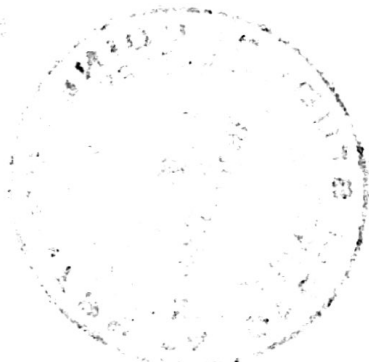


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The Cambridge Companion to British Romanticism

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Department of English, University of Pennsylvania

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3 Poetry in an age of revolution

POETS are no more insulated from political events and controversies than are any other class of people. Indeed, they are less so, in that poets work in *language*, the same medium in which political concepts and demands are formulated, contested, and negotiated. If this is generally true it is of particular relevance in periods of significant historical change, when political issues impress themselves with increased urgency on all sections of society and give rise to vigorous debates concerning fundamental political principles. The period between 1780 and 1830, during which the great Romantic poets came to maturity and produced their most important works, was such a period, as they were all aware. Wordsworth told an American visitor that "although he was known to the world only as a poet, he had given twelve hours thought to the conditions and prospects of society, for one to poetry."¹ Coleridge and Southey were both active as political journalists, and Coleridge produced a number of significant works of political theory. Byron spoke on political issues in the House of Lords, as well as satirizing political opponents and the political situation in general in his poetry.² Shelley wrote to his friend Peacock, "I consider Poetry very subordinate to moral & political science, & if I were well, certainly I should aspire to the latter" (Shelley, *Letters*, II, 71). His interest in politics is evidenced by the political pamphlets he wrote. William Blake could express regret that his countrymen should "trouble themselves about politics" and state "Princes appear to me to be Fools Houses of Commons & Houses of Lords appear to me to be fools they seem to me to be something Else besides Human Life" (Blake, *Poetry and Prose*, p. 580). Yet, as David Erdman has shown, his poetry is

¹ Quoted in F.M. Todd, *Politics and the Poet: A Study of Wordsworth* (London: Methuen, 1957), p. 11.

² For Byron's speeches in the Lords see Byron, *Works*, II, 424-5. He spoke on the Framework Bill (1812), on Catholic Emancipation (1812), and on Parliamentary Reform (1813). His most important political satires are *Don Juan* (1819-24), *The Vision of Judgement* (1822), and *The Age of Bronze* (1823).

saturated with political concerns. Even Keats, the most apolitical of the great Romantic poets, published a sonnet from jail to celebrate the release of the liberal political journalist Leigh Hunt and began a political satire on the Prince Regent, "The Jealousies: A Faery Tale" (also known as "The Cap and Bells"). An example of arrogance to an inferior moved him to exclaim, "O for a recourse somewhat human independant of the great Consolations of Religion and undepraved Sensations. of the Beautiful. the poetical in all things – O for a Remedy against such wrongs within the pale of the World!" (Keats, *Letters*, p. 33). Poetry was Keats's life – but like all the Romantics he suspected that there were times when poetry was not enough.

In this essay I wish to place the political concerns of the Romantic poets within the context of the events, social movements, and ideas of their age. Against this background their political attitudes and stances will make more sense than when considered in isolation. But I also wish to argue that they did not merely reflect their age. Their political concerns were also shaped by their particular role as poets, though in ways which are often ambivalent. In *A Defence of Poetry* Shelley claimed that "Poets are the unacknowledged legislators of the World" (*Poetry and Prose*, p. 508). This claim would have been endorsed by all the Romantics in so far as they believed that poets contributed to political understanding and action in ways that went beyond their role merely as concerned citizens. It is a claim that we should treat with both respect and caution. Their belief in it gave the Romantics a crucial self-confidence without which they would have been lesser poets. At the same time it forms part of an ideology – the Romantic ideology – that reflects certain inevitable deficiencies in the Romantics' understanding of themselves and their age.

Before we consider this topic, however, it is necessary to sketch briefly the historical events and tendencies of the period. The central event is beyond question the French Revolution, "the master theme of the epoch in which we live," as Shelley called it, hinting to Byron that he might take it as the subject for a poem; in the event Shelley himself treated it in fictional form in his *Laon and Cythna*, later revised as *The Revolt of Islam* (Shelley, *Letters*, 1, 504). Its effects, both positive and negative, on British political attitudes were far-reaching and lasting. In assessing the reactions to it we must, however, take into account certain differences that determined how individuals reacted. In terms of their social origins the Romantics ranged from the aristocracy (Byron, a peer, and Shelley, the heir to a baronetcy and son of an MP), through the middle-class (Wordsworth, the son of an attorney, and Coleridge, the son of a clergyman) and lower middle-class (Keats, the son of a stable owner), to the artisan or upper working-class

(Blake, the son of a hosier, who earned his own living as an engraver), and even the rural proletariat (John Clare, an agricultural laborer). The extent to which the Romantics shared a common outlook indicates that whatever their origins they shared as men of letters and intellectuals a new and uneasy social position: "Literary men," Bulwer noted, "have not with us any fixed and settled position *as* men of letters."³ None of the Romantics lived entirely from their literary earnings, but their status as literary producers affected their sense of their own identity more than any other economic affiliations.

One crucial point of distinction among the Romantics concerns what we may call their generational position. It is customary to distinguish two generations of Romantic poets: an older generation of writers born in the early 1770s, including Wordsworth (born 1770), Coleridge (1772), and Southey (1774), who were initially fervent supporters but later resolute opponents of the French Revolution and what it represented; and a second generation, born around 1790, including Byron (1788), Shelley (1792), and Keats (1795), who were consistently liberal in their politics and can be seen as supporters of the revolution, if with qualifications. (As a member of an earlier generation Blake, born 1757, is, in this as in other respects, anomalous.) We must remember that public events are also personal events to the individuals living through them, so that such factors as age and previous experience weigh heavily in their reactions, and the testimony they offer often reflects the personal as much as the public significance of events. A telling example very much to the point here is the fact that Wordsworth's fullest and most moving account of the revolutionary ferment of the early 1790s is offered in *The Prelude*, whose central theme is the growth and development of his own mind. In *The Excursion* (1814) he again treated the events of that period in terms of their impact on a single individual, the figure known as the Solitary. Thomas De Quincey was later to take Wordsworth to task for assuming prematurely the failure of the French Revolution in his account of it. For De Quincey, writing in 1845, the Revolution "has succeeded; it is far beyond the reach of ruinous reactions; it is propagating its life; it is travelling on to new births – conquering, and yet to conquer" (De Quincey, *Collected Writings*, XI.312). De Quincey was a great admirer of Wordsworth and politically conservative to the point of reaction – but he was born in 1785, and this allowed him to see the events of the 1790s in a different historical perspective than was available to the elder generation.

