

NEH Summer Seminar for College Teachers:
THE AESTHETICS OF BRITISH ROMANTICISM, THEN AND TODAY
Stephen C. Behrendt
University of Nebraska
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Initial Parameters

For the purposes of the seminar, I have bracketed “the long Romantic era” loosely as c. 1770 - 1840. That dating enfranchises early poets like Mary Robinson, who began publishing in the 1770s; transitional novelists in the Gothic, sentimental, and eventually the Jacobin modes; and politico-aesthetic commentators like Burke on the early end. On the other end, it includes poets like Hemans, Coleridge and Landon, all of whom died in the 1830s (remember that William Wordsworth lived until 1850), and Baillie, who was still publishing; novelists like Stanhope, Peacock and the early Disraeli and Dickens. Using these delimiters gives us a central core from the middle of the period as well as two “borderlands,” one on either end, in which issues of periodicity may especially appropriately be investigated. It also accommodates what is widely accepted to have been a period of dramatic changes in the production and consumption of “literature” (variously and flexibly defined) but also of the other arts, changes that both reflected and contributed to the emergence of differently constituted “publics” and the various “tastes” that came to be associated with those publics.

Fundamental Questions I

We need to consider several key questions:

1. What criteria for the assessment and valuation of works in the various arts – but especially in the “word arts,” and particularly in “literature” – appear to have been in place *early* in this period? To what extent were they “formalized,” as opposed to individualized and idiosyncratic?
2. In what ways did those criteria change over the course of the period, and for what identifiable reasons?
3. By the end of the period, was there a constellation of criteria, and – if so – to what extent did those criteria presume a single general standard of “taste” or authority? If no such consensus is evident, upon what, then, did “critics” and commentators base their judgments?

From these initial large questions, several sub-questions seem to follow more or less logically, and in each case we need to think about how and why any and all changes were driven, accepted (or not) and enforced:

1. To what extent were (publicly articulated, or “published”) judgments influenced by any of the following:
 - a. “pure” aesthetics; and when commentators claimed such a basis for judgment, to what “authorities” did they defer? Is there a recognizable (even if not entirely consistent) standard?
 - b. “political” considerations, including both formal party associations (e.g., journals supported by or affiliated with political parties or factions) and individual (i.e., “personal”) political or ideological convictions?
 - c. socio-economic considerations involving “class” status or other socio-economic circumstances, either of the artists (authors) or of their commentators?
 - d. issues of gender, including expectations (stated or implied) about “proper” subject matter, genre, etc.? In terms of (published) commentary, to what extent is the gender either of an artist/author or of that artist/author’s critical commentator – *or both* – a factor in opinions about “value”?

- e. considerations involving race, ethnicity, national origin or affiliation, relating to commentator, author, and subject matter
- f. “religious” considerations, from doctrinal to more broadly institutional (e.g. Dissenting author? Methodist? Catholic? Jewish? Atheist?)
- g. “moral” issues (as distinct from strictly “religious,” above). This is a particularly thorny category because both the word and what it signifies – or seems to signify (“signal”) – to those who use it or read it is treated in immensely (and probably deliberately) flexible, variable, and “situational” ways. To what extent do artists and commentators actually attempt to *define* what they understand by “moral” (and “morality”), and to what extent do they deliberately leave the matter vague for ideological reasons or purposes?

2. Surely *all* of these factors are at play to some extent – perhaps inevitably so – in any critical response to a work of art intended for the public (or for “*a* public” or for a *selected* or *envisioned* public). But does there appear to have been (or still to be) even a remotely definable (however loosely) sliding scale that reflects the importance played by each of these factors (and others we may identify) in judgements made from year to year (and from genre to genre?) throughout the period?

3. If, at any historical moment, the “critical establishment” regards itself as the custodian of culture, as the “filter” that both packages and censors “content” in the arts, then what implements are available – both to authors and to other, differently-minded commentators – in getting immediate access to real or virtual audiences without the interference (positive or negative) of intermediaries (“middle-men”) who claim authority for their pronouncements. See Wordsworth’s preface to *LB*, for example, or any of the “pleading prefaces” to be found in works of prose and poetry.

4. How do artists/authors attempt to inoculate themselves against various sorts of bias (or even plain inconsistency and – worse – outright ignorance) on the part of their commentators?

5. If we think of the critical commentary surrounding any work as a sort of “paratext,” must we therefore somehow accommodate that paratext into our assessment of the primary text, on the assumption that the artist/author probably *expected* particular kinds of responses, anticipated them, and therefore manipulated her or his work in ways that we can recognize and explain (and perhaps theorize) now, some two centuries later?

