embody a perspective which synthesizes the two in an exotic, attractive, terrifying fashion.

By integrating elements of East and West into a single vision Coleridge has pointed to a fundamental ambivalence in Romantic Orientalism: appropriation of the Orient for Western consumption – whether political, economic, or literary – carries with it the risk of obscuring the points of identification of the two spheres. While the East might provide exotic and attractive poetic locations, and more spectacular opportunities for action, the longing for something unfamiliar might necessitate a synthesis of conflicting elements, by what Coleridge describes in the *Biographia Literaria* as the 'magical power' of the 'imagination'. In such an imaginative poem as 'Kubla Khan' this transformation confirms not only the duality of the Oriental image, but also the attendant anxiety over the definition of self.

The seminal text for any study of Orientalism is Said (1985); Romantic Orientalism in particular is considered by Kabbani (1986) and Leask (1992). Raine (1964) relates 'Kubla Khan' to the world of dream and symbol. The poem's fragmentary nature is discussed and contextualized by Levinson (1987).

The ode as embodiment of Romantic ideology: assertions and challenges

> When old age shall this generation waste,
> Thou shalt remain, in midst of other woe
> Than ours, a friend to man, to whom thou say'st,
> 'Beauty is truth, truth beauty, – that is all
> Ye know on earth, and all ye need to know.'
> (Keats, 'Ode on a Grecian Urn', 1820)

> Scatter, as from an unextinguished hearth
> Ashes and sparks, my words among mankind!
> Be through my lips to unawakened Earth
> The trumpet of a prophecy! O, Wind,
> If Winter comes, can Spring be far behind?
>
> (P.B. Shelley, 'Ode to the West Wind', 1820)

Romantic writers developed a variety of strategies to embody disparate elements within the same text; in 'Kubla Khan' this problem was evoked by carefully balancing a rational narrative mode with an imagistic lyric discourse in a poem which Coleridge deliberately left as a 'fragment' in order to illustrate the irresolvable nature of the problem. For others the reconciliation of opposites was not as problematic, though it did demand a degree of innovation, and experimentation with poetic form. Keats invented a new and influential mode of symbolic lyric poetry, in which the deep-seated desires are submitted to the scrutiny of the sceptical mind. In 'Ode on a Grecian Urn', the most teasing and problematic work of his 'annus mirabilis' (1818–19), the progress and resolution of the poem is determined by the central symbol's inability to sustain the meanings that the poet would wish it to bear.

Keats was extremely well read and acutely self-critical. His letters record a series of impressions made by a variety of authors, but above all Shakespeare, to whom he constantly refers in expressing his insight into the nature of poetic creation, notably in 1817, when he coined the term 'Negative Capability'. For him it was the capacity to resist the urge to systematize, to have a freedom to contemplate reality without trying to reconcile its contradictory aspects, and without 'any irritable reaching after fact and reason', thereby engendering an invigorating openness of mind. He embodied this in the very fabric of the 'Ode on a Grecian Urn' through his creation of a unique stanzaic form, combining what he believed were the best features of the two traditional sonnet constructions. Each stanza begins with four lines rhyming ABAB, as in a Shakespearian sonnet, which gives a good regular beginning and then allows the reader to pause; this is followed by an adaptation of the Petrarchan sestet, sometimes embodying the regular rhyming pattern of CDECDE (stanzas 3 and 4), but freely adapting it into different combinations, including CDEDCE (stanzas 1 and 5) and CDECED (stanza 2). By uniting the Shakespearian quatrain and Petrarchan sestet, Keats showed that he could work within canonical poetic tradition, yet mould the material to his own advantage. In this way, as he noted in a letter of 1818, he was able to claim that what shocks the virtuous philosopher 'delights the chameleon poet'.

Keats was not the only Romantic poet to turn the traditional exigencies of the ode to his own purposes. Wordsworth and Coleridge were also aware of the creative potential of this verse form, and used it to great effect in such poems as 'Ode: Intimations of Immortality from Recollections of Early Childhood' (1807) and 'Dejection: An Ode'. By identifying each of these poems as 'Ode' in the title, there is an attempt to situate the verses within a tradition stretching back to classical times, in order to accommodate those shifts in subject and mood which have become identifying features of Romantic expression. Whereas earlier English odes, such as those by Dryden or Thomas Gray, were generally written to praise abstract concepts

or impersonal subjects, Romantic odes (which were Pindaric rather than Horatian in spirit) were filled with individual insight and passionate meditation; they were inspired by external circumstances, but turned poignantly inward to explore both personally affecting situations and generally human ones. The flexibility embodied in irregular stanzaic structure, variable line length and changeable rhythm and metre, contributed to the impression of immediacy and uncertainty which Romantic poets wished to evoke.

