

INTRODUCTION

In this anthology we present the reader with a selection of texts of English discursive prose of the period from the late 1780's to the early 1830's, the Romantic age. We present what we consider to be important texts bearing on key issues. Only Coleridge stands out as a major prose-writer in this period, and in the section devoted to him we have brought together examples of his early, middle and late work. The extracts from the works of the other authors represented in this anthology are grouped in sections around three themes which most occupied writers' minds during the Romantic period, Freedom, Imagination and Reform. Though several of the passages chosen are comparatively short and others considerably cut, we have, we believe, nowhere sacrificed continuity of argument or coherence of debate to mere variety. We have, however, confined this selection to the prose of ideas, omitting, for reasons of space, more 'literary' types of prose, in the forms of dialogue, character-sketch, autobiography, reverie, travel-description and comic anecdote. Our main purpose is to provide a wide representation of the literature of thought of the period.

The historical background to English Romanticism is, of course, no less than the three revolutions which shook the world of the ancient regime in the 1780's. The attainment of independence by the American Colonies in 1783 was the first of these. Though America's revolution had been successfully attained with the assistance of Great Britain's European rivals, it did in effect mark a significant shift of power away from Europe. The defiance of centrist aristocratic authority by middle-class intellectual and mercantile interests, supported by small landed proprietors, in a remote region of vast and unexplored economic potential, encouraged those forces in Europe which were willing to challenge despotism and reshape the state on optimistic, rationalist models without the hierarchical dominance of the nobility and the church. The French Revolution, when it came, developed rapidly beyond the controlled constitutionalism of its predecessor and produced a nationalist populism which was at once vindictive and aggressive. Paradoxically, one of its main targets was the cosmopolitan aristocratic culture whose style and language were French. International respect for French sophistication in the arts was undermined. In Britain the Napoleonic War brought overt hostility to things French. The main alternative cultural influence was German. In Germany the tradition of Lutheran pietism had combined with a disciplined

educational movement to provide the basis of a distinctive and experimental culture. Taught by Herder, Goethe praised the Gothic architecture of Cologne Cathedral as Germany's national style, and in the 1770's the Storm and Stress writers had re-awakened interest in Shakespeare, in feudal heroism, in the primitive imagination, in idyllic nature and in the expression of wild feelings of rebellion, protest, restlessness, tragic love and youthful melancholy. The increasing emphasis on individual intuition, which is the principle feature of these German writers, received powerful stimulus from Britain, where the cults of the sentimental and the Gothic and the search for the origin of the Sublime in art and landscape had exposed gaps in neo-classical sensibility. In turn, German melodramas became the rage in Britain. By the beginning of the nineteenth century it was possible to chart a redirection of the European literary consciousness from the old Rome/Paris axis outwards, to the Teutonic forests to the east and to the Celtic and savage lands to the west, a centrifugal tendency of extraordinary novelty and force. The highest values of the new writers were openness and freedom, but they were also ready to explore the dark areas of insanity and guilt.

In Britain the 1780's also saw a development which accelerated the most important change of all to an irreversible momentum. This development was only the application of the rotary steam engine to the loom, yet this proved to be the central link in a series of technological innovations which suddenly freed the factories of the early Industrial Revolution from river-power and enabled the existing large towns to become manufacturing centres with unrivalled economic advantages. The subsequent mushrooming of Britain's cities over the next decades established the main conditions of modern society before they were properly understood. The demand for industrial labour stimulated a growth in population which was already under way owing to improvements in diet and child-care. Capital was abundant, markets were widened by improvements in transport, numerous inventor's patents were taken out, output increased, wage-levels altered beyond expectations, and successful industrialists exerted a new type of influence, challenging the power of the landowners and the financiers. A new seriousness enters English prose around this time, hesitantly at first, since it is the product of uncertainties and conflicts. For the Industrial Revolution realigned men's moral thinking as well as their political loyalties. The pace of change was so rapid and the movement of population so bewildering that philosophers' trust in a natural moral order which converted private profits into public good was shaken. Commerce, generally regarded hitherto as a balanced exchange of goods, providentially convenient in a geographically various world, was now seen as a source of social injustices and evils. Even private property, long declared the guarantor of stability and of limited political rights, could come under attack as a scandalous sign of unfair

ingenuity and conspiracy. Rural depopulation led to a literature of indignant contrasts and nostalgia. Conservatives and radicals alike disliked developments so out of proportion to expectations of a controllable tomorrow. Humanitarian concern, however, still largely took its bearings from traditional religious sanctions. Social insights came fitfully as the implications of the machine age were very gradually grasped. There was no sudden dawning of a new consciousness of economic reality. In the nature of the case, though the pull towards an ultimate reorientation of literature in line with social problems was irresistible, the most dramatic initial impact upon writers at the end of the eighteenth century came not from the Industrial, but from the French, Revolution.

