

## GUIDE 2: ROMANTIC BACKGROUNDS

1. See Raymond Williams, *Culture and Society, 1780-1950* (Penguin, 1961). Williams defines at least five distinguishing features of Romantic concerns:

- A. "A major change was taking place in the nature of the relationship between a writer and his readers."
- B. "A different habitual attitude towards the 'public' was establishing itself."
- C. "The production of art was coming to be regarded as one of a number of specialized kinds of production."
- D. "A theory of the 'superior reality' of art, as the seat of imaginative truth, was receiving increasing emphasis."
- E. "The idea of the independent creative writer, the autonomous genius, was becoming a kind of rule."

2. See Robert Langbaum, *The Poetry of Experience* (Norton, 1957).

- A. "The romanticist is not against science. He is merely trying to limit the applicability of its findings."
- B. "By giving us as exotic a past as possible, the romanticist gives us a past which, because it is inapplicable to the present, we can inhabit as a way not of learning a lesson but of enlarging our experience."
- C. "The whole conscious concern with objectivity as a *problem*, as something to be achieved, is in fact specifically romantic."

3. Earl Wasserman, "The English Romantics: The Grounds of Knowledge," *Studies in Romanticism* 4 (1964): 17-34.

- A. "What Wordsworth, Coleridge, Shelley, Keats chose to confront more centrally and to a degree unprecedented in English literature is a nagging problem in their literary culture: How do subject and object meet in a meaningful relationship?"

**Methods and Myths of Union:** shock; surprise / intense moments of feeling / "spots of time" or epiphanies / "glimpses," or suggestions of something operating behind observed phenomena / transfigurations of the physical world / incest / sympathy; identification / romantic union; especially male-female (Romantics assume male as subject) / the privileged insights of children, savages, madmen, or idiots / marginal figures: the Wandering Jew; Cain; Faust; Prometheus /

desire unfulfilled; guilt (existential *vs.* actual guilt) / women as objects of desire; as the ethereal; the destroyer?

### GUIDE 3: TOPICS IN ROMANTICISM

#### 1. Philosophical Trends

A. The power of the mind: human perception and intellectual capacity are at least partly responsible for determining our sense of reality. (Kant's *a priori* forms of intuition are space and time; those forms make it possible for us to build a sense of "reality.") Philosophical *idealism* of this sort is to be contrasted with older *realist* theories such as those of Plato and Aristotle which, in their very different ways, posit an external reality that we can apprehend but that we don't create "in our heads," so to speak.

B. Desire to unite subject (perceiver) and object (perceived) without either being quite absorbed in the other: see "Ode to a Nightingale," etc. Samuel Taylor Coleridge writes of symbolic utterance's power to help us experience the "multeity in unity" of the cosmos. The world's objects and creatures should not seem alien to us, but neither must we presume to "swallow them up" altogether or cancel them out for the sake of achieving greater self-awareness, higher states of consciousness.

C. Belief in an intrinsic and internal morality *vs.* externally imposed moralities. In his 1784 essay "[What is Enlightenment?](#)" Immanuel Kant insists that we take responsibility for our own actions. The essay begins, "Enlightenment is man's emergence from his self-imposed immaturity. Immaturity is the inability to use one's understanding without guidance from another. This immaturity is self-imposed when its cause lies not in lack of understanding, but in lack of resolve and courage to use it without guidance from another. *Sapere Aude!* {dare to know} "Have courage to use your own understanding!"--that is the motto of enlightenment."

D. Individualism: not of the atomistic bourgeois sort that defines itself by pleasure and accumulation (the Utilitarian self, or consumer self), but rather a strong emphasis on the full, integrated personality. Each person is—and should think of himself or herself as—unique and authentic, not merely a product of social norms and collective imperatives.

E. Importance of childhood, madness, dream states, the primitive: forms of non-reason. Like Kierkegaard, Nietzsche, and Freud later on, the Romantics do not accept the claim that the rational mind is in full control or that it fully determines who we are. Their poetry often invokes a nascent sense of the Unconscious, as Freud would call it.