Despite the contradictions and oppositions which Keats was able to represent in his 'Ode on a Grecian Urn', its structure is far more regular and traditional than the odes of many of his contemporaries. The urn which Keats addresses in the reverential, lyrical language of the ode, is a fine work of art, embodying ideas of perfection and permanence. The images depicted of the courtship dance (stanza 1), the bucolic lovers (stanzas 2–3) and the pagan sacrifice (stanza 4) are frozen and silent, suspended in time, and rendered eternal only through the intervention of art. The bold lover can never kiss his beloved, 'Though winning near the goal'; as a consolation for not having his 'bliss' he is offered her eternal youth and love by being fixed in time. By comparison to the urn, which evokes the eternal 'beauty' and 'truth', these human beings seem imperfect and transitory; and yet, for all its ideal perfection, the urn is only art. Its paradoxical nature is revealed by demonstrating that its advantages are simultaneously disadvantages: the urn's limiting deficiency is that it never changes, and its human characters never partake of the vicissitudes of earthly existence – joy and suffering, life and death.

It is in this sense that the urn forms the ideal symbol of Romantic struggle and yearning: its inhuman perfection is a source of tension. It embodies contrary suggestions of music and silence, movement and stasis, and as an *objet d'art* it cannot approach human realization. This distance is confirmed in the exclamation 'O Attic shape! fair attitude' of the last stanza, which dissociates the urn from the scenes depicted, and raises it to its proper sphere as aesthetic object. Yet the poem does not end there, but returns for a final confrontation to the time 'When old age shall this generation waste', in a quest for the meaning of reality, which is embodied in an ambiguous statement about the reconciliation of truth and beauty. What emerges is embodied in two conflicting apprehensions concerning the wonder of art, and its simultaneous limitations. Its 'still' and permanent beauty is refreshing to contemplate; yet there is an awareness that such beauty embodies a falsehood which disregards genuine human joy and despair. Examined in this way, Keats's ode demonstrates the elusiveness and complexity of symbols, as well as the tension which exists within them. It also demonstrates the perfect operation of Negative Capability, in which the apparently contradictory realms of imagination and reality can creatively coexist.

Shelley's 'Ode to the West Wind' is another lyrical address to an ideal object, inspired by a creative struggle within the self. It is a more confident and socially aware poem than that of Keats, and provides a more optimistic conception of the power and function of art, particularly poetry, as a vehicle for liberation. Many attributes ascribed to the poet in the ode later appeared in his *Defence of Poetry* (written in 1821, published posthumously in 1840), where he argued, like

Wordsworth, that the poet occupied the role of priest or prophet; but he went beyond Wordsworth in claiming for the poet the position of 'unacknowledged legislator', liberator, and explorer for a future society, which would recognize the appeal of the power of the imagination over a merely utilitarian view of art.

Like Keats's 'Grecian Urn', Shelley's ode embodies both associations with and departures from the tradition of the sonnet. It is written in five fourteen-line sections of *terza rima*, and struggles to idealize and unify contradictory aspects of existence by examining a natural phenomenon (the autumn wind), and simultaneously pointing to a reality transcending the physical. In his lyrics of nature Shelley uses such emblems as clouds, wind and skylarks to celebrate the joining of material and spiritual elements and reflect what he believes is a duality embodied in the poet – the exceptional individual who inhabits the corporeal, but is able to look prophetically beyond the veil of earthly existence.

The wind is the ideal vehicle for spiritual vision because of its freedom and power to blow where it wishes – an attribute which the poet recognizes in characterizing his addressee as 'tameless, and swift, and proud' and honouring it with the epithet 'O uncontrollable!' He prays that this autonomous liberator will lift him from his earthly prison – a place from which he is forced to exclaim 'I fall upon the thorns of life! I bleed!' Yet this same natural phenomenon is a 'Wild spirit', which appears as a destroyer in autumn, carrying away dead leaves and announcing the impending arrival of cruel, relentless winter. It is precisely this annihilating power which the poet wishes to embody: 'Be thou, Spirit fierce,/My spirit! Be thou me, impetuous one!' It is here that Shelley moves beyond the position of Keats, and claims for himself the role of prophet and social reformer, who can engender a new awakening through the 'incantation' of his verse. The process of rebirth is infused with Shelley's views on politics and religion: the destruction of the old, unregenerate world will allow for the construction of a new order, just as the destruction of winter gives way to the renewal of spring. The questioning conclusion to the poem serves as an encapsulation of some of the key features of Romantic discourse: through an investigation of the self and its surroundings the poet explores the possibility of finding a better world and a new life to replace the old systems and assumptions.

While it may be possible to identify a pervasive spirit within Romantic discourse, it is more difficult to discover a single object or mode of literary expression which captures the essence of this period. Nevertheless, given what has been said about the ode in its various manifestations, it might be attractive to identify this genre as the keystone of Romanticism. Many Romantic odes are epiphanic lyric meditations on a serious subject, presenting a determinate speaker in a particularized setting. This persona, who often embodies a privileged visionary capacity, is overheard carrying on a sustained interlocution, sometimes with himself or with an external object, but more frequently with a silent auditor, in the course of which there is an achievement of an altered mood, or a deeper insight into the contemplated object. Despite claims to the contrary, such self-intoxicating bardic *hauteur* encouraged the use of elaborate diction which was far removed from what Wordsworth called the 'language really used by men'; also, the exclusivity of the

experience described endowed the odes with powerful alienating pretensions which could only be understood and shared by a privileged few.