6. Here is one place where *theory* becomes especially important. As we are all aware, various schools of modern/contemporary theory take quite different approaches to these problems. At one end of the continuum appears to be the assertion that because we cannot fully understand the complex socio-cultural dynamic of the Romantic era we cannot therefore legitimately apply our incomplete and selective contemporary (2010) knowledge of these matters to a primary work because doing so is inevitably “unfair” to the work and to the milieu in which it was produced and “consumed.” At the other end, one encounters the suggestion that only by discovering “everything” about the work, the author, the times, and the surrounding culture, can we hope to assess the work “fairly.” Paradoxically, both ends arrive at much the same conclusion: it can’t be done. In the first scenario, we can never accumulate sufficient (and sufficiently reliable) evidence; moreover, even if we somehow *could* get “everything,” we are nevertheless prevented from reading that evidence accurately because we are situated some two centuries later and are the products of a wholly different and therefore fatally alienating set of cultural circumstances. In the second scenario, the problem is that there is simply *so much* evidence that we cannot process it in a way that prevents us from losing sight of the primary work almost entirely or turning that work into merely another bit of “data” for wholesale (and presumably de-personalized, or de-individualized) processing.

At the same time, to suggest that a possible way out of this dilemma is to revert to some sort of a “pure” critical formalism – focusing exclusively upon the work itself and disregarding extraneous matters of biography, history, economics, religion, etc. – is to come full circle to the question with which we began: **IS** there (**WAS** there) any agreed-upon standard or set of criteria? And who says so, whether yea or nay? Who decides? And how?

7. Among all these questions and considerations lurks, like the alligator beneath the surface, the matter of the **canon** and the many factors involved in the creation of canons, their demolition, and their reformulation – all of which presume the possibility of creating some sort of “list.” But the formulation of canons inevitably turns the focus back in large part to the canon-makers themselves, to the (usually self-appointed) custodians of culture who claim to be able to assess and classify artistic productions, artists/authors, subject matters, intellectual or ideological “programs,” and even intended audiences on the basis what they present as legitimate bases of qualitative assessment. All such canon-making (and breaking) would seem to be inherently political in some respect, however, in that not only does it involve some “authority” claiming an ability to identify what is “good” (even “best” – or, in modern terms, “required reading”), but it also involves that “authority” claiming, *de facto*, to be able to say, moreover, **for whom** any work is “good” (or bad), and why it is so. In the absence of any consensus, any collectively agreed-upon criteria for judgment, how do canons (or other “lists”) come into being? Who produces them? Under what circumstances? For what purposes? And who, in turn, accedes to the judgments and the taste-formations involved, thereby at once perpetuating and petrifying both the materials themselves and the (apparent) standards and criteria that inform those judgements?

8. The relative “success” of a work (in whatever medium) is frequently identified in the contemporary public consciousness both with public “popularity” (judged most typically by sales) and with the work’s currency in general public conversation (“everyone’s talking about . . .” – so much so that the work’s mere **name** assumes a communicative function). If we argue that many wildly “successful” Romantic-era works (e.g. Bloomfield’s *The Farmer’s Boy* of 1800) did not attain “canonical” status, despite substantial sales and widespread currency, does that mean then that we ought to regard *Childe Harold’s Pilgrimage* or the Waverley novels differently than we typically do? It’s perhaps easier to put this issue in terms of apparent **lack** of contemporary success: the work that goes unappreciated until long after its appearance (think of Shelley’s comments in the preface to his *Prometheus Unbound*).

9. What, then are we to make – or attempt to make – of any relationship between a Romantic-era work’s contemporary “success” and its place in any subsequent canon? Does the roster of authors represented in Bell’s series of English poets (beginning already in 1778) or in the Rivington edition of English novelists edited by Barbauld (1810) represent what we would now think of as a “canon”? Or do they simply represent what a very market-savvy publisher and bookseller saw as a fortunate confluence of relaxed copyright circumstances and a mass of “available” texts? In the light of recent work by scholars like William St Clair and James Raven on the history of books, publishing, audiences and reading, must we rethink even matters like these, which would seem – at least on first glance – to be more related to demographics than to assessment and valuation?

See, for instance, the list of poets in the four-page catalogue of “Cooke’s Cheap and Elegant Pocket Editions of the most esteemed Works in the English Language” (c. 1810), which includes among the “Select Poets” Pope and Dryden but also Elijah Fenton (1683–1730) and Thomas Parnell (1679-1718). Or see Bohn’s *Cabinet Edition of the British Poets* (1851): vol. 2: Henry Kirke White, Gay, Burns, Shenstone, Beattie, Butler, Byron; vol. 3: Hannah More, Pope, Isaac Watts, Hayley, Mason, Prior, Graham, Logan; or vol. 4: Dryden, Lyttleton, Hammond, Charlotte Smith, Richardson, Bloomfield, Gifford, Canning.

Or consider the brief roster offered by “R[obert]. Anderson, of Carlisle,” whose preface to his *Poems on Various Subjects* (1798) dubs his age an “enlightened period, when Britain can boast of a Cowper, a Roscoe, a Rogers, a [Peter] Pindar, a Hayley, and a Mrs. Smith.”

10. What can we discover about matters of canon, valuation, and *salability* from looking at publishers' lists and advertisements? What can we learn from the pages of advertising that often appeared at the end of literary works? Are there patterns there to be identified? Targeting of particular audiences? Scattershot approaches?

11. At what point do we need to factor in some consideration of both *literary works* (in the form of books) and *authors* (as public figures or "celebrities") as *commodities*? Where do "mass-market" publishers of the period – from the Minerva Press to Thomas Tegg to pirates – