

The Best Books on British Romanticism

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Richard Holmes, *Coleridge: Early Visions, 1772-1804* (Pantheon, 448pp.) and *Coleridge: Darker Reflections, 1804-1834* (Pantheon, 656pp.)

It is fitting to start with a biography of one of the major Romantics because the Romantics placed so much emphasis on art as a means of personal expression. So many of our conceptions of the artist—a “genius,” a dreamer, more sensitive and perceptive than others, often an abuser of illicit substances in his or her desire to shake off the shackles of normal perception—come from British Romanticism, and especially from how Coleridge is represented in the popular imagination. While Holmes’ 1974 biography of Percy Shelley might be a greater work than his biography of Coleridge, this one is particularly fascinating for the way that Holmes’ research undermines so many of the myths about Coleridge. While Holmes does not stint on describing the ghastly effects of Coleridge’s addiction to opium, he locates the sources of Coleridge’s work in his

everyday life, not in hallucinations that came to him when he was high. Holmes brilliantly and persuasively roots “Kubla Khan,” often seen as the ultimate “stoner” poem, in books Coleridge had read about Khan’s empire and in scenery he took in on his daily walks: the “romantic chasm” in the poem, Holmes argues, was a chasm Coleridge walked by frequently. “Christabel” seems very influenced by his friendship with Dorothy Wordsworth, and the ghastly image of the skeletal ship from “Rime of the Ancient Mariner” stem from Coleridge observing the construction of actual ships. The effect of Holmes’ research is not that Coleridge seems less imaginative and creative, but even more so: it took a poet of special talent to transform his daily life into art in the way that Coleridge did. Holmes also notes that Coleridge provided an extremely important way to think about the kind of poetry that would later be called “Romantic”: Coleridge saw his work as focused on slowing things down, on patience. Unlike the rapid wit of Augustans such as Alexander Pope, Romantic poetry requires slow reading and contemplation. Fittingly, then, Holmes’ beautifully written biography is a book that must be enjoyed slowly, contemplatively.

M. H. Abrams, *The Mirror and the Lamp: Romantic Theory and the Critical Tradition*. Oxford University Press, 416pp.

At least in scholarly terms, this is the book that rescued Romanticism. When it was published in 1953, anti-Romantic poets such as T. S. Eliot were still in the ascendant, as Modernists rejected what they viewed as the excessive emotionality of Romantic poetry in favor a clinical, detached approach to artistic creation. Abrams reasserted the importance of Romanticism merely by taking their aesthetic theories seriously, and then

subjecting them to a rigorous examination in relation to the Augustan aesthetic views that they were reacting against. The effect, to some extent, is to bridge the gap between them: the Augustans anticipated some of the key ideas of the Romantics, and the Romantics were not always as anti-Augustan as they believed themselves to be. Abrams emphasizes *the* central metaphor for understanding the Romantic view of how the poet relates to nature: the poet's consciousness is not a passive "mirror" that merely reflects nature (as the Augustans had maintained) but instead a "lamp" shining its light out into the natural world. Our memories and our personalities color the way we interact with nature: as Wordsworth puts it in "Tintern Abbey," we "half-create" what we see. This, Abrams indicates in the title of one of his chapters, is an "Expressive Theory of Poetry and Art." For the Romantics, art is now primarily about self-expression, and while various literary movements since Romanticism place more or less emphasis of the importance of self-expression as necessary to great art, none of them have rejected it entirely, and we owe this to the Romantics. Abrams concludes his masterpiece of literary scholarship with a fascinating chapter on the relationship between poetry and science in the Romantic era: the Romantics were the first artists to truly have to grapple with the role of art in the face of the growth of systematic scientific knowledge as we now recognize it. What is the place of poetry in an age of rapid technological development? How can a poet write about a beautiful cloud when science can now explain precisely why the cloud looks the way that it does? If we look at everyday objects scientifically, does this mean that we can no longer regard them poetically? These questions continue to be relevant today, as do, Abrams suggests, the ways that various Romantic poets responded to them.

Daisy Hay, *Young Romantics: The Shelleys, Byron, and Other Tangled Lives*. Bloomsbury, 384pp.

Hay is not the first biographer to focus on a group of Romantic writers instead of on an individual: the "Godwin" circle of William Godwin, his wife Mary Wollstonecraft, their daughter Mary and son-in-law Percy Shelley have been a particular focus of such studies. However, the publisher of Hay's biography, Bloomsbury, is only slightly exaggerating when it claims that "Hay shatters the myth of the Romantic poet as a solitary, introspective genius, telling the story of the communal existence of an astonishingly youthful circle." It is impossible to write the life of one Romantic writer without taking in several others, given their "tangled lives," as the title puts it. Hay's focus on how her subjects' lives were deeply enmeshed with the lives of others also restores to prominence relatively neglected—and fascinating, she proves—figures from the period such as Thomas Peacock, primarily known for his 1818 fictional satire of the Romantics, *Nightmare Abbey*, and Leigh Hunt, who emerges not only as a promoter of the Romantic movement in his 1816 essay "Young Poets," but as an interesting poet in his own right. Hunt also co-wrote a book on gardening with his sister-in-law, Elizabeth Kent, entitled *Flora Domestica, or, The Portable Flower-Garden* that was published in 1823. This neglected work reveals, Hay argues, not only the how the aesthetics of Romanticism affected realms outside of the fine arts, but also the high status of Romantic poets by this time: Kent and Hunt use quotations from John Keats and other Romantics instead of the standard passages about gardening matters from Shakespeare and Milton. These tangled lives are not always happy ones: Hay's book is filled with tragedy, from