For those who, like Wordsworth, came to maturity at the time of the French Revolution, it was the culmination of a decade in which beneficial

³ *England and the English* (1833), ed. Standish Meacham (Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, 1970), p. 98.

and progressive reforms had come to seem a real possibility. The loss of the American colonies at the end of the War of American Independence in 1783 was a national disaster, but the Americans' success served if anything to encourage those who wished to reform the British political system. Blake in *America a Prophecy* (1793) saw the war as a struggle between liberty and despotism and as presaging the European revolutions of the 1790s. For the second generation of poets, after the defeat of the revolutionary struggle, the continued existence of the American republic was one of the few sources of encouragement – “a People mighty in its youth...Where, tho' with rudest rites, Freedom and Truth / Are worshipped,” in the words of Shelley's *Laon* (*The Revolt of Islam*, xi.xxii). The American slogan “No Taxation without Representation” had relevance for the mother country, whose unrepresentative political system was increasingly called into question. Its defenders argued that the system did effectively represent the leading “interests” of the nation, rather than individual voters or constituencies. But it was undeniable that it favored the aristocratic landed interest to the detriment of the rising commercial, financial, and industrial interests. Those excluded from the political process were increasingly inclined to dismiss the opposition of Tory and Whig as merely a factional struggle for power and profit. Influential and respectable groups were agitating for the reform of Parliament, and it was known that even the Prime Minister, William Pitt the Younger, favored it. The prospects of changing society for the better were promising, and there sprang up a variety of humanitarian movements for such causes as the abolition of slavery, the reform of the prison system, and the education of the poor. The liberal sensibility of the 1780s is well represented by the poetry of William Cowper, particularly his *Task* (1785). The optimism of progressives in Britain was initially encouraged by the events of 1789 in France. It was at first assumed that France, for so long a byword for despotism and political benightedness, was finally following the enlightened example of Britain. The destruction of the notorious prison of the Bastille in July 1789 was greeted with rapture by, among others, the young Coleridge who penned “An ode on the Destruction of the Bastille.” The London Revolution Society, whose pro-French activities were to provoke Edmund Burke's monumental attack on the whole revolutionary movement, had in fact been founded to celebrate the Glorious Revolution of 1688–9 which had established the Protestant succession and a balanced system of government in Britain. After the civil wars and political upheavals of the seventeenth century the Revolution settlement had inaugurated a century of domestic peace and economic growth under William and Mary, Queen Anne, and the Hanoverian Georges. War abroad had increased Britain's colonial possessions, while

increasing prosperity at home fostered increased agricultural productivity and the growth of industry. Ironically enough, this prosperity probably helped to undermine the political stability that had produced it. Those classes who had increased their economic strength now wanted a share of political power, and the old aristocratic system seemed increasingly outmoded and restrictive. The first serious challenge to this system was the agitation surrounding John Wilkes in the 1760s, when London mob violence began to take a disturbing political turn. By the 1780s discontent was being expressed even by sections of the ruling class. Once the political debate had been opened in this way, the radical ideas that had lain dormant since the seventeenth century were revived among literate artisans and working men, including William Blake. In the 1790s working-class radicalism began to organize itself in the form of societies, of which the most famous was the London Corresponding Society, which established contact with the Jacobin clubs in France. Those who wished for change at home naturally felt their cause was the stronger when they saw British ideas of liberty exported first to America and then to France. Now, surely, was the opportunity to see that the mother of freedom did not lag behind other countries.

To be aged around twenty with such ideas and such hopes and faced by events like those occurring in France was to be in a situation of unique opportunity – and unique vulnerability. Wordsworth recognized the significance of the conjuncture of historical and personal factors when he wrote:

O pleasant exercise of hope and joy,
 For great were the auxiliars which then stood
 Upon our side, we who were strong in love,
 Bliss was it in that dawn to be alive,
 But to be young was very heaven!...

Not favoured spots alone, but the whole earth,
 The beauty wore of promise, that which sets
 (To take an image which was felt, no doubt,
 Among the bowers of Paradise itself)
 The budding rose above the rose full-blown.

(*The Prelude* [1805], x.690–4, 702–6)

But this is a retrospective view. When he wrote these lines Wordsworth was aware that the extravagant promises had not been kept – the glorious dawn, like that in his “Ode: Intimations of Immortality,” had faded “into the light of common day.” The elder Romantics did not (as is sometimes claimed) abandon all hope of human betterment. They did, however, come to see it as involving a much longer time span and trusted increasingly to morality and religion rather than political reform to bring it about.

The elder Romantics' disillusion is in many respects understandable. As events unfolded, the French Revolution turned out to be a Pandora's box, with despair rather than hope left at the bottom. Its internal development, its repercussions in Britain, and its activities abroad all shocked or appalled its initial supporters. Those who had applauded it as a bloodless reform along the lines of the Glorious Revolution had then to come to terms with the September Massacres of 1792, the execution of Louis XVI in 1793, the Terror, and the rise of Robespierre. The latter's fall was celebrated dramatically by Coleridge and Southey, and Wordsworth was to recall the relief it gave him in *The Prelude* (x.515ff). But he had already entered the mythology of politics, and John Clare (who was only two when Robespierre was guillotined) was a generation later to defend his mistrust of "revolution and reform" by recalling that "there was a Robspiere, or something like that name, a most indefatigable butcher in the cause of the french levelers" (Clare, *Autobiographical Writings*, p. 26). The spectre of mob violence, particularly ominous to those who remembered the Gordon Riots of 1780 in London, was to haunt the minds of liberals for a generation and strengthen the determination of conservatives to refuse any kind of reform. The conservative backlash was intensified by the outbreak of war between France and Britain in 1793, which, as recorded by Coleridge in his "Fears in Solitude" (1798) and by Wordsworth in *The Prelude* (x.229-305), created an intolerable strain on the sympathies of liberals. The imminent prospect of a French invasion in the early 1800s completed their transformation into English patriots. The war was to last, with insignificant intermissions, for over twenty years, becoming in the words of a *Times* correspondent "a war of no common description – a war of system against system, in which no choice is left us, but victory or extirpation."⁴ It was the first "modern" war in a number of respects, not least the ideological commitment of the two sides. While prosecuting the war abroad Pitt's Tory government and its successors were also determined to deal with dissent at home. The demand for reform was fueled by economic distress both during and immediately after the war. Liberals who had looked forward to a reform "from the top," carried out by respectable and educated men like themselves, were easily alarmed by the sight of the people attempting to take part in the political process on their own behalf, though it seems likely that the reformers, by enlisting working men in political activities, acted to avoid a revolution rather than to provoke it. Another source of alarm was the danger that discontent in Ireland might provide an opportunity for a French invasion.

⁴ Quoted in Clive Emsley, *British Society and the French Wars 1793-1815* (London and Basingstoke: Macmillan, 1979), pp. 159-60.