#### 2. Language, Poetry, Art

A. Programs for poetry (the Preface to [Lyrical Ballads](#))—the Romantics are fond of poetical manifestos; in this sense they are just as interested in the social dimension, the pragmatic or

audience-oriented dimension, of their art as, say, the Neoclassical moralists were. Some Romantic poets ally their work with the potential for a great transformation in the human spirit.

B. Attack on Neoclassical reason, orderliness, “frigidity”—Augustan verse as an artificial, abstract language that amounts to self-congratulation on the part of the poet-fraternity. In his Preface to *Lyrical Ballads*, Wordsworth describes the initial part of his task as follows: “The principal object, then, proposed in these Poems was to choose incidents and situations from common life, and to relate or describe them, throughout, as far as was possible in a selection of language really used by men. . . .” As for overemphasis on reason at the expense of our other capacities, William Blake says it best in *The Marriage of Heaven and Hell*: “Attraction and repulsion, reason and energy, love and hate, are necessary to human existence.” Reason is not condemned, but *energy* is its dynamic “contrary,” and both must be understood as related and given their due: “Good is the passive that obeys Reason. Evil is the active springing from Energy.”

C. **Attempt to forge a secular scripture; to overcome “fallen” or “alienated” language. How can the poet achieve a prophetic or bardic voice, one that at least partly overcomes the effects of the scattering and confounding of human speech after men's attempt to build the Tower of Babel? (*Genesis*). How can we rediscover Pentecost (*Acts 2*)? Furthermore, *can* we expect so much of poetic language? If we can, what is the cost to the poet, the “bard” or prophet, of achieving such power and insight? {Shelley's anxiety in “West Wind,” and his admission of the indirectness of inspiration in “A Defense”}**

D. **The problem and burden of inspired utterance: how does a poet know, when invoking the muse, whether inspiration has truly been granted and the poem is infused with spirit? In secular terms, how is it possible to discern when one's expression is the product of a unique individual and therefore authentic, rather than mainly the effect of societal narratives and expectations?**

E. The influence of John Milton: the author of *Paradise Lost* (the greatest story ever told about the greatest story ever told) faced some of the same problems as Romantic poets: the possibility and extent of inspiration; the prophetic burden of trying to be a conduit to the ways of the divine even as we acknowledge that we are among the “fallen” and therefore limited and frail. Milton also promoted blank verse as liberation from ancient strictures on expression—he was in this regard a precursor of the Romantic “rebels.” Romantics both revere and confront Milton: his achievement is forbidding in its genius and audacity, while his Christian emphasis on humanity's dependence on God strikes Romantic ire: Shelley proclaims in “A Defence of Poetry” that “Milton's Devil as a moral being is as far superior to his God as one who perseveres in some purpose which he has conceived to be excellent in spite of adversity and torture, is to one who in the cold security of undoubted triumph inflicts the most horrible revenge upon his enemy. . . .” And as for Blake, he calls the Miltonic God the Father “Nobodaddy,” and lauds his Devil as a purveyor of energy. He portrays Christ as a rebel, just like Satan: “The Devil's account is, that the Messiah fell, and formed a heaven of what he stole from the Abyss. This is shewn in the Gospel,

where he prays to the Father to send the comforter, or Desire, that Reason may have Ideas to build on."

F. Artistic or "aesthetic" apprehension *as* redemptive: Keats is interested in this prospect, as are all the Romantics in their way. Shelley says in "A Defence of Poetry" that "poetry redeems from decay the visitations of the divinity in man."

### 3. Narrative Patterns, Myths

(a) The journey as a Romantic motif.

(b) Importance of a move from the Fall, sin, and guilt, to regeneration—see Saint Augustine's *Confessions*. For Augustine, too, the moment of conversion, and therefore of the possibility of redemption, was a *textual* moment: *tolle, lege, tolle, lege*: the sing-song voice of children telling him to "take up and read" the passage of scripture that leads him to accept Christ.

