UNIVERSITY OF HARTFORD: THE PRESIDENT’S COLLEGE

THE ROMANTICS
Some Suggestions for Reading

GENERAL

We are just a few weeks away from the beginning of the President’s College’s exciting program in the Romantics. Now is the time to start your reading in preparation for the courses. To help you along, we have compiled the following suggestions for reading.

As the noted scholar of Romantic poetry Stuart Curran has recently pointed out, study of the English Romantics has undergone radical changes in recent years. We are witnessing “a revolution in process,” he says. While the pantheon of major poets – Blake, Wordsworth, Coleridge, Byron, Shelley, Keats – continues to hold the attention of scholars, the field has broadened to include numbers of lesser writers, and particularly numbers of women writers. We are also seeing a more comprehensive effort to set the literature of the period in its social and economic context: the Romantic Revolution and the Industrial Revolution are related phenomena.

It goes without saying that the best place for your reading to start is with the poets themselves. There are numerous anthologies of English Romantic poetry readily available, but those who are interested in looking at some of the people previously seldom included in surveys of the Romantics might take a look at:


If you are looking to get a general understanding of the English poets of the period and their aesthetic and spiritual contribution, you will find much to ponder in two of Meyer Abrams’ magisterial works (the second is perhaps the more broadly suggestive and is a helpful way into the poetry of Wordsworth):


Anchoring the Romantics rather firmly in the figure of Blake, the following offers an interpretation of the six poetic “greats” of the period:


The shift from eighteenth-century poetry to the Romantics is discussed in
If you’re getting ready to go off to England to follow in the footsteps of the English Romantics, try the relevant sections in:


**IDEAS AND DEFINITION**

Getting a sense of the Romantic movement as a whole – Continental as well as British, artistic and philosophical as well as literary – is a more daunting prospect. A book that gives us a sense of how the visual arts emerged into Romanticism is:


Two books, among many, deal with the relationship between Romanticism and industrialization. The first is a study of the link between landscape on the one hand and political ideology on the other, and the second is an anthology of writing exemplifying ways in which people looked at the encroachment of industry on nature:


See also:


Bermingham and Klonk are two of what is a large body of studies of landscape in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries: how people conceive of the natural world tells us a lot about how they locate themselves in the world as a whole. Our relationship to the natural world – at the very time when the natural world was eroding – is of course central to the aesthetic concerns of the era. Getting a sense of where Romanticism came from, what other currents were operating at the time, and how Romanticism became transformed into the industrialized and the modern can be grasped through three recent books, two dealing largely with the eighteenth century and one with the nineteenth:


Several books deal with the connection between Romanticism and overseas expansion, notably:


On Romanticism and war, see


A quirky but entertaining treatment of the relationship among science, the visual arts and poetry is:


The relevant sections of the following will provide a brief overview of the main intellectual currents:


A whole generation of British students read


and were changed by the experience. The book deals with major images and themes of the period. Finally, the following books offer, respectively, a selection of key documents relating to the idea of Romanticism, continental and British, and a selection of key opinions on what constitutes Romanticism by modern literary scholars:


**ART**

There is of course a wealth of literature on the great artists of the period, particularly John Constable and J.M.W.Turner. A major exhibition of Turner’s watercolors is now going on at the Royal Academy and a book-cum-catalogue has been published for the occasion:


The authoritative and comprehensive studies of the work of Constable and Turner, all published in New Haven by Yale U P, are:


A more portable study of Constable is:


On continental art and its background, see:


Brookner’s book has stirred up a good deal of controversy and may be quite misleading, but it is apparently a good read on the French Romantics.

One of the great portraitists of the eighteenth century (along with Gainsborough and Reynolds) was George Romney, born in the Lake District and given special emphasis in the collections at Abbot Hall, Kendal, which the President’s College tour to the Lakes will visit. If precursors to the Romantics have a place here, we should mention a new biography:


**BLAKE**


The recent Tate Gallery exhibition has led to a handsome catalogue, with contributions from some well-known writers: Peter Ackroyd, Marilyn Butler, Robin Hamlyn, and Michael Phillips, William Blake: Chambers of the Imagination (London: Tate Gallery, 2000).

**WORDSWORTH**

For the course on Wordsworth and Coleridge’s *Lyrical Ballads* we are recommending the Oxford U P paperback edited by W.J.B.Owen (1969), because it sets the poems out pretty much as they originally appeared in 1798, but several collections of Wordsworth’s poetry contain his contributions to the collection (i.e. everything except Coleridge’s “Rime of the Ancient Mariner”). The Oxford Standard Authors edition of Wordsworth’s poetry is hard to read (small print, two columns); if you want to plunge into Wordsworth in a big way, go for the Yale edition of the poems, edited by John O. Hayden (1981). The collection originally appeared in Britain in a two-volume Penguin edition in 1977. There is a new paperback, The Major Works, ed. Stephen Gill (Oxford: Oxford U P, 2000), which includes the major prose works as well as a wide selection of the poetry.