The government response to such dangers was repression, by force when necessary, and by the widespread use of spies, informers, and *agents provocateurs*. Liberals soon found how isolated they were in a society whose mistrust of innovation was exacerbated by the fear of invasion from without and revolution from within. The net of suspicion and paranoia enveloped even respectable opponents of the government, as some among the poets were to find. In 1792 Robert Burns's gift of artillery to the French National Convention led to an investigation by his superiors in the Excise. In 1796 a Home Office agent was shadowing Wordsworth and Coleridge in their wanderings (they were suspected of spying for the French) and trying to take down their conversation for his masters (Coleridge, *Biographia*, I, 193-7). In 1803 Blake quarreled with a soldier, Private Schofield, who accused him of making seditious and even treasonable statements – an accusation that could well have cost Blake his liberty if not his life, had he not had respectable friends to speak for him at his trial. Blake suspected that the incident was a deliberate attempt to entrap him.⁵ In 1812 Shelley's correspondence from Ireland was being opened and his case came to the attention of the Postmaster General, the Home Secretary, and the Irish secretary. It was no doubt the respect due to the son of an MP and grandson of a baronet that saved him from prosecution; his servant was actually arrested and imprisoned for distributing his pamphlets.⁶ Following the death of his first wife Shelley lost the custody of his children, a virtually unprecedented judgment, for which his published views on religion and marriage were largely responsible. The general ideological intolerance of British society in matters moral and political – “cant” as it was known – made Shelley and Byron glad to live abroad.

It was not however upper- or middle-class liberals who bore the main brunt of government repression but working-class radicals. In 1793-4 a number of leading reformers were tried in Scotland and given sentences of up to fourteen years' transportation – events that probably lie behind Burns's anthem to “the cause of TRUTH and Liberty,” “Scots, wha hae wi' Wallace bled” (Burns, *Letters*, II, 235-6). In 1794 the government prosecuted leaders of the London societies for treason, but after the acquittal of Thomas Hardy, John Horne Tooke, and John Thelwall (a friend of Coleridge's) – an acquittal at least partly due to a masterly pamphlet by William Godwin – they were forced to back down. The suspension of Habeas Corpus between 1794 and 1801 and again in 1817-18 allowed the arrest of scores of radicals without

⁵ See David V. Erdman, *Blake: Prophet against Empire*, rev. edn. (New York: Doubleday, 1969), pp. 403-11.

⁶ See Kenneth Neill Cameron, *The Young Shelley: Genesis of a Radical* (London: Victor Gollancz, 1951), pp. 167-9, 172-7.

the uncertainty and embarrassment of a trial. In 1812 the government deployed more troops against the Luddite framebreakers (on whose behalf Byron spoke in the Lords) than had been sent to the Peninsula four years earlier to fight the French. The riots that followed the Spa Fields meetings organized by the Spenceans in December 1816 led to their leaders being prosecuted for high treason, while the sailor Cashman was hanged for his part in the riots opposite the shop kept by William Godwin. In 1817 three Derbyshire radicals were executed for their part in a rebellion instigated by a government spy, prompting Shelley to write one of his most powerful political pamphlets, *An Address to the People on the Death of the Princess Charlotte*. In 1819 a large demonstration of reformers at St Peter's Field in Manchester was attacked by the local Yeomanry, who were congratulated by the government for their action; Shelley's response this time was another pamphlet, "A Philosophical View of Reform," and the poem "The Mask of Anarchy" (both remained unpublished in his lifetime). It can be seen that the apparatus of government oppression had outlasted the war, which was finally brought to an end with the battle of Waterloo in 1815. In an ironic gesture the slaughter at Manchester was dubbed "Peterloo," rather as every political scandal now is given the suffix -gate.

The war also obliged the government to do something about the long-standing problem of Ireland. During the American War Henry Grattan's middle-class Volunteer Movement had forced significant concessions from the English government. During the war with France the society of United Irishmen with their radical aims and French sympathies was an obvious target for repression. Following the Irish rebellion of 1798 and a French landing, the government reasserted direct rule over the sister-island with the Act of Union (1801), dubbed by Byron, "the union of the shark with his prey" (*Works*, II, 441). Largely owing to George III's opposition this was not accompanied, as Pitt had intended, with a measure of Catholic emancipation. The continued denial of full civil liberties to Catholics (while Britain supported her Catholic allies in Portugal and Spain) was a scandal for liberals up until the repeal of the Test and Corporation Acts (1829) and prompted Shelley's trip to Ireland in 1811-12. As the Irish poet Thomas Moore wryly commented in 1809, "Rebels in Cork are patriots at Madrid" ("The Sceptic: A Satire," 58, in Moore, *Poetical Works*, p. 143). It should however be noted that George III was more in step with the country at large (including the older Romantics) than were the liberals on this issue.

At a period when Christianity was considered to be part of the law of the land, political and religious issues were virtually inseparable. Dissent from the established Church of England (whether by Catholics or Protestant

dissenters) was seen as going hand in hand with dissidence, and the French were blamed for infidelity as much as with revolution. The speech to the Revolution Society that provoked Burke's *Reflections on the Revolution in France* was delivered by the Dissenting intellectual Richard Price. Another Dissenting supporter of the Revolution, Joseph Priestley, saw his house and laboratory destroyed by a Birmingham mob under the slogan "Church and King." The followers of "old" dissent – the Baptists and Unitarians – were regarded with suspicion because of the actions of their forebears in the seventeenth century, and while few of them were potential regicides their continued exclusion from public office and other civil rights made their academies a natural breeding ground for political opposition. Godwin and Hazlitt were both sons of dissenting ministers, and Coleridge contemplated a career as a Unitarian minister. Modern historians have tended to identify the "new" Dissent of Methodism as politically conservative, though it was hardly welcomed as such at the time. Outright atheism, as in the case of Shelley, went hand in hand with a more radical rejection of the established order; Shelley attacked God as a "prototype of human misrule." Not surprisingly those Romantics who, like Wordsworth, Coleridge, and Southey, finally returned to a defence of the established political order also devoted themselves to defending the Established Church.

The government's policies towards France and towards radicals at home would not have been possible without ideological justification. The government was assiduous in its efforts to manipulate the existing media, whether by prosecuting journalists like William Cobbett, William Hone, Richard Carlile, and Leigh Hunt and his brother John, or by bribing and priming journalists on the government side. A member of Pitt's government and future Prime Minister, George Canning, was the moving force behind *The Anti-Jacobin* (1797–8), a weekly journal that attacked the French and their British sympathizers, and whose merciless satires of Wordsworth, Coleridge, and Southey in their democrat phase are still remembered. In the *Quarterly Review*, founded in 1809 as a deliberate counterweight to the liberal Whig *Edinburgh Review* (founded 1802), William Gifford, editor of the *Anti-Jacobin*, again took up the Tory cudgels against the poets of the younger generation, who were also assailed by the wits of *Blackwood's Edinburgh Magazine*. Throughout this period political considerations weighed heavily in the reviewing of poetry. The partisan treatment meted out to Keats prompted Clare to ask "is politics to rule genius – if it is – honesty & worth may turn swindlers & liberty be thrown to the dogs & worried out of existence." But Clare well knew that "to escape the hell of party-political criticism is impossible" (Clare, *Letters*, pp. 189–90).