The archetypal embodiment of such self-conscious identity and visionary experience is Wordsworth's 'Immortality Ode'. It contains moments of vision as well as a series of powerful sensations, exciting feelings of rapturous 'joy' (a word often repeated), and confidence in his own powers. The poem's adherence to the tradition of the Pindaric ode, with its circular structure and irregular stanzaic pattern, allows for the exploration of a wide spectrum of dualities, including life and death, childhood and maturity, physicality and spirituality. In the process the powerful, self-confident poet rejoices in his precise powers of recollection, and in the epiphanic nature of his priestly character.

Such is the view from the dizzy heights to which Wordsworth, a Romantic originator, had raised himself; yet even from this pinnacle of achievement, pangs of anxiety emerge. Although the rapturously self-assured image of the poet as gifted figure of authority has been a dominant one in traditional assessments of Romanticism, this impression has been open to question – not only by modern critics wishing to challenge canonical assumptions, but even by some Romantic writers considered in this unit. The most vociferous, articulate and celebrated of Wordsworth's pessimistic contemporaries was Byron, who achieved instant and enduring fame in 1812 with the issuing of the first two cantos of *Childe Harold's Pilgrimage*. The effects of this publication were immediate and far-reaching: he supplanted Walter Scott as the most popular poet in Britain, and captured the spirit of the age through his depiction of frenetic energy combined with satiric evocation of public discontent. Unlike Wordsworth, Byron did not rely on the contemplation of nature for the substance of his poetry; instead his work was informed by such elements as British politics and the turbulent European nationalistic struggles which emerged in the wake of the French Revolution. He readily assumed the role of commentator on his times, and relished the opportunities afforded him of denigrating the reputations and achievements of his Romantic contemporaries. As early as 1809, in *English Bards and Scotch Reviewers*, a verse satire after the manner of Pope, he referred to Coleridge as 'turgid' and Wordsworth as 'simple'; in later years, after extensive periods abroad, where he was able to reflect on what he saw as the insularity of poetic attitudes in Britain, he engaged in more sustained and energetic attacks, the most memorable of which was his anarchic, chaotic and comic *Don Juan* (1819–24), a work which overturned many contemporary expectations about the nature and purpose of poetic expression. His most memorable attack on the poets of his day appeared in the Dedication, where he noted:

> You – Gentlemen! by dint of long seclusion
> From better company, have kept your own
> At Keswick, and, through still continued fusion
> Of one another's minds, at last have grown
> To deem as a most logical conclusion,
> That Poesy has wreaths for you alone:
> There is a narrowness in such a notion,
> Which makes me wish you'd change your lakes for ocean.

Such irreverence assisted in casting Byron in the role of outsider, vexed and amused by the anomalies of his age, and keen to redefine the criteria by which poetic production was assessed. He had no interest in the innovations proposed by Coleridge and Wordsworth, but preferred traditional language and style, especially the couplet and the Spenserian stanza; also he did not subscribe to the doctrine of the poet as prophet. He wished to supplant Romantic imagination by Romantic indignation, and it was his ridiculing of certain solemnly cherished ideas that placed him at odds with the guardians of canonical tradition. His ostracism was confirmed after his death in 1824, when the Dean of Westminster refused him a tomb in Poet's Corner – that emblematic resting place for a narrowly and somewhat arbitrarily defined 'Who's Who' of English letters. The omission was not rectified until 1969, when a memorial to Byron was installed in the Abbey.

The gauntlet thrown down by Byron to his contemporaries – and to us – is challenging and significant. Although his questioning of established norms was energetic and outspoken, the campaign mounted by those who valued the jurisdiction of Wordsworth and others resulted in a resounding victory for established authority. The enduring legacy of a restricted definition of Romantic aims and standards has been a change in the direction and perception of English poetry, causing it to be proscriptively distinguished as etherial, precious and intellectual. Continued support for this view – whether active or passive – jeopardizes the recovery of a position where poetry is capable of sustaining a variety of outlooks or opinions, some of which might lie outside the narrow confines of the socially or politically acceptable. The alternative reasoning of Byron points to the exciting opportunity offered by an unhindered embrace of tensions and anxieties, incongruities and oppositions, in developing a new definition of Romanticism.

The best introduction to Keats's poetry is by Barnard (1987); Vendler (1983) provides a good general assessment of the odes. Austin (1986) contains a useful survey of the various interpretations of the 'Ode on a Grecian Urn' and its enigmatic final lines. Informative introductions to the poetry of Shelley are those by Raine (1973) and Pirie (1988). Chernaik (1972) discusses Shelley's lyric poetry; Bloom (1959) and Webb (1977) provide fine analyses of 'Ode to the West Wind'. Abrams (1965), Dekker (1978) and Fry (1980) describe the more salient features of the Romantic ode. There is a useful guide to Byron's poetry by Rutherford (1961).

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