(c) Self-consciousness (adulthood) as a Fall: the attempt to recover a naive apprehension of reality (Nature, Spirit, the Self): how recover the Garden of Eden? In "Intimations of Immortality," the speaker says of the growing child, "the little actor cons another part" and that as we grow older, the visionary gleam passes and our perceptions and imagination "fade into the light of common day." Blake, too, sees childhood as a state of "innocence," though he also insists that innocence cannot be understood in isolation from (or simply privileged over) the adult world of "experience."

(d) Cain, the Wandering Jew, Faust, Manfred: outcasts all, but men of worth. Romanticism at times tells us to pay attention to the ordinary man and woman—Wordsworth's "Solitary Reaper" and "Leech Gatherer," for example—but it also focuses on the marginal and "beyond the pale" or society's mores. Blake: "the road of excess leads to the palace of wisdom"; "One law for the lion & ox is oppression."

(e) journey from childhood to adulthood

### 4. Ethics and Politics

(a) problem: how to turn individual enlightenment into a positive and public social or political program? Are men bound merely by "sympathy"? See Wordsworth

(b) the French Revolution: as the secular Millennium; as a disappointment—how to adjust views of the Revolution? Do first and second-generation Romantics differ in their approaches?

(c) nationalism: new emphasis on self-determination—Byron in Greece

(d) attacks on the establishment: Shelley attacks Castlereagh; Blake on "charity"

(e) attack on traditional learning: the failure of Oxford and Cambridge

(f) attack on the Church: attempt to defy traditional forms of morality as merely excuses to justify traditional institutional oppression

## 5. The Classics

(a) self-contained, Apollonian past or inspired Dionysian past?

(b) importance of Italy: the sun and light *vs.* English gloom and damp

(c) the Augustan myth: the union of arts and empire renewed in the light of imagination

(d) the Elgin marbles

## 6. The Country/Landscape *vs.* City

(a) relationship between poet and landscape

(b) how does landscape symbolize Mind or Spirit?

(c) how is Man integrated into or fused with Nature? (achieve communion)

(d) how does the city symbolize the Industrial Revolution? does it ever become a valid Romantic subject of its own?

## 7. The Self

(a) how does the Self have identity without being alienated by self-consciousness?

(b) Romantic journey as quest for true identity: recovery of lost self

(c) the Self as revolutionary, outsider, as unrepentant: the manifestation of Will

(d) development of national selfhood

## 8. History

(a) history as cycle, pattern, gyre (myth): understanding of the cycle unites present (subject) with past (object)

(b) private history (The Prelude) *vs.* public history

(c) the public *vs.* private hero

(d) problem: how can the Romantic agent (hero) act within history without contributing to the institutional forces of oppression?

### 9. Dream, Trance, Vision, Folk Stories, Myth

(a) the drama of the mind: closet dramas (Manfred)

(b) dream or trance as the moment of twilight (*dammerung*) where we shift from this world, the harsh alienated daylight world, to the enticing and forbidding realm of darkness, and potentially, death: the place where subject and object are *perhaps* united, where desire is fulfilled—cf. Keats

(c) recovery of naive apprehension of reality *via* folk wisdom, i.e. the language of ordinary men

(d) psychological renewal in the act of retelling dream/story—see Coleridge's "Ancient Mariner"

### 10. Sex

(a) the woman as object of desire: a reminder of alienation and of potential union and recovery

(b) incest as firstly an attack on traditional institutional morality and secondly as the union of alienated individuals

### 11. Symbols (see Abrams' Glossary of Literary Terms)

(a) wind/air: *pneuma* means "spirit" and "wind"—prophecy, infusion, Spirit

(b) light/sun: illumination, knowledge

(c) night: the inviting primal womb; death; union

(d) water: unstable realm between spirit and earth—another twilight zone?

(e) fire: infusion, rhapsody, revolution, destruction

(f) moon: both reflects and gives light: the imagination

(g) birds: aspirations of the beyond; fusion of body and spirit; transformation

### 12. Miscellaneous

(a) how do the Romantics use satire, if at all? what makes Romantic satire difficult?

(b) use of Romantic irony (Byron)