The government's most valuable support was secured by conviction rather than interest. The leading conservative ideologue was Edmund Burke, author of *Reflections on the French Revolution* (1790) and other works and pamphlets of the 1790s.⁷ As an opponent of the American war and of royal absolutism Burke's liberal credentials were impeccable. Yet he broke with many of his fellow Whigs by his total opposition to the French Revolution and its British supporters. Rejecting the philosophy of abstract rights of the French revolutionaries, he offered a vision of human society as essentially hereditary, "a partnership not only between those who are living, but between those who are living, those who are dead, and those who are to be born."⁸ When the first generation of poets awoke from their dream turned nightmare it was to Burke's principles that they turned. Burke's greatness, appreciated even by liberal critics like William Hazlitt, consists in having elevated the political debate to the level of a debate of principle. His appeals to tradition, sentiment, and chivalry were open to question, but at the same time they served to call into question the values of reason, progress, and efficiency to which Burke's opponents appealed. As we shall see, not even the most radical of the Romantics would find it easy to resolve this clash of principles.

The other side of the ideological debate is represented by one of the replies to Burke's *Reflections*, Thomas Paine's *Rights of Man* (I, 1791, II, 1792). A veteran of the American Revolution, Paine not only defended the principles of the French Revolution but called for their implementation in Britain. Against Burke's appeal to the hereditary principle, Paine insisted that "Every age and generation must be as free to act for itself, *in all cases*, as the ages and generations which preceded it."⁹ His writings had their greatest impact among working-class radicals, and his influence among this audience alarmed the government so much that they prosecuted him for seditious libel, obliging him to flee to France. The story that he was advised to escape by Blake is, alas, almost certainly apocryphal.¹⁰ In France Paine was imprisoned under the Terror, when he occupied himself by writing *Age of Reason* (I, 1794, II, 1795). This anti-Christian work was actually intended to

⁷ Burke was also the author of *A Philosophical Enquiry into the Origins of Our Ideas of the Sublime and Beautiful* (1757), an important source for the development of the Romantic aesthetic of sublimity. The political implications of the sublime are explored in Ronald Paulson, *Representations of Revolution 1789–1920* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1983).

⁸ *Reflections on the Revolution in France*, ed. Conor Cruise O'Brien (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1968), pp. 194–5.

⁹ *Rights of Man*, ed. Henry Collins (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1969), p. 63.

¹⁰ See Erdman, *Blake: Prophet*, pp. 154–5.

counter the French tendency to atheism by offering instead a pure Deism. But Paine's "infidel" religious beliefs were almost more scandalous in Britain than his revolutionary politics, and publishers were prosecuted in the 1810s and later for republishing his religious works.¹¹ Paine's influence has much to do with the freethinking tendency of nineteenth-century British radicalism. Religious and political issues were intimately connected in this period because of the conservative posture of the established church and the ideological use to which it put Christian doctrine. Shelley charged that the accusers of the Deist publisher Richard Carlile cared for religion "only as it is the mask and the garment by which they are invested with the symbols of worldly power" (Shelley, *Letters*, II, 143). Blake accused Bishop Richard Watson, who wrote against Paine, of being "a State trickster," and attributed "the English Crusade against France" to "State Religion." Blake himself was no infidel and wished to defend what he considered true Christianity against its self-seeking spokesmen – he thought that "Tom Paine is a better Christian than the Bishop."¹²

If Paine spoke to and for the radicals while Burke put the conservative case, the liberal intelligentsia had their textbook too in the shape of William Godwin's *Political Justice* (1793). Although he had been a Whig journalist in the 1780s, Godwin aspired to produce a true political philosophy rather than mere party polemic. He certainly opposed the political principles of Burke, and his rejection of all authority or tradition led him to an anarchist position. At the same time he rejected the activism of Paine and considered that the resort to revolutionary action posed as great a threat to intellectual independence as did acquiescence in the established order. The combination of theoretical extremism and practical restraint made Godwin the perfect theorist for intellectuals, and his work had a great influence among young liberals in the 1790s, including the first generation of Romantics, as William Hazlitt (not without malice) was to recall a generation later.

No work in our time gave such a blow to the philosophical mind of the country as the celebrated Enquiry concerning Political Justice. Tom Paine was considered for the time as a Tom Fool to him; Paley an old woman; Edmund Burke a flashy sophist. Truth, moral truth, it was supposed, had here taken up its abode; and these were the oracles of thought. "Throw aside your books of chemistry," said

¹¹ Shelley's *Letter to Lord Ellenborough* (1812) and a letter intended for publication in the *Examiner* written in 1819 (Shelley, *Letters*, II, 136–48) were both prompted by the prosecutions of radical booksellers for publishing *Age of Reason*.

¹² *Poetry and Prose*, pp. 612–13, 620. Watson was actually a liberal bishop, but he fell afoul not only of Blake but also of Wordsworth, whose most outspoken (though not published) political pamphlet was *A Letter to the Bishop of Landaff* (1793).

Wordsworth to a young man, a student in the Temple, "and read Godwin on Necessity." (Works, XI, 16-17)

It was believed that it was in consideration of the high price of the work and its intended address to the educated that the government decided not to prosecute it – an equivocal compliment. Godwin's initial fame was followed by later obscurity, and many of his early admirers, including Wordsworth, did not care to be remembered as such twenty years later. But he did have one significant disciple among the younger poets – his son-in-law, Shelley.

By the time Shelley was eagerly studying *Political Justice* the elder poets had transferred their allegiance to Burke. Shelley understood the disillusion from which they suffered, though he did not share it. In the Preface to *The Revolt of Islam* he wrote:

on the first reverses of hope in the progress of French liberty, the sanguine eagerness for good overleapt the solution of these questions, and for a time extinguished itself in the unexpectedness of their result. Thus many of the most ardent and tender-hearted of the worshippers of public good have been morally ruined by what a partial glimpse of the events they deplored, appeared to shew as the melancholy desolation of all their cherished hopes. Hence gloom and misanthropy have become the characteristics of the age in which we live, the solace of a disappointment that unconsciously finds relief only in the wilful exaggeration of its own despair. This influence has tainted the literature of the age with the hopelessness of the minds from which it flows. (Poetical Works, pp. 33-4)

Shelley wrote *The Revolt of Islam* in order to understand and come to terms with what he accepted as the temporary failure of the revolutionary movement. He could see this failure as a lesson of history, to be learnt in order to guide future action. For the younger generation the historical debacle did not involve the frustration of personal hopes, nor did it oblige them to curb their aspirations for the future.