It is true that the French Revolution has been viewed by many historians as the product of underlying economic and political forces, but its contemporary witnesses saw it primarily as the work of ideas and responded to it with the spontaneity of personal involvement. The revolution became the focus for many varieties of aspiration and its progress provoked a deep re-examination of personal and political ideals. Its early stages were celebrated as a blissful dawn by Wordsworth and Coleridge, when every new book dealing with the principles of liberty raised hopes of millennial proportions. As the 'revolutionary decade' came to an end, however, the radicals had largely recanted any revolutionary intentions. Shaken by the aggressive policies of France, intimidated by a campaign of repression which included a network of spies and *agents provocateurs*, and themselves fearing a dangerous outburst of popular disaffection in Britain, the English Jacobins could be pronounced dead as a political force by Godwin in 1801. Wordsworth, Southey and Coleridge were attacked as turncoats, but they reacted honestly to the quick turns of events and tried, in their political writings, to face contemporary pressures without totally relinquishing the progressive hopes of the age. Later disillusionment prompted such gloomy retrospects as that of Shelley; 'Methinks those who now live have survived an age of despair'. Hazlitt, who considered the 1790's his formative period, commented;

The French Revolution was the only match that ever took place between philosophy and experience; and waking from the trance of theory to the sense of reality we hear the words "truth", "reason", "virtue", "liberty", with the same indifference or contempt that the cynic who has married a jilt or a termagant, listens to the rhapsodies of lovers.

The tendency to view the crisis of the 1790's in terms of the conflict of principles both in society and in man himself developed during the Romantic period.

The Fall of the Bastille was greeted in Britain with almost unanimous cordiality. France, so long an example of the horrors of despotism and

supersition, was casting off her chains, and many observers anticipated her attaining the same degree of liberty as that enjoyed in Britain. The Revolution seemed to Wordsworth 'nothing out of Nature's certain course', and came as a natural successor to American independence. Paine, Price and Godwin all tell the same tale of the development and diffusion of ideas of liberty from the time of the Commonwealth and the 1688 settlement. Yet the school of 'natural rights' which had developed especially in America went far beyond the compromises of the British Constitution, and Burke, who had supported the Americans on constitutional grounds, was one of the first to recognize the dangers of this new manifestation of radical ideas. Many radicals such as Major Cartwright sought to justify their claims by an appeal to ancient British customs before the imposition of the 'Norman yoke', but the principal danger came from those who ignored the authority of precedent and demanded freedom and equality on the basis of the Protestant right of private conscience and judgment or on the more metaphysical grounds of 'natural' equality. A Dissenting background was common to many of the leading radicals of the day. Paine was brought up as a Quaker, Godwin as a Sandemanian, a creed also shared by the proto-communist Thomas Spence. Priestley and Price were prominent members of the Dissenting fraternity. Most of them placed natural religion above revelation and many had close links with scientific thought. They were influenced by the works of the French enlightenment, especially those of Helvetius, who had asserted the original equality of man which is only disturbed by environmental forces; and in the Dissenting Academies the study of French materialists such as d'Holbach led a few like Godwin and Hazlitt into atheism.

Burke saw the threat which this combination of ideas posed to the traditional framework of British society, and responded even more to the spectacle of French popular tumult, as subversive ideas ceased to be the property of an intellectual elite and in England were disseminated through societies of artisans and appeared in novels and plays. The *Reflections* can be faulted as a perversion of the principles of the 1688 settlement and of the historical events in France, but its central importance lies in its reinterpretation of the idea of tradition and in its interpretation of the historic crisis facing Britain. Burke's defence of traditional ties does not depend upon ideas of rational order or harmony, nor primarily upon order as a bulwark against latent chaos. Burke gives a positive value to tradition by basing it upon feelings, which are built up through life by associations of place and person. 'We begin our public affections in our families', he states, and goes on to construct a model of the state cemented by familial bonds of loyalty, obligation and heredity. Overshadowed and supported by this matured,

