

The following lesson and the next 2 are to be considered as substituting the actual lectures for the first week. You are therefore invited to read them carefully and eventually study them, since they introduce you to many topics that will be touched upon during the course. In case you find any difficulty you can report to me through my email.

First lesson October 4, 2010

The complexity and richness of the Romantic period can be more easily faced if we select not only the number of authors to be met (either accepting **the canon**¹ or not), but also some category capable of describing their literary production.

In this perspective, I have chosen the category of **travel** for a series of reasons. The most important of these reasons is that travel can be taken as the substance itself of romantic experience, as a complex metaphor that can account for the multifarious facets of Romanticism. Obviously in order to make the category of travel work in this direction, it is necessary to stretch the connotations of the word travel to make it mean diverse things, namely:

- the travel in life towards individual self-assertiveness (**travel inside**), that can take the shape of a circuitous voyage or of an endless errance. Since every individual experiences a very special personal travel, the languages and genres the report can take are virtually endless as is the number of human beings.

- the travel towards a specific goal (**travel outside**), the final result of a quest for a paradise (the East was just at the beginning of our period entering the list of fascinating countries) contrasting the depressing quality of the present. **Time** can become an ally of space in this case, as the nostalgic recreation of an ancient past, taking shape in the fascination for the primitive and the Medieval, as new mythology or as the dream of a future time of utopic desires, or as infinite/sublime experience.

- the movement imposed on human beings by some human or obscure force driving them on through natural places that rarely seem friendly to them: travel as **exile** or as **damnation**.

Movements of all sorts (whether accompanied by anxiety, nightmares, hopes or ecstasy) always imply the necessity to find new words to communicate them, as many words actually as are the many shapes taken by human experiences, as numerous as the grains of sand that run through the fingers of the Sybil.

I will try to frame these concepts within William Blake's words (1757-1827):

- 1 To see a world in a grain of sand
 - 2 And a heaven in a wild flower,
 - 3 Hold infinity in the palm of your hand
 - 4 And eternity in an hour.
 - 5 A robin redbreast in a cage
 - 6 Puts all Heaven in a rage.
 - 7 A dove house fill'd with doves and pigeons
 - 8 Shudders Hell thro' all its regions.
 - 9 A dog starv'd at his master's gate
 - 10 Predicts the ruin of the state.
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¹It would be very interesting to look up the *Oxford English Dictionary* or *OED* (on-line edition available in the reading room at the Department of Foreign Languages) in order to make sense of this religious metaphor commonly employed in describing the "authors worth reading" within a given culture.

119 every night and every morn
120 some to misery are born
121 Every morn and every night
122 some are born to sweet delight
123 Some are born to sweet delight,
124 Some are born to endless night
.....

These lines are taken from William Blake's **Auguries of Innocence**, a poem not known at the time of composition, since it was first published by Rossetti in his edition in Gilchrist's *Life of William Blake*, 1863. It was edited from a manuscript in fair draft written by Blake probably during his stay at Felpham (1800-3)². What Blake's words seem to imply is that one can find vast truths in the smallest of things - or to put it in fashionable literary terms the microcosmic is representative of the universal. So, knowledge of the whole world can be gained from examining its smallest constituent parts: even such a small thing as a caged robin is an affront to both God and man - it's a tiny thing but it's symptomatic, and absolutely representative of the whole. The poem is built on a series of paradoxes where innocence is juxtaposed with evil and corruption, a mark of Blake's poetics, according to which it is only through opposites that progress can eventually take place. Blake is one of the greatest Romantic poets we shall analyze in more detail in the following lessons.

From *Wikipedia*: The lines "Some are born to sweet delight, Some are born to endless night" (123-124) are quoted by Jim Morrison in the song "End of the night" by The Doors from their first album (1967). A posthumous 1985 compilation album of music by Nick Drake is titled "Heaven in a wild flower", taken from the second line of the poem. The lines 'To see a world in a grain of sand, And a heaven in a wild flower, Hold infinity in the palm of your hand, And eternity in an hour' were said by Lara Croft in the 2001 movie *Lara Croft Tomb Raider*. Hannibal Lecter used the lines "A robin redbreast in a cage / Puts all heaven in a rage" in the 2002 thriller *Red Dragon*, as a clue to FBI agent Will Graham. Bob Dylan recorded the song 'Every Grain of Sand' for the album *Shot of Love* (1983): 'In the fury of the moment I can see the Master's hand, In every leaf that trembles, in every grain of sand.'

The Romantics are with us... in many ways: in the new language of poetry and songs, in a new way of looking at the world outside and at ourselves deep inside, in transgressive ideas and attitudes.

Some of these latter will be the ground of new poetry.

Ideas and attitudes, however, are not the product of excellent minds only; they sometimes are the byproducts of the historical times, and when the times are changing as rapidly as they did between the last quarter of the 18th century and the beginning of the 19th, then the flourishing of new ideas is also as extraordinary.

Before we look at the momentous historical events that characterize the early part of the Romantic period, let us have a look at the situation of readers and books at that time.

Since the middle of the 18th century the numbers of readers in Great Britain had started to increase: people read for information, for entertainment and for profit, but also for moral improvement, that is in order to gain access to the proper society. As the century advanced, novels and travel books became the most popular forms of literature. The category of literature actually started to emerge at about this time: as a matter of fact Samuel Johnson, in his famous *Dictionary of the English language* of 1755 still defined literature as "learning, skill in letters" but by the end of the 18th century it had come to mean a material product or a profession, and the *OED* records for 1813 the

² *Auguries of Innocence* is also the title of a poetry collection by Patti Smith (2005)

following definition: “a body of writings produced in a particular country or period”. The big change could only be effected through the combined action of a few transformations: the evolution of the book trade from a relatively casual craft into a professional industry; the corresponding transformation of writers into professional authors; the resulting change in the reading public that came to amount to a widespread national audience of both genders and almost all classes.

In turn readers understood themselves as participants in public culture. By the middle of the 19th century about 40% of women and 60% of men could read and write, out of a population of more than 13 millions by 1831. Booksellers and printers therefore had a large reading public to please and it was through their publishing politics that authors entered the **canon** or were left on the margin. It was for instance through the enterprising activity of bookseller Robert Dodsley that the first series of *Collection of poems by several hands* was issued from 1748 to 1758 that was to transform 18th century poetry from an entertainment for a few refined readers to a general appreciation for **graveyard poets** and in general protoromantic poetry by both the culturally ambitious and the fashionable gentry. Readers could get access to this still expensive material since the 18th century through coffeehouses (for male readers of newspapers and periodicals), or public **libraries** (for books). Libraries are certainly the phenomenon due to change the way of reading and the quality of the literary production: Great Britain provided both **subscription libraries**, that is libraries whose members together decided what titles to buy and therefore controlled their public’s reading activity; and **circulating libraries**. These were run for profit by booksellers who would buy large libraries from auction houses and lend them to members for a fee. They refused to judge the books they offered and therefore provided whatever was available to whoever came in to borrow virtually erasing hierarchies between *genres* and genders. These booksellers also provided a physical space for mixing of young people of both genders, free from control, a no-man-land where both male and female readers could eventually meet in uncontrolled atmosphere, and this actually amounted to a kind of social revolution. Since circulating libraries charged single volumes and not the work, three-volume novels came into fashion for more profit. As for literary criticism, until the end of the 18th century it was shaped by periodicals, like the *Adventurer*, *the Idler*, *the Rambler*, *the Connoisseur*, whose titles connote a rather loose purpose, people free to move, that talk to readers free of narrow identifications: the activity is not officialised yet. From the early 19th century, however, this changes with the institution of critical journals (*Edinburgh, Quarterly, Blackwood, Analytical*) that are mainly devoted to reviewing new writings or to summarizing intellectual production. Above all, papers that certainly **create differentiated reading groups, and do not talk to a generalized audience.**

A HYPOTHETICAL CHRONOLOGY FOR ROMANTICISM - now widely accepted – spans from **1783 to 1837**, that is from American independence to the beginning of Queen Victoria’s reign. This is a much wider chronology than the usual one starting with *Lyrical Ballads* in 1798, and which includes what previous manuals classified as Preromanticism.

The chronology I am proposing is a mixed one, including historical facts and literary and artistic events, and it will be useful to keep it under your eyes while we go on examining different texts and authors.

One important element must be stressed from start. No mention of the **word Romanticism** appears in the poets’ writings and no theorization of Romanticism characterizes the great stirrings of the turn of the century – in this Great Britain is very different from Germany or Italy. It was only in 1825 that Hazlitt identified a list of characters (philosophers and poets like Bentham, Godwin, Coleridge, Scott, Byron, Southey, Wordsworth, Malthus) that he saw as representing the age. The 1820s and 1830s were years of transformation, of profound change, that according to Hazlitt marked the end of an era. Hazlitt’s book was titled *The spirit of the age or contemporary portraits* and his assessment of the representative figures and their impact on the age have been very influential in shaping subsequent characterizations of Romanticism, although no term like Romantic/Romanticism appears in his book either.

PRELUDE to Romantic chronology:

1781 Henry Fuseli *The Nightmare* is exhibited in London at Royal Academy as the most telling exhibition of the sublime. You can find a copy of this picture in the *Norton*. The picture portrays a psychological experience, setting it within a reassuring middle-class interior, where a demon-nightmare with a monkey's features sits curled up on the body of a young woman laying asleep on a bed, almost suffocating it. Sensuality and fear are mixed. A horse's muzzle from behind a curtain is ghostly and menacing. According to popular belief, it symbolized sexual desire and also the means of transportation for nightmares. Eroticism is the result of the contrast between the extremely bright female figure and the black background hosting the two monstrous creatures and darkness. It stands for the girl's unconscious, set free during sleep from the constraints of reason and producing unspeakable phantasies and unquiet desires. The dream materializes the deepest anxieties that are allowed to surface.