The polemical exchanges between the two generations in the 1810s can obscure the fact that the political differences between them are often matters of degree rather than of kind. The elder generation's experience of political violence led them to view with horror the revival of the popular radical movement after 1815. Southey, writing in 1817 to the then prime minister, was scandalized to note that the "spirit of Jacobinism" that had seduced him and fellow middle-class liberals in the 1790s had now "sunk into the rabble"¹³. But the younger poets' attitude was at best ambivalent. Byron shared Southey's fantasies of a new Jacobin tribunal presided over by radical leaders

¹³ C. D. Yonge, *The Life and Administration of Robert Banks, second Earl of Liverpool*, 3 vols. (London: Macmillan, 1868), II, 298-9.

like William Cobbett and Henry Hunt. Even Shelley, the most sympathetic to the radical cause, was torn between two imperatives: to rouse the people to resistance, and simultaneously to moderate and guide it towards peaceful means of change. The refrain of "The Mask of Anarchy" – "Ye are many, they are few" – reflects his ambiguous attitude: do the odds guarantee victory in an armed struggle, or make such a struggle unnecessary? Whatever their sympathies with the poor and oppressed the poets were for the most part upper- and middle-class intellectuals who could only fear what the oppressed might do to right their wrongs.

Another factor common to the two generations is the Romantic commitment to national independence, a commitment whose importance and conservative tendency is well known in the case of continental Romanticism. (See the essay by Peter Thorslev in the present volume.) In Britain nationalism took a more liberal direction that stressed the rights of a national community to political self-determination. It provided a bridge over which the elder Romantics could cross from defence of revolution to support of reaction. In 1796 Southey published *Joan of Arc*, written in collaboration with Coleridge. The point of the choice of subject is clear – England had no more right to interfere in the affairs of the French republic in the late eighteenth century than it had had to meddle with the kingdom of France in the fifteenth. In 1814 Southey, freshly crowned as Poet Laureate, published *Roderick, the Last of the Goths*, with an equally pointed political moral – Britain's defence of Spain and Portugal against French imperialism was as holy a cause as Roderick's defence of Spain against Moorish invasion. Southey could argue that he opposed the French in 1814 for the same reasons for which he had sympathized with them twenty years before. Southey and Byron had little enough in common, but canto 1 of the latter's *Childe Harold's Pilgrimage* (1812) shows Byron too as a sympathizer with the Portuguese and Spanish. Britain's involvement in the Iberian Peninsula from 1808 also gave Coleridge and Wordsworth the opportunity to speak out in favor of the war against France, Coleridge in the columns of *The Courier*, and Wordsworth in a long pamphlet on *The Convention of Cintra* (1809). Their unhappiness with French foreign policy was not a new thing; the crucial event was probably the French invasion of Switzerland in 1798, which inspired Coleridge's "France: An Ode." In this poem Coleridge had to disavow his earlier enthusiasm for France as a champion of liberty, now that it had invaded the land of William Tell and republican independence.

French imperialism was symbolized by the figure of Napoleon, who entered popular mythology as a bogeyman. In the eyes of the elder Romantics he was a descendant of Milton's Satan. As "the child and the champion



Figure 3.2 "Boney's meditations on the Island of St Helena or The Devil addressing the Sun" by George Cruikshank (1815). Both the poets and the caricaturists could draw on a knowledge of well-known literary sources, such as Shakespeare, Bunyan, or, as here, Milton. Casting the Prince Regent as the Sun and the central mover in the coalition that has confounded the Satanic Napoleon is one of those details that suggests that popular caricaturists may often have been working tongue-in-cheek while following a popular line.

of Jacobinism" (Coleridge, *Essays on His Times*, I, 185) Napoleon exposed the hollowness of the French republican rhetoric of freedom for all nations. The younger generation had no more liking for Napoleon, whom they saw as yet another tyrant, perhaps a great one in comparison with his opponents, but still a tyrant rather than a liberator. For Byron Napoleon was an exemplary tragic figure, an historical embodiment of the contradictions Byron perceived within himself (*Childe Harold's Pilgrimage*, III. sts. xxxvi–xlv). His notorious self-identification with Napoleon (he even acquired the Emperor's old coach) implies no endorsement of his actions. In his "Ode to Napoleon Buonaparte" (1814) Byron reserves his warmest praise for "The Cincinnatus of the West," George Washington. In Blake's mythological system Napoleon can be identified as the revolutionary Orc who ended by turning into the tyrannical Urizen whom he had initially opposed. For Shelley he was the man who threw away the unparalleled opportunity to be the liberator of mankind when he yielded to the temptation of "greatness" in the bad old sense ("The Triumph of Life," 215–24).

In Shelley's words, Napoleon's "grasp had left the giant world so weak / That every pigmy kicked it as it lay" (226–7). His fall ushered in the age of the "Holy Alliance," the league of Russia, Austria, and Prussia, who, in the eyes of the liberals, had defeated Napoleon only in order to reimpose their own tyranny on Europe. Britain was not a member of the Holy Alliance but had formed a Quadruple Alliance with its members. Not surprisingly, if not entirely fairly, the Foreign Secretary, Lord Castlereagh, was detested by the liberals for his support of European despotism as well as for his earlier activities in Ireland. He was the first of the three government leaders savaged by Shelley in *The Mask of Anarchy* (the others were the Home Secretary, Lord Sidmouth, and the Lord Chancellor, Lord Eldon), and Byron wrote some particularly vicious epigrams on the occasion of his suicide in 1822. The younger poets detested the Holy Alliance for its oppression of nationalist liberation movements. Even Keats spoke on behalf of nationalism by publishing a sonnet "To Kosciusko," the Polish patriot who led a rebellion against Russia (a leading member of the Holy Alliance) in the 1790s, and who had also been celebrated in verse by Coleridge and Leigh Hunt. Byron and Shelley saw the suppression of nationalist movements at first hand during their years in Italy, once more under the control of Austria and its Italian puppet-states. Byron's sympathy with the revolutionary Carbonari extended to allowing them to store arms in his cellar, and his activities brought him to the attention of the Italian authorities.¹⁴ Shelley was more

¹⁴ For the police reports on Byron, see Byron, *Works*, IV, 454–64; for his address to the Neapolitan insurgents, V, 595–6.

circumspect, but he shared with Byron the liberal English view of Italy as the home of the great medieval republics and was prepared to remind British reformers that, via the influence of Italian literature on English poets, "we owe among other causes the exact condition belonging to [our own] intellectual existence to the generous disdain of submission which burned in the bosoms of men who filled a distant generation and inhabited another land" (Shelley, *Prose*, p. 231). In such poems as "Lines written among the Euganean Hills" (published 1819), "Ode to Liberty" (1820), and "Ode to Naples" (1820) he celebrated Italy's republican tradition, lamented its extinction, and hailed its resurgence. One of the most explicit statements of his own anarchist position, the sonnet often known as "Political Greatness" was actually addressed to the short-lived republic of Benevento, which tried to establish its independence from papal rule in 1821. Byron's "Ode on Venice" (published 1819) and *The Prophecy of Dante* (1819) also lament the political decline of Italy; though his two verse dramas *Marino Faliero, Doge of Venice* and *The Two Foscari* (both published with the *Prophecy* in 1821) show Byron's preference for the aristocratic republicanism of Venice and his preoccupation with the political dilemma of the dissident patrician.