age-old framework, the individual is denied the capacity to originate plans of conduct or of society by his own unaided reason. Burke values experience above speculation, and the test of time and of wide acceptance above individual conviction. Burke's choice of ground was deliberate and well-judged. Against the imposing edifice of his system, Paine might point out errors of historical fact, and pour scorn on individual passages, and Mackintosh might employ his keen lawyer's wit to reduce to absurdity Burke's appeal to precedent, but Burke's main positions were as much beyond logical refutation as they were above rational proof. Paine had developed during the American War a style of popular journalism which responded to issues of the moment with colloquial urgency, ignoring the niceties of political disquisition and using the metaphors of the stable and the highway to describe the manoeuvres of the Parties. He appealed to scriptural authority with the bold directness of a Dissenter and approached the mysteries of government with a similar lack of reverence. His 'common sense' approach reduced national finance to a mathematical simplicity comprehensible to the ordinary man, backed by intoxicating hopes of tangible social benefits. Paine led the paper armies of vindication and set the informal tone for writers whose strong feelings hurried them into print. Mary Wollstonecraft passed quickly from the rights of men to those of women, and her work shows a vehemence of personal feeling at the expense of both propriety and organisation. Her radical technique of comparing women with other oppressed or excluded groups sometimes gets out of hand, especially when she compares women to soldiers or to the aristocracy, but her lasting relevance lies in her attacks on ingrained social attitudes as well as on particular financial, educational and career disabilities. She raises perennial problems in feminist thought, such as the difficulty of reconciling a mother's care of her children with the conduct of a career. Both Mary Wollstonecraft and William Godwin attacked the social shibboleths of reputation and honour, sexual and aristocratic, and both looked for an extension of the liberty of the individual and a more genuine freedom, equality and openness in personal behaviour. Godwin's demand for 'perfect sincerity' was as much a plea for a lifting of social barriers to unforced intercourse as it was a method for the ascertaining of truth. It was a mark of the informal mood of the 1790's so nostalgically recorded by Hazlitt and evidenced in styles of behaviour and dress. Godwin recognised the threat to progressive ideas posed by Burke's monolithic traditionalism, and set himself the task of erecting a similarly imposing radical philosophical monument couched in the old-fashioned form of the two-volume treatise. In fact, his thorough-going treatment of ideas and their logical conclusions produced some sensational speculations which amply justified Burke's epigram that a strict logician is a

licenced visionary. Nevertheless some of Godwin's audacious speculations as to the status of marriage and the possibilities of technological and medical advancement have proved more prophetic than his contemporaries might have dreamed. Inspired by the French Revolution to envisage a simpler form of society, he took libertarian ideas to an anarchistic extreme, while his sense of natural human sympathy, nourished by the eighteenth-century school of Shaftesbury and Hutcheson, and a peculiarly exclusive and intellectual brand of dissent, imposed a strict criterion of social responsibility. Man is released from political coercion only to be bound by the inflexibly demanding rule of justice, the obligation to contribute to the highest welfare of society, and to follow a rigorous intellectual discipline to make this contribution effective and free from the perversions of traditional emotional prejudices. His hopes for the gradual 'perfectibility' of man rest squarely on the faculty of reason, although he recognised the force of Burke's idea that men are emotionally as well as intellectually formed by and attached to the existing framework of 'things as they are'. In his novels, Godwin presents sombre portraits of men corrupted by environmental pressures; but his philosophy maintains that reason can look beyond the limits of the actual, and recall the corrupt man or alienated criminal to the ideals of a common humanity. His literary technique is deficient in imaginative appeal but perhaps his main weapon is his clarity of logical definition. His definition of a political party as a confederation to give disproportionate weight to the opinions of those so associated is capable of giving pause to many 'democratic' party-men, even before he goes on to the other disadvantages of such conglomerates.

Godwin's ideas greatly influenced the early Romantic poets. The plan of Coleridge and Southey to found an egalitarian Pantisocratic community in America was based on his theories. Coleridge projected a book on Pantisocracy which would contain 'the best of Godwin'. Godwin was also at one time a light in darkness to Wordsworth. Wordsworth, after a first-hand experience of revolutionary France which left him with a lasting impression of the power of a popular movement — 'my hope was in the people' — quickly became disillusioned with the rise of Napoleon. 'A Pope/Is summon'd in to crown an Emperor', was his sardonic comment. Wordsworth turned to Godwin for a political optimism which drew its hopes from ideals of the mind, independent of actual events. However, Wordsworth, ever seeking the palpable connection with the 'world which is the world/Of all of us', felt a sense of dissociation as he was forced to consider man as he might be, rather than man as he was. The restless critical analysis of traditional values seemed even to dissociate him from nature and his own past. Eventually he worked out a new, poetic faith which linked him with the here and now, a faith founded

on the emotional and moral worth of the social traditions of his boyhood Cumberland and Westmorland. While Godwin placed his chief hope in an elevated and purified version of aristocratic virtues such as knowledge, cultivation and rational benevolence, Wordsworth placed his in people of little learning and restricted opportunities, but possessing great knowledge of the human heart and of nature, and speaking an unsophisticated language which he praised as both poetic and philosophical. In a later political work Wordsworth praised the revolt of the Iberian peoples against Napoleon because their movement was 'social' in character and not motivated by rational objects.

In the radicalism of their youth, which both were later sedulous to conceal, Coleridge and Southey gave lectures in Bristol. Coleridge was forced, according to his own account, to publish his first moral and political lecture because of accusations of treason; it was later revised and published as *Conciones ad Populum*. Coleridge's strategy was largely to emphasise the points on which he differed from other radicals as he developed his own more radical ideas, expressed in religious terms. He seems to have held with Godwin that the political rights, forms and privileges for which other radicals campaigned were not as important as the abolition of property (or 'aspheterism' as he called it in his Pantisocratic days). 'It is a mockery of our fellow creatures' wrongs to call them equal in rights when, by the bitter compulsion of their wants we make them inferior to us in all that can soften the heart or dignify the understanding'. Thelwall, the noted radical orator, visited Coleridge in 1797, and his comments testify to Coleridge's extreme position on property, for the violent nature of which he reproached the poet. Even as late as 1799 we find Coleridge urging Southey to write a history of the levelling principle. In his published writings Coleridge showed a more cautious attitude, defining a Jacobin as one who believed in natural rights — on which grounds he could technically disavow Jacobinism — and stating that government 'must be founded on property for the present race of men'.

Both Coleridge and Southey made much of their difference from extreme radical rationalism. Coleridge felt that 'the intensity of private attachments encourages, not prevents, universal benevolence'; he moved towards a paternalistic attitude and towards management of the people, an idea he found in religious organisations such as the Methodists and Evangelicals, who would go personally among the poor, teaching them their duties that they might be rendered 'susceptible of their rights'. In Coleridge's late publication on *Church and State* these earlier ideas are developed into a scheme which embraces all aspects of moral and political life. His feeling that property should not be owned absolutely by individuals survives in his idea that all ownership of property is granted

by the State on condition of certain duties. This concept of stewardship is implicit in his new name for private property, 'propriety'. The other category of property is the 'nationalty' which supports the National Church, an organisation dedicated to moral, social and religious ideals. Religion, education and medicine are the particular fields of activity of the 'clerisy', but its overall function is to preserve and foster the moral and religious ideals of humanity against the threat posed by rationalistic materialism. It ensures that the ends served by the instrumental sciences are human ends. In the practical administration of the State Coleridge planned a system of government which balanced the forces of permanence — the landed interest — and the forces of progress — trading, manufacturing and professional interests. Although the functions of the National Church are theoretically distinct from the political organisation, there is a certain overlap when Coleridge asserts that the Church should teach the basic principle of political life — obedience to the laws, or 'civility' — and should make the people aware of their duties, lessons which seem to inhibit dissent. The book was very influential among those who wished the Church to play a larger part in unifying society in the pursuit of moral and humanitarian goals. However, the 'ideal' method which Coleridge employed is equivocal. Things remain much the same for practical purposes; it is the way in which they are regarded which changes. Coleridge insists that the ideal 'National Church' differs greatly from the actual Church of England (itself a literal 'Godsend') in its enormously expanded influence, and this gave real inspiration to the Broad Church movement. But his view of constitutional arrangements implies little practical change.

Another centre of intense original intellectual activity was creative art. The aesthetic ideas of the British Romantics are of a very mixed complexion. Lacking the sense of unity that many of the continental movements possessed, they present an odd variety of ideas. The central document of British romanticism is Coleridge's *Biographia Literaria*. Emerging from his long working relationship with Wordsworth, it found receptive readers among the younger poets. Yet in the *Biographia* Coleridge conducts an extended argument against Wordsworth's Preface to *Lyrical Ballads* and is heavily indebted to German sources. Keats, in his definition of 'negative capability', objects to Coleridge's excessive attachment to theoretic consistency; Shelley with his typical synthesising method, assimilates Coleridge's ideas into his own conception of art as visionary inspiration, itself indebted to neo-Platonic sources. Byron rejected the ideas of Wordsworth and Coleridge, preferring to look back to eighteenth-century ideas of poetry, yet his grand gestures and the extravagant emotions of his poetry became for many the keynote of 'the romantic'.

The problem facing Wordsworth and many of the British Romantics was how to convey deep feeling without overbalancing into sentimentality. The approach which many followed was to stress the reality of their subjects and the specific, well-proportioned emotion of their reaction. This justification is not dependent on conventional situations with their over-ready emotional *clichés*, but is carried by the material itself and its comparability with situations in real life. The reader is almost forced to compare his own reaction to analogous situations in real life with the insights of the artist. Wordsworth, with a profound wish to ameliorate public taste and attitudes but wishing also to utilise habitual or traditional feelings, had to awaken a new appreciation of common reality — one might almost say forge a new image of reality. The Lake District life which he praised as an existence in which ‘the essential passions of the heart find a better soil in which they can attain their maturity’, was in fact a very selective image of everyday reality. Nevertheless the passions which Wordsworth elevates into principles convincingly correspond to basic human instincts such as familial love and independence; and the poetry, as well as the Preface, lays emphasis on the reality of character and setting, often to the extent of being authenticated by documentary proof or personal record. In fact so great is Wordsworth’s stress on reality that he viewed the poet as ‘mechanical’ or servile, and the poet’s power as small beside the power of actual suffering; and his poetic theory tends to ignore techniques of selection and presentation in favour of an appeal to experience. He wanted to recall poetry to the discipline of empirical reality. But the later additions to the Preface include the paean to poetry as the rock of defence of human nature and suggest that the poet is a man gifted beyond the ordinary, a man able to see and interpret the spirit of Nature working through all things, a claim expressed with a Romantic eloquence which looks forward to Shelley’s rhapsody.

Coleridge criticised Wordsworth’s theory rather than his practice. The Preface to *Lyrical Ballads* seems to advocate copying rather than imitating, whereas Wordsworth’s poetry had impressed him by ‘the fine balance of truth in observing with the imaginative faculty in modifying the objects observed’. For Coleridge a poem is a structure ordered by the originating impulse, less a description of outward things than a system of symbols representing inner experience. The poet cannot merely copy the observed language and behaviour of others but must rely on his own educated and intuitive choice of images and diction to correspond to the exact nuance of emotion. The discipline of observed reality is replaced by fidelity to inner experience which organically shapes the poem, its diction, rhythm and rhyme all working together to reinforce the progression and climaxes of a representation of emotional or spiritual experience. Coleridge’s stress on the inward experience which a poem

embodies — ‘meditation’ rather than ‘observation’ — is consistent with his philosophical views on the inner origin of all spiritual and moral values which are evident to the Coleridgean faculty of Reason. From the subordination of the material realism of sense comes the importance of the Imagination, which ‘dissolves, diffuses, dissipates, in order to re-create’. In his second *Lay Sermon* Coleridge defined the Imagination as ‘that reconciling and mediatory power, which, incorporating the reason in images of the sense, and organising (as it were) the flux of the senses by the permanent and self-circling energies of the reason, gives birth to a system of symbols, harmonious in themselves, and consubstantial with the truths of which they are conductors’. The function of the symbol, mediating between the individual and the general, sense and spirit, is integral to Coleridge’s idea of poetry, but the emphasis on reconciliation is perhaps an indication of his particular interest; the analysis of emotions and states of being that are complex and often paradoxical, for which normal language and conceptions are inadequate.

Hazlitt attended Coleridge’s lectures on Shakespeare, and Keats attended one of Hazlitt’s. Keats, to whom Shakespeare’s works were an education in themselves, develops the idea of the versatility of the artist’s temperament in his letters, where he doubts whether the poet has a personality. The artist’s relish in the intense dramatic representation of human passions can conflict with the demands of a stable moral character. The artist delights as much in the creation of an Iago as a Desdemona, an Iachimo as an Imogen; this suggestion adumbrates a moral irresponsibility that points forward to the Aesthetic movement. Hazlitt too adopts the Coleridgean criterion of dramatic impersonality; imagination is consequently denied by Hazlitt to Wordsworth, whose subjects are seen as mere vehicles for the artist’s self-projection. Even in Keats, his own protégé, he finds a deficiency in ‘action, character and...imagination’ and a want of ‘masculine energy of style’. It is strange to find Hazlitt, the immoral turbulent Romantic, criticising the Romantic poets for exactly the same deficiencies of weight of subject and dependence on ‘expression’ as Arnold some thirty years later.

Coleridge’s account of the Imagination also influenced Shelley, though the effects were such as to demonstrate the difficulties of Coleridge’s own formulations. For Coleridge the poet’s secondary imagination is similar in kind to the primary imagination, which is a universal possession, a faculty by which everyone creates his own world, which is yet the world of all of us. The secondary imagination, though creative, fashions its worlds in a strict conformity with the ideals which order the communal reality. Yet however hard Coleridge tries to reconcile the insights of the artist with the everyday world, the figure of the poet in his work suggests the exceptional visionary, the vates with glittering eye and floating hair

inspired by supernatural forces. In Shelley's 'Defence of Poetry' the poet is no longer seen as Wordsworth's common man, who, 'singing a song in which all human beings join with him, rejoices in the presence of truth as our visible friend and hourly companion'. Shelley's poet, struggling to eternise the transient visitations of supernatural power, is a nightingale who is little acknowledged by men entranced by the melody. The intensity both of the poetic inspiration and of the response to poetry is such as to escape rational consciousness; it is 'a going out of our own nature, and an identification of ourselves with the beautiful which exists in thought, action and person, not our own'. The idea of poetry as a record of moments of high intensity received eloquent expression in Shelley's rhapsody with its images of hot coals, electrical discharges, Promethean fire and lifted veils, while his emphasis on the momentary nature of inspiration licensed the fragment as a poetic 'form' and added to the conviction with which Poe was later able to assert that a long poem was 'simply a flat contradiction in terms'.

The inspiration for social reform at this period was not confined to artists. Among those who made the greatest practical impact in this field were adherents of a new form of puritanism, often legalistic in its approach. The moral earnestness of the Evangelicals was not a new thing in English life, but it did become organised into an influential campaign in the 1780's, and won converts among the most powerful establishment circles. Fashionable pulpits thundered threats of hell-fire, and the discrepancy between standards of behaviour and the practical implications of Christian doctrine seemed more obvious. The Evangelicals' writings were addressed to the responsible classes and inculcated the virtue of respectability. Their education of the poor was concerned to foster docility and appreciation rather than criticism and imagination. This conservatism is not, however, exclusive of energetic denunciation of human shortcomings, idleness and vanities, and it can produce an enthusiastic vision of an enlightened discipline in society.

The Evangelical temper was at first inimical to radical political reform. A more potent intellectual influence in this respect was the peculiar form of moral and democratic rationalism associated with the Scottish tradition. The combination of the elective, debating form of church government, and the tolerant 'new light' ethic of the moral sense, had given Presbyterianism a human face in the eighteenth century. The Scottish Universities proved more hospitable to adventurous enquiry in economics and jurisprudence than the English. Edinburgh was by 1800 a leading European educational and cultural centre, attracting young Englishmen denied the opportunity of the Grand Tour by the wars with France. The younger generation of Scottish intellectuals, Mackintosh, Jeffrey, Brougham and Lockhart, engaged in debating societies. The

majority wrote in favour of progressive social principles. Their habits of intensive academic study and legalistic exactitude added weight to the case for reform which was being argued more idealistically in England. When James Mill, a rationalist advocate of educational and political solutions to the problems of the age, joined forces with Bentham, the utilitarian tradition lost for ever its dimension of hedonistic latitudinarianism, and allied itself to high seriousness and detailed proposals for the rationalisation of the bureaucracy, the colonies, the schools, the magistracy. Despite the material benefits which these measures brought, and the undoubted humanitarianism of their proposers, they were widely attacked for their concentration on materialistic benefits and their acceptance of 'natural laws' which set strict limits to benevolence. Rationalism, which to Godwin and many of the early radicals had seemed consonant with the greatest human improvement, became viewed as a cold sacrifice of human values to material advantage and administrative expediency. The defence of the imagination in Shelley's 'Defence of Poetry' was a counter-blast to the predominant spirit of government and an affirmation that true reform lay in a study of man's instinctual, emotional and moral nature. Shelley's ideas maintain a commitment to progress, and indeed to revolution. In Brougham, on the other hand, the radical cause found a skilful orator who applied the techniques of legal action, petitioning, pamphleteering and organising movements to secular ends. Brougham gained an influence in the Educational Institution set up by Joseph Lancaster, who invented the economical monitor-system of teaching. It became the British and Foreign Schools Society, with the aims of furthering secular, factual education and basic skills. The concept of Useful Knowledge embraced the sciences and practical arts, history and biography, and resulted in a widespread improvement in the abilities and confidence of the leaders of the working class.

The Owenite experiment in social and educational reform was at once more ambitious and concentrated than the Working Men's associations. Supported by Bentham and prominent Quakers, Owen reorganised his workers' lives on a strictly authoritarian and paternalistic basis with a strong though disguised bias towards secularism. Owen was himself a man of limited reading but wide experience in trade and manufacturing. In his writings he exhorts and demands without the embellishment of learned allusions, but with a fervid literalness suggestive of a revivalist preacher. Owen's hectoring repetitiveness, however, indicates his impatience with both the method of individual salvation and of Parliamentary Reform. He wanted his socialist organisations administered by strong governing bodies, and when he assumed the leadership of various labour organisations he was continually attacked for his autocratic

methods. Hazlitt called him a man of one idea, that the individual's character is formed by his environment, and in his model village he set out to provide an environment that would produce happy, moral and productive workers. Above all ruled the principle of kindness: 'a firm, well-directed, persevering kindness'. Owen's fame in his later years rested on his projects for co-operative villages. He had originally prepared plans to organise the unemployed into independent productive units based on industry and agriculture, ruled by committees of elders. His ideas inspired many experimental communities, in Britain and America, some of which Owen himself helped to establish, and he persisted in grandiose schemes of national labour organisation, underestimating the resistance of entrenched economic interests, and of his own comrades, to the reasonableness of his measures.

Cobbett's reaction to the post-war economic crisis was visceral rather than analytic. When he rode by a fertile estate and learned that the owner was Ricardo he set his spurs to his horse and decamped with speed. Cobbett upheld the traditional values of an independent yeomanry. He championed the small independent farmers and lamented their decline as they were compelled or indoctrinated to support the accumulated wealth represented by the large estates and owners of the public funds. Cobbett attacked the palpable target, the economists or Scotch 'feelosophers', and those who were buying up the old estates, the 'tax eaters' and 'jobbers' who were capitalising on the new financial system, and the 'accursed hill' of Old Sarum which represented the corruption of political life. In Cobbett the gift for publicity went with a pugnacious, if erratic, political commitment. Every instance of oppression that met his eye on his travels gave rise to a 'rustic harangue' or article in his *Political Register*, tracing its cause back to enclosure, the grasping large landowners, the Poor Laws or the 'paper-money system'. The sight of the unemployed making roads while crops deteriorated in the fields especially roused his ire, and he cursed and avoided the turnpikes and canals, the improved communications which he saw draining the life-blood of the countryside to swell the 'wen'. Cobbett looked back to a childhood spent in 'merrie England', and often upheld nostalgically the old plain and substantial way of life when the rights of labourers were respected and a common sense of interdependence sustained social and economic relationships. He frequently returned to the example of the medieval monastery as the image of a beneficent social institution, a working community, settled and focal, and found it preferable to the insecurity, competitiveness and rapid urbanisation of the early industrial age.

Cobbett's anti-Protestant attitude contributed towards the increasingly medieval sensibility of nineteenth-century intellectuals of all viewpoints, for instance Scott and Carlyle, as well as Disraeli. Even Coleridge,

whose style of thought and writing contrasted so sharply with Cobbett's, praised him as a great educator with a mastery of the popular style, who had become 'the rhinoceros of politics, with a horn of brute strength on a nose of scorn and hate', but who had also 'given publicity to weighty truths'. In many respects a reactionary, Cobbett also looks forward to the next age; he was not only a member of the Reformed Parliament, but a studious cultivator of his own personal image, with an individual, though not learned, style.

Cobbett's paradoxical combination of devotion to the pre-industrial past and commitment to political and economic reform gives his prose a representative significance which no doubt is too great for the actual quality of his writing to bear. Nevertheless his work contributes to what is an impressive array of the discursive prose of the Romantic age. The cultural shift which occurred in the later eighteenth century and early nineteenth century is, as has been indicated, of startling breadth and variety, affecting all subjects of enquiry, all fashions and all the fine arts. Prose is not only one of the arts so affected, but also, because of its amorphous nature, it uniquely reflects the details of the shift. Burke's *Reflections*, consciously cast in the mould of ancient wisdom admonishing upstart novelty, appeal rhetorically to the emotions, yet his style was soon outmoded. The characteristic form of Romantic prose is the narrative essay, individual, revealing, and capable of brilliant bursts of argument and spells of scenic clarity. Not all the best prose of the Romantic age is, of course, romantic. Yet even the most rigorous opponents of originality, idealism and intuitionism formulate their objections in a prose which seems sharpened in definition by the very energy of its adversaries. Certainly, compared with the ratiocinative prose of the Augustan age, the argumentative writing of the early nineteenth century utilitarians and economists is markedly austere, pointed and assertive. The prose of the whole epoch is characterised by swift transitions and densely concentrated climaxes, such as Coleridge's celebrated two paragraphs on Imagination and Fancy. Wordsworth's Preface has some spectacular short passages, and when he argues there that there is no essential difference between the language of poetry and the language of prose when prose is well written, his point cannot only be taken as the downgrading of poetic technique: the argument works just as well the other way, to a higher evaluation of literary prose. Indeed, for different reasons, both Wordsworth and Coleridge direct our attention to the creative achievement of prose-writers. Coleridge believed that the 'writings of Plato, and Bishop Taylor, and the *Theoria Sacra* of Burnet, furnish undeniable proof that poetry of the highest kind may exist without metre, and even without the contradistinguishing object of a poem'. It is not, however, such older eloquence or sustained elaboration