unhappy marriages to children dying in infancy to Percy Shelley tragically dying in a boating accident at 29. Ultimately, however, Hay brilliantly demonstrates how the Romantics lived out a principal theme of their works: the conflict between solitude and sociability. The artist seems to require solitude to create his or her work, but too much solitude also seems dangerous and not conducive to artistic creativity. In their tangled lives, the artists of the Romantic period attempted to keep these two in balance, and novels such as Mary Shelley's 1818 *Frankenstein*, in which Victor Frankenstein hides himself away in order to create his monster demonstrate the dangers of a lack of sociability.

William Wordsworth, *The Prelude*, 1805 version.

There should be of course one primary work from British Romanticism that is essential to understanding the movement and the period, and while there are many candidates, from long poems such as Byron's *Childe Harold* to shorter ones such as Keats's "The Eve of St. Agnes" or Percy Shelley's "Mont Blanc," Wordsworth's epic poem about his own life is the best place to begin. While the Romantics deeply admired epic poems such as John Milton's *Paradise Lost*, they eschewed epic in favor of the short, highly emotional lyric poem, turning over the aesthetic hierarchy of the Augustans that placed epic at the top of the poetic heap and lyric somewhere near the bottom. The Romantic avoidance of epic was no doubt aided by the Augustans having been spectacularly bad themselves at writing epic poems: their best attempt at the form by far is Alexander Pope's mock-epic, *The Rape of the Lock*. Wordsworth, then, faced squarely the problem of how to merge the emotional intensity and introspection of the lyric with the more

public concerns of the epic poem (such as war) by writing an epic poem about his own life. "Oh there is a blessing in this gentle breeze / That blows from the green fields and from the clouds / And from the sky: it beats against my cheek / And seems half-conscious of the joy it gives," Wordsworth's poem opens. It is hard to find the essence of Romanticism more clearly and concisely expressed in these four lines: the beauty of nature, but nature also as alive and moving, and most importantly, nature's effect on the speaker as the wind blows against his face. Wordsworth's poem dives deeply into his childhood and the events that shaped him as a poet and as a person, but the poem is also surprisingly dramatic, particularly the sections that focus on Wordsworth's experiences in France during the Reign of Terror. *The Prelude* was not published until 1850, after Wordsworth's death, and exists in various versions, but the most quintessentially Romantic is the 1805 thirteen-book version dedicated to Coleridge and not yet with an actual title. Wordsworth was (arguably) the greatest Romantic poet, and *The Prelude* is (not so arguably) his greatest work.

E. J. Clery, *The Rise of Supernatural Fiction, 1762-1800*. Cambridge University Press, 240pp.

College courses on British Romanticism once focused exclusively on the Big Six male poets: Blake, Wordsworth, Coleridge, Percy Shelley, Byron, and Keats. Gothic fiction, which focused on the supernatural and was enormously popular in the period, was not taken seriously by most scholars as part of Romanticism until the 1980s. Clery's book clearly and convincingly presents a history of how supernatural fiction came to be so popular among the Romantics--Percy Shelley not only avidly read Gothic novels, but wrote two of them himself. She begins

with a brisk account of the rise of a consumer society in the eighteenth century in Britain, and the corresponding interest in the emotional underpinnings of everyday life: commodities, like art, tend to provoke intense emotional reactions. The rise of the Gothic novel (and the novel in general) is inseparable, Clery argues, from the increasing role of women as consumers, particularly about women as consumers of fiction. In particular, the mounting interest in the intense emotional states of fear and even terror evoked by sublime objects such as mountains were indicative of a rising interest in fiction that would produce these extreme states. Gothic novels, beginning with Horace Walpole's *Castle of Otranto* in 1764, became extremely popular and extremely controversial. Throughout the period, Gothic was criticized for its violations of realism (Walpole's novel features a giant helmet falling on a character in the first few pages and killing him) and its supposedly detrimental effects on readers, particularly female ones. Mary Wollstonecraft's 1792 *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman* is especially critical of the detrimental effects of novels on female

readers, and by "novels," Clery argues, Wollstonecraft specifically means Gothic fiction. Even though novels such as Matthew Lewis's *The Monk* (1795) end with poetic justice—the evil monk Ambrosio is punished for his crimes—along the way there are numerous salacious passages that seemed to attract readers more than the novel's moral message. While Lewis embraced the irrational elements of Gothic, fellow writers such as Ann Radcliffe tried to balance Gothic and realism, as Radcliffe's novels invariably end with a rational explanation of the supernatural events that have occurred in the plot. While Gothic never has gone away (it is a strong component of the novels of the Brontë sisters in the Victorian era), it ran out of steam by the 1820s, Clery argues, as readers' obsession shifted to the tormented heroes of Lord Byron's poetry, the Byronic hero. It is impossible now to consider the Romantic period without the Gothic novel as a significant aspect of it, and Clery's book convincingly demonstrates why this is the case: supernatural fiction was not "bad Romanticism" or "trashy Romanticism": to a significant extent, it *was* Romanticism. A