If Italy had a strong hold on the English political imagination, Greece had a stronger. In the preface to *Prometheus Unbound* Shelley speculated that "If England were divided into forty republics, each equal in population and extent to Athens, there is no reason to suppose but that, under institutions not more perfect than those of Athens, each would produce philosophers and poets equal to those who (if we except Shakespeare) have never been surpassed" (*Poetry and Prose*, p. 134). The Hellenism of the younger Romantics also served as a code for the preference of a pagan amorality over the asceticism of Christianity. In this respect Keats is less detached from political controversy than he is usually taken to be. Wordsworth was responding to the subtext of the "Hymn to Pan" in Keats's *Endymion* when he sneered that it was "a Very pretty piece of Paganism."¹⁵ Those trained to admire the cultural and political achievements of classical Greece could not but lament its modern degradation under Turkish rule, as Byron did in canto II of *Childe Harold's Pilgrimage* (1812). It is therefore not surprising that the liberal poets welcomed the beginning of the Greek War of Independence in 1821. Shelley translated Prince Ypsilanti's "Cry of War to the Greeks" for publication in English newspapers and wrote *Hellas* (published 1822) to promote sympathy for the Greek cause. Byron again carried sympathy into action,

¹⁵ B. R. Haydon's account, quoted in Walter Jackson Bate, *John Keats* (London: Oxford University Press, 1963), p. 265.

committing himself and his financial resources to the struggle, and dying of a fever at Missolonghi.

If nationalism provides a point of contact between the two generations, there are nonetheless important distinctions. The elder Romantics had more in common with the mystical nationalism of continental Romanticism and its conservative bias. The younger poets were liberal nationalists, whose nationalism was a form of cosmopolitanism. Shelley supported the struggles for independence of the Irish, the Italians, the Spaniards, and the Greeks because he hoped that eventually they would liberate themselves not only from their external oppressors but from their own narrowly national prejudices, particularly those connected with religion. His political ideals, derived from the Enlightenment and Godwin, are universalist and abstract. Wordsworth, as he describes it in book x of *The Prelude*, reacted against the abstraction of the Godwinian philosophy and replaced it with other ideals: the organic unity and the sacredness of the particular community, as can be seen even in his relatively early poems on the local community of the Lake District, "Michael" and "The Brothers" (both in the second volume of *Lyrical Ballads* of 1800). In 1801 Wordsworth drew the attention of a prominent politician to these poems, expressing his sense of the unique value of the particular community and its way of life, which he saw as under threat from such modern developments as "the spreading of manufactures through every part of the country...Workhouses, Houses of Industry, and the invention of Soup-shops &c &c." The defence of tradition against modern innovation is Burkean; yet Wordsworth was actually writing to the liberal Whig leader, Charles James Fox, whose support of the French Revolution had led to a break between him and his former ally Burke (Wordsworth, *Early Years*, pp. 313-15).

Wordsworth no doubt wished to see a continuity between his youthful liberalism and his growing conservatism. But the contradiction represented by his letter is symptomatic of what is problematic in the attitude of all the Romantics to progress. The debate between Burke and Paine had established the central political issue of the age as the tension between tradition and freedom. Burke defended the traditional political institutions of society as the result of an organic process of development expressing a collective wisdom not to be improved on or called into question by any individual who was the product of that society. Paine vindicated the right of any society – and by extension of any individual – to decide all such questions for itself and thus to liberate itself from the claims of prescription and the dead hand of the past. Between these two options the Romantic poets could choose in different ways; but none of them could escape the tension

they generated. The early revolutionary enthusiasm of the elder Romantics showed that they had appreciated the claims of freedom, if finally they saw the defence of tradition as the most urgent concern. It is perhaps less obvious but equally true that the younger poets felt the force of the appeal to tradition. Poets are after all badly placed to reject such an appeal, as they work to find their roots and their place in the traditions of British and European literature. And the struggle for liberty has its own tradition, as Shelley and Byron's interest in the heritage of Greek and Italian republicanism testifies. The tradition could itself be a site of contestation. Burke agreed with Price in his reverence for the Glorious Revolution, but differed totally in his interpretation of it. When Shelley in *A Defence of Poetry* recalled "the last national struggle for civil and religious liberty" (*Poetry and Prose*, p. 508) he was implicitly invoking the authority of such republican writers as Milton and Algernon Sidney – an authority conservatives like Wordsworth could also invoke to bolster their nationalistic support for England in her struggle with France.

As upper- and middle-class intellectuals all the Romantic poets found themselves carried along on movements of social change with whose consequences they were in various ways forced to quarrel. These movements were in the last analysis economic, comprising what have become known as the Agricultural Revolution and the Industrial Revolution, with their accompanying changes in attitude. The war promoted the growth of industry by increasing demand for many manufactured goods and giving British manufacturers (thanks to British naval superiority) a monopoly of overseas markets. The wartime increase in food prices also favored agricultural improvement and provoked a fresh wave of enclosures by act of Parliament. These economic developments lie behind the codification of the new "science" of political economy in the writings of Thomas Malthus (*An Essay on the Principle of Population*, 1798, enlarged 1803) and David Ricardo (*On the Principles of Political Economy, and Taxation*, 1817). Malthus was actually spurred to produce his thesis that the increase of population must inevitably set limits to human progress by the utopian speculations of writers like Godwin. His conclusion that the poor should be left at the mercy of economic forces made him anathema to all the Romantics. The economic and social life of the nation was changing radically, in ways that alarmed conservatives like Wordsworth and troubled progressives like Shelley. The pressure for political and social reform came primarily from those who had profited from these economic changes and who wished to use their economic prominence to press their claims to a greater share of political power and to promote their own middle-class, liberal, and progressive values. They were

able to enlist political allies both from those of the old aristocratic ruling class who had profited by astute investment in new forms of economic enterprise, and from the new, mainly urban working-class, brought into being by the spread of industrialism and becoming aware that its economic interests could only be protected by gaining a share of political representation. By using such universal human values as freedom and equality as the slogans under which to forward their own class interests, the bourgeoisie were able to gain support from classes with whose interests theirs were finally at odds. They could not of course control the consequences of this strategy. While middle-class reformers were largely satisfied with what they gained with the first Reform Act (1832), their working-class allies had formed expectations that led them to continue pressing for further reform throughout the nineteenth century.

In so far as they espoused the values of liberty and equality the Romantics could be seen as ideologues for the bourgeois revolution, helping to obscure the class nature of middle-class political demands, which as Marx was to show were implicitly calls for economic *laissez-faire* and the unrestricted operation of the market. But we must recognize that what were slogans to the politicians were matters of genuine concern to the poets; they took the universal claims of middle-class liberalism seriously, and this had important consequences. It meant that the radical working-class reformers could draw on the liberal poets to define their own political demands and aspirations, left unfulfilled by the success of the bourgeois revolution. Byron and Shelley enjoyed a high reputation with the radical Owenites and Chartists. It also meant that the poets could offer a penetrating critique of the practice of the bourgeoisie by comparing it with its own professed values.