of imagery that one seeks in Romantic prose. Shorter energetic flights are more typical, surprising turns, graphic sketches; they represent a loosening of the constraints exerted by Augustan principles of decorum and balance. It is true that Johnson's Latinate and symmetrical style was still widely regarded as a model in the early nineteenth century, but Coleridge attacked Johnson's antitheses as almost always verbal only, and Hazlitt criticised Johnson's mechanical rise and fall, his long words and his artificiality. De Quincey, too, objected to his triads. In 1832 Carlyle described Johnson's writings as laborious and obsolete, and by 1835 he could discern 'the whole structure of our Johnsonian English breaking up from its foundations'.

The change deserves to be regarded positively. Factors which contributed to it include the increasing suspicion of authority and desire to bypass aristocratic patronage. Certainly many of the prose-writers of the Romantic age learned their style in a more open forum than the journals and letters in which an earlier generation had begun to practise prose. The development of journalism is particularly significant; the extension of political comment into full-scale articles on topics like the slave-trade, the colonies, the war, and penal and electoral reform can be observed in process during the period from 1790 to 1830. The journalistic essay had to be colourful and pressing, as well as topical; many of the writers of this period earned money by writing such pieces. Later the quarterly reviews were able to pay better rates and offer generous space; in their pages the writer had the advantage of anonymity and independence from book-sellers. The breadth of the audience's interests fostered versatility in the reviewers, as well as an assumption of authority, the confidence to beat out an idea over several sentences and a weakness for familiar quotations and dismissive sarcasms.

Other means of reaching an audience through prose were the reading of papers to literary and philosophical societies and the giving of a series of lectures. An incalculable influence on the style and form of the political speech was, of course, the sermon, where indeed the two were separate. In the hands of the young Coleridge, for instance, the sermon was no exercise in classical tedium. We have from Hazlitt a marvellous description of Coleridge's preaching in 1798:

The preacher then launched into his subject, like an eagle dallying with the wind. The sermon was upon peace and war; upon church and state — not their alliance, but their separation — on the spirit of the world and the spirit of Christianity, not as the same, but as opposed to one another. He talked of those who had 'inscribed the cross of Christ on banners drifting with human gore'. He made a poetical and pastoral excursion — and to show the fatal effects of war, drew a striking contrast between the simple shepherd boy, driving his team afield, or sitting under the hawthorn, piping to his flock, 'as though he should never be old', and the same

poor country-lad, crimped, kidnapped, brought into town, made drunk at an alehouse, turned into a wretched drummer-boy, with his hair sticking on end with powder and pomatum, a long cue at his back, and tricked out in the loathsome finery of the profession of blood.

Such were the notes our once-lov'd poet sung. And for myself I could not have been more delighted if I had heard the music of the spheres. Poetry and Philosophy had met together, Truth and Genius had embraced, under the eye and with the sanction of Religion. This was even beyond my hopes.

It is doubtful which is the more attractive here, the original sermon or the report which it inspired, but again the two have become inseparable. Even while dwelling on a theme of sustained seriousness, Hazlitt manipulates a tone which is flexible and expressive of personal excitement. By the 1820's the periodical press had taken over much of the reporting, criticism and reminiscence which the post used to receive, and now the reading public felt itself to be the confidant of everybody. In 1824 Mary Russell Mitford explained the new conditions to her old-fashioned friend Sir William Elford, who had questioned the propriety of the style of her books;

We are free and easy in these days, and talk to the public as a friend. Read 'Elia' or the 'Sketch Book', or Hazlitt's 'Table Talk', or any popular book of the new school, and you will find that we have turned over the Johnsonian periods and the Blairian formality to keep company with the wigs and hoops.

Obviously the dominant virtues of prose were now to be informality and freedom. The Victorian period, however, brought other changes, most notably an increase in the self-importance of prose-writers who felt the need to stake a claim to greatness and to design works on an appropriate scale. This Victorian achievement in discursive prose is very impressive indeed, but the freshness and brightness of the Romantic age were by then evidently lost.

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