**COLERIDGE**

Coleridge’s sprawling *oeuvre*, consisting of lectures, essays, philosophical works, literary musings, and, of course, poetry, is being gradually pulled together by the Bollingen Press (Princeton U P) in sixteen large volumes, the first of which appeared in the 1970s. There are numbers of convenient editions of the poetry readily available. Coleridge’s major prose work, the *Biographia Litteraria*, was published by Princeton in 1983 as a part of the Coleridge series. The most significant poems are brought together with the *Biographia Literaria* and other prose works in a new paperback volume, *The Major Works*, ed. H.J. Jackson (Oxford: Oxford U P, 2000).


**BYRON**

People have been gathering Byron’s writings and producing biographies of him almost from the beginning. His complete poetical works are accessible in several editions, selections from his letters and journals were brought together by Thomas Moore as early as 1830 and they were published in much more complete form in six large volumes, along with seven volumes of poetry, by John Murray between 1898 and 1904. A further collection of *Correspondence* followed in 1922, and more came with the publication of the Marchesa Iris Origo’s *Byron: The Last Attachment* (1949) about his time in Italy.


**SHELLEY**

The *Complete Poems* are available in a Modern Library edition of 1994 and there are numbers of other editions, including an Oxford Standard Authors edition. Biographies began early: there are several 19th-century efforts. The standard biography is *Shelley*, published in a revised edition in 1947 by N.I. White. There has been extensive study of Shelley and his circle, primarily by Kenneth Neill Cameron, who has written illuminatingly about Shelley’s political background. See Cameron’s *The Young Shelley* (1950), *Shelley and His Circle* (four volumes, 1961, 1970) and *Shelley: The Golden Years* (1974). Shelley’s thought and aesthetic theory have been much discussed. Harold Bloom remains among the most perceptive critics of the poetry. See *The Visionary Company*, above. For a recent collection of criticism, see Betty T. Bennett and Stuart Curran, ed. *Shelley: Poet and Legislator of the World* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins U P, 1996).

**KEATS**

Keats’s short life is extremely well documented, thanks to the work of numbers of scholars. Hyder E. Rollins pulled together much of the material relating to the people around Keats in his large compilation *The Keats Circle: Letters and Papers* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard U P, 1948), and

Editions are numerous. Since there are relatively few textual problems, one is pretty much as good as another, though Miriam Allott’s *The Complete Poems* (London: Longman, 1970) has good notes and a clean text. Jack Stillinger’s, *The Poems of John Keats* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard U P, 1978), is the most authoritative edition. There is also a nice little edition of *The Selected Letters* by Lionel Trilling (Doubleday, 1951).


**OTHER WRITERS**

Obviously the above suggestions merely scratch the surface. Nor can one get a comprehensive grasp of the Romantic period without digging into the prose – notably the novels of Amelia Opie, Anne Radcliffe, Jane Austen, Mary Shelley and others (the men, it seems, write the poems and the women write the novels: we need both to understand what is going on).

Mary Shelley, particularly, is a figure of major importance to an understanding of Romanticism. *Frankenstein* (available in a Norton Critical Edition, ed. J. Paul Hunter), more than any other work of imaginative literature, brings together the themes and fears behind Romanticism – industrialization, alienation, science, the Gothick, the myth of Prometheus. No wonder that there is a huge literature on this novel. On Mary Shelley in general, see Betty T. Bennett, *Mary Wollstonecraft Shelley: An Introduction* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins U P, 1998), and a new biography, Miranda Seymour, *Mary Shelley* (London: John Murray, 2000).


Robert Southey, whose long narrative poems were highly thought of in his day, is not much read now – except for his historical works (there is a new edition of his *Life of Nelson*, for example: London: Constable, 1999). For a biography, see Mark Storey, *Robert Southey: A Life* (Oxford: Oxford U P, 1997).


Sir Walter Scott was immensely popular in his day, and numbers of his novels are still read. His narrative poems are available in a Signet edition as *The Lady of the Lake and Other Poems* (1962).
Thomas De Quincey’s *Confessions of an English Opium Eater and Other Writings* is available in an Oxford paperback (1999).

Since the President’s College tour of the Lake District will also visit John Ruskin’s house, Brantwood, across the lake from Coniston, we should end by mentioning, in connection with this clearly Victorian (and currently much studied) figure, a new and much praised two-volume biography by Tim Hilton, *John Ruskin: The Early Years*, and *John Ruskin: The Later Years*. Both were published by Yale U P, both in 2000.

Humphrey Tonkin

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(Corrections and suggestions for additions or changes to this draft are very welcome)