The Romantic attitude to industrialism can be caricatured as an aesthetic distaste for smoking chimneys and noisy factories and a preference for the idyllic charms of the countryside. In actual fact the Romantic imagination responded powerfully if ambivalently to the sublimity of the new industrial landscape.¹⁶ The real focus of the Romantics' critique of their age is on the moral and social values in whose name both the increase of industry and the rationalization of agriculture took place. These social tendencies implied a redefinition and a revaluation of human nature and of the human person to which the poets were all finally opposed. In revolutionizing the British economy and British society the middle-class reformers seemed resolved to throw out the human baby along with the outdated social and political bathwater. The poets' problem was how to rescue the former without seeming to

¹⁶ See Francis D. Klingender, *Art and the Industrial Revolution* (1947; reprinted, London: Granada, 1972).

defend the latter. Responses to the new order could often be little better than nostalgia, which fueled the growing interest in medieval themes, to be found in Burke's lament that "the age of chivalry is gone. — That of sophisters, oeconomists, and calculators, has succeeded" and in the radical Cobbett's accusation that the Reformation had destroyed the old order of feudal loyalty and monastic charity.¹⁷ The reactionary position that provided a refuge for such unlikely bedfellows could also be laid to the charge of the poets. There is some point in Peacock's malicious accusation that "While the historian and the philosopher are advancing in, and accelerating, the progress of knowledge, the poet is wallowing in the rubbish of departed ignorance, and raking up the ashes of dead savages to find gew-gaws and rattles for the grown babies of the age."¹⁸

We must recognize that a number of the Romantics' distinctive concerns are polemical themes in their long-running struggle with what they saw as the dominant philosophy of the age, a philosophy to which we can refer under the short-hand term of "utilitarianism."¹⁹ A philosophy that reduced human action to the calculation of consequences and the pursuit of self-interest and valued hard facts over fine fancies was bound to touch poets on a sensitive spot. Keats sneered that the capitalistic brothers in his *Isabella; or, the Pot of Basil* thought "red-lined accounts / Were richer than the songs of Grecian years" (stanza xvi). But the sales figures of Keats's own Grecian romance, *Endymion* (1818), seemed to indicate that the reading public shared their tastes. If the Romantics were fond of recalling that other societies had considered the poet a seer or prophet, it was a defensive reaction to a society that saw them as mere entertainers at best and self-indulgent triflers at worst. This negative view of poetry in the modern age was expounded with some glee (and an indeterminate amount of irony) by Shelley's friend Peacock, whose account shows how easily a low estimate of poetry could be reconciled to political liberalism.

[W]hen we consider that the great and permanent interests of human society become more and more the main spring of intellectual pursuit;...and that therefore the progress of useful art and science, and of moral and political knowledge,

¹⁷ Burke, *Reflections*, p. 170; William Cobbett, *A History of the Protestant "Reformation," in England and Ireland; Showing How That Event Has Impoverished and Degraded the Main Body of the People in Those Countries* (1824–6).

¹⁸ "The Four Ages of Poetry" (1820), in *Memoirs of Shelley and other Essays and Reviews*, ed. Howard Mills (London: Rupert Hart-Davis, 1970), p. 128.

¹⁹ The founder of Utilitarianism is usually considered to be Jeremy Bentham, the radical legal and political reformer; but Bentham systematized ideas and attitudes that were common currency among progressive thinkers at the time. See Elie Halévy, *The Growth of Philosophical Radicalism* (1928), trans. Mary Morris (London: Faber and Faber, 1972).

will continue more and more to withdraw attention from frivolous and uncondusive, to solid and conducive studies...we may easily conceive that the day is not distant, when the degraded state of every species of poetry is...generally recognized. ("The Four Ages of Poetry," p. 131)

Peacock's attack stung Shelley (who had himself, as noted earlier, once put "moral and political knowledge" above poetry) to respond with his *Defence of Poetry*. That the poets had a real case to answer is clear from the views on poetry expressed by the great liberal spokesman Thomas Babington Macaulay, writing with no irony at all.

We think that, as civilisation advances, poetry almost necessarily declines...

Perhaps no person can be a poet, or can even enjoy poetry, without a certain unsoundness of mind...

In a rude state of society men are children with a greater variety of ideas. It is therefore in such a state of society that we may expect to find the poetical temperament in its highest perfection...

He who, in an enlightened and literary society, aspires to be a great poet must first become a little child, he must take to pieces the whole web of his mind.²⁰

This is the nightmare of Blake come true, a narrow rationalism that excludes and stigmatizes everything it cannot incorporate within itself. In the light of Macaulay's remarks we can see why Romantic poetry is so often concerned with childhood, madness, the socially inferior, myth, and superstition – with everything that was marginalized by the dominant philosophy of progress and utility.

In 1818 Keats crossed from economically backward Ireland to prosperous Scotland and encountered the central tension between tradition and progress within his own experience. In a startling prefiguration of Max Weber's thesis concerning Protestantism and the rise of capitalism, Keats attributed the economic progress of Scotland to the influence of the Calvinist "kirk-men" who "have made Men, Women, Old Men Young Men old Women, young women, boys, girls and infants all careful...regular Phalanges of savers and gainers." But by the same token they had "banished puns and laughing and kissing" – for Keats the fate of Burns was a powerful indictment of Scottish asceticism. He concluded, inconclusively:

I have not sufficient reasoning faculty to settle the doctrine of thrift – as it is consistent with the dignity of human Society – with the happiness of Cottagers – All I can do is by plump contrasts – Were the fingers made to squeeze a guinea or a white hand? Were the Lips made to hold a pen or a kiss? And yet in Cities Man is shut out from his fellows if he is poor, the Cottager must be dirty and very wretched if she be not thrifty – The present state of society demands this and this

²⁰ "Milton" (1825), in *Critical and Historical Essays*, 2 vols. (London: Dent, 1907), I, 153–6.

convinces me that the world is very young and in a verry ignorant state – We live in a barbarous age. (Keats, *Letters*, p. 118)

But in pointing to the “young” and “barbarous” state of the world Keats is implicitly invoking the very doctrine of progress that was undermining the poetic values of love and pleasure to which he was committed.

Simply by being poets, then, the Romantics were fated to be reactionaries, in at least one sense of the term. William Hazlitt, who had his own reservations concerning the “new” reformers of the utilitarian school of Bentham, concluded that poetry itself was by its nature opposed to liberal political values.