The American revolution

The American revolution is considered "the watershed that divided 18th from 19th century England", triggering hot debates in all orders of society (also on slave topics) and actually defining a powerful **public opinion** in Great Britain that was later to intervene in the debates on the French revolution. **Colonialism** and **slavery** are both strongly linked topics in British Romanticism.

ROMANTIC CHRONOLOGY 1783-1837

1783 America is granted independence: Great Britain loses the American colonies at the end of the American Revolutionary War.

Same year, same month: a series of earthquakes begins in Calabria, Italy, leaving 50.000 dead.

In June the volcano Laki, in Iceland, begins an 8-month eruption which kills 9.350 people and starts a 7-year famine. The eruption causes deaths of livestock when they eat contaminated grass and also widespread crop failure. Effects of the eruption were felt all over Europe, where this was one of "the greatest environmental catastrophes.

In November the first manned hot-air balloon designed by the Montgolfier brothers takes off from Paris

In different fields, at very different levels of impact, all these events point to the new **movement** that is going to characterize the period we are about to examine.

1785 The Times newspaper is founded.

1786 William Beckford's *Vathek, an arabian tale. From an unpublished manuscript* was published anonymously, capitalizing on the 18th century obsession with all things Oriental. It was inspired by Antoine Galland's translation of the *Arabian Nights*, itself re-translated, into English, in 1708.

1787 King George III's madness announced.

1788 Macklin's Poets' Gallery opens in London. Macklin commissioned 100 paintings illustrating famous English poems, which he published monthly as engravings between 1790 and 1795. This is the first in a series of similar exhibitions meant to create connections between the arts

and envisaged to reinforce the fascination of the **national** literary production within a larger audience.

1789-1799 THE FRENCH REVOLUTION The French Revolution was not only a crucial event considered in the context of Western history, but was also, perhaps, the single most crucial influence on British intellectual, philosophical, and political life in the nineteenth century. In its early stages it portrayed itself as a triumph of the forces of reason over those of superstition and privilege, and as such it was welcomed not only by English radicals like Thomas Paine and William Godwin and William Blake (who, characteristically, saw it as a symbolic act which presaged the return of humanity to the state of perfection from which it had fallen away), — but by many liberals as well. With its declared emphasis on "Liberty, Equality, and Fraternity," it was also welcomed by others as being analogous to the **Glorious Revolution of 1688**.

As it descended into the madness of the Reign of Terror, however, many who had initially greeted it with enthusiasm — Wordsworth and Coleridge, for example — had second thoughts.

Therefore in order to understand the impact of the French Revolution on the British mind, we must consider that the British had had a very different experience of a revolution in the 17th century (the **Glorious Revolution**), when King James II had been overthrown by a union of Parliamentarians with an invading army led by the Dutch William III of Orange who ascended the English throne as William III. The crisis had become inevitable when James had fathered a son: until then, the throne would have passed to his daughter, Mary, a Protestant and the wife of William of Orange. The prospect of a Catholic dynasty in the kingdoms was now likely. Already troubled by the King's Catholicism and his close ties with France, key leaders of the Tories united with members of the opposition Whigs and set out to resolve the crisis by inviting William of Orange to England. The Glorious Revolution is also occasionally termed the **Bloodless Revolution**, even if there were two significant clashes between the two armies, and anti-Catholic riots in several towns; it can also be seen as the last successful invasion of England. James's overthrow began modern English **Parliamentary democracy**: never since has the monarch held absolute power, and the **Bill of Rights** has become one of the most important documents in the political history of Britain. The deposition of the Roman Catholic James II ended any chance of Catholicism becoming re-established in England, and also led to limited toleration for non conformist Protestants — it would be some time before they had full political rights. For Catholics, however, it was disastrous both socially and politically. Catholics were denied the right to vote and sit in the Westminster Parliament for over 100 years afterwards. They were also denied commissions in the army and the monarch was forbidden to be Catholic or marry a Catholic, thus ensuring a Protestant succession.

Unlike in the English civil war of the mid-seventeenth century (which had brought about the beheading of King Charles I), the "Glorious Revolution" did not involve the masses of ordinary people in England (the majority of the bloodshed occurred in Ireland). This fact has led many historians to suggest that, in England at least, the events more closely resemble a coup d'état than a social revolution.

In order to commemorate the Glorious Revolution, the "Revolution Society" was founded which celebrated the event every year. In the sermon preached on November 1789 in London, Richard Price celebrated the 17th century revolution espousing the philosophy of universal "rights of men", and argued that Englishmen should see themselves more "as citizens of the world than as members of any particular community", thus emphasizing a different conception of national identity that did not involve any superiority. This sermon provoked the angry reaction of Edmund Burke, who argued against the idea of abstract, metaphysical rights of men and instead advocated national tradition. Burke's reaction sparked a pamphlet war that witnessed the participation, among others, of Thomas Paine and Mary Wollstonecraft.