The language of poetry naturally falls in with the language of power. The imagination is an exaggerating and exclusive faculty: it takes from one thing to add to another: it accumulates circumstances together to give the greatest possible effect to a favourite object...The principle of poetry is a very anti-levelling principle...Poetry is right-royal. It puts the individual for the species, the one above the infinite many, might before right. (*Works*, IV, 214–15)

Hazlitt opposes the imagination, “a monopolising faculty, which seeks the greatest quantity of present excitement by inequality and disproportion,” to the understanding, “a distributive faculty, which seeks the greatest quantity of ultimate good, by justice and proportion.” The opposition of imagination and understanding or reason is a commonplace in Romantic literary theory. But, as Hazlitt shows, there are political considerations that make the issue less clear-cut than it might appear. In his reply to Burke Paine had seen an intimate connection between the latter’s imaginative power and literary graces and his reactionary politics. Those who thought of themselves as political reformers, like Paine, could make the choice between reason and imagination in favor of the former. For the poets this was an impossible choice, and the recognition of its necessity was agonizing. This recognition of a disjunction of values lies behind the Furies’ taunt to Prometheus that

The good want power, but to weep barren tears.
The powerful goodness want: worse need for them.
The wise want love, and those who love want wisdom;
And all best things are thus confused to ill.

(*Prometheus Unbound*, 1.625–8)

In Shelley’s last major poem, “The Triumph of Life,” the narrator grieves

to think how power and will
In opposition rule our mortal day—
And why God made irreconcilable
Good and the means of good;

(228–31)

The narrator of Keats's "The Fall of Hyperion: A Dream" faces a similar dilemma, between Moneta's description of him as one "of the dreamer tribe" (1.198) and his admiration for those

Who love their fellows even to the death;
Who feel the giant agony of the world;
And more, like slaves to poor humanity,
Labour for mortal good. (1.156-9)

The narrator hopes that a poet can be "a sage; / A humanist, physician to all men" (1.189-90), and Moneta agrees – but Keats can have no confidence that he is this kind of poet. The healing of the division between "Good and the means of good" is a central concern of Shelley in his *Defence of Poetry*, where he replies to Peacock's elevation of understanding over imagination by arguing that the imaginative visions of poets (in the widest sense) must serve to guide the labors of the reformers (*Poetry and Prose*, pp. 500-1).

Was it realistic to believe that poetry could have this kind of influence in the modern world? The Romantics recognized that as writers their task was the spreading of ideas and the changing of minds. Faced by the incomprehension of the reading public, Wordsworth proudly reminded his correspondent "that every great and original writer, in proportion as he is great or original, must himself create the taste by which he is to be relished" (Wordsworth, *Middle Years*, I, 150). By influencing his readers the poet could free them from what Blake memorably called their "mind-forg'd manacles" ("London," 8). The Romantics' faith in the power of imaginative vision to transform the world is the source of some of their greatest achievements. To it we owe *The Prelude*, "The Ancient Mariner," the prophetic poems of Blake, *Prometheus Unbound*, and the Odes and "The Fall of Hyperion" of Keats. But it is not a faith we can easily share. To rely on vision to transform the world is to be limited to transforming it in vision while leaving it untouched in reality. The Romantic assumption that the mind creates its world neglects the extent to which the converse is true. If the social world determines our mental being, then the extent to which poets, or any writers, can change the conditions of existence is severely limited, though they are naturally reluctant to recognize this. Not all the Romantics would have endorsed Coleridge's view of society, but they would probably have agreed with his thesis that society's ills stemmed from an erroneous philosophy, and that it was the business of responsible intellectuals to oppose that philosophy.²¹ Yet it seems more likely that economic and social developments had

²¹ See his letter to the Prime Minister, Lord Liverpool, July 28, 1817; Coleridge, *Letters*, IV, 757-63.

brought about the philosophy than vice versa. Coleridge's dream of an independent class of intellectuals, the "clerisy," not involved in struggling for particular interests and thus able to educate and legislate for society as a whole, is the typical fantasy of a writer.²² Such a body could only come into existence as the product of the kind of material interests it was supposed to oversee and would only be able to deal with symptoms it would be condemned to mistake for causes.

The Romantics in general remained under the sway of what Marx and Engels were to call "the German ideology." Their strictures on their Young Hegelian colleagues apply to these poets too.

Since the Young Hegelians consider conceptions, thoughts, ideas, in fact all the products of consciousness, to which they attribute an independent existence, as the real chains of men...it is evident that the Young Hegelians have to fight only against these illusions of consciousness. Since, according to their fantasy, the relations of men, all their doings, their fetters and their limitations are products of their consciousness, the Young Hegelians logically put to men the moral postulate of exchanging their present consciousness for human, critical or egoistic consciousness, and thus of removing their limitations. This demand to change consciousness amounts to a demand to interpret the existing world in a different way, i.e. to recognize it by means of a different interpretation.²³

As Marx put it in the eleventh of his "Theses on Feuerbach": "The philosophers have only interpreted the world in various ways; the point, however, is to change it" (p. 620). The Romantic poets called on their readers to imagine the world anew in order to transform it – but the social world would have to be transformed first if the possibilities of imaginative vision were to be available to any but a privileged few. The error is more pardonable in poets than in political philosophers; and on Marx's own principle that "It is not the consciousness of men that determines their existence, but their social existence that determines their consciousness,"²⁴ it is futile to castigate individuals for the errors of their time and class. These errors preserved them from despair and allowed them to at least record their protest against conditions they rightly considered to be inhuman. Their position is most sympathetically seen as one of responsibility without power. The "escapism" of which they have often been accused is rather a strategy of compensation,

²² See *On the Constitution of the Church and State*. The subsequent history of the idea is traced in Ben Knights, *The Idea of the Clerisy in the Nineteenth Century* (Cambridge University Press, 1978).

²³ Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels, *The Germany Ideology* (1845–6; reprinted, Moscow: Progress Publishers, 1976), pp. 35–6.

²⁴ Preface to *A Contribution to the Critique of Political Economy* (1859); Karl Marx, *Early Writings*, trans. Rodney Livingstone and Gregor Benton (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1977), p. 425.

an attempt to lodge themselves (and their readers) in more congenial worlds of their own creation to console them for their inability to transform this world, "the very world which is the world / Of all of us, the place in which, in the end, / We find our happiness, or not at all" (*The Prelude*, x. 725-7). There is a danger that the resort to vision may cut the visionary off from the human community, and this is a frequent theme in Romantic poetry – in the *Urizen* of Blake, in Wordsworth's *Excursion*, in Coleridge's "Kubla Khan" and "Ancient Mariner," in Shelley's "Alastor" (1816) and "Triumph of Life," in Byron's *Childe Harold*, *Manfred*, and *Cain*, in Keats's "La Belle Dame Sans Merci" and "Fall of Hyperion." The danger was ever-present because it seemed that the alternative to visionary escape could only be acquiescence in the conditions of the world as it was and a lapse into custom and habit. In a society whose practices and beliefs constituted a denial of human imagination and creativity it was the poets' role to keep open a sense of alternative possibility. This perhaps is the crucial political function of the imagination, and in this respect all true poets are, as Shelley argued at the end of *A Defence of Poetry*, politically progressive, whatever their ostensible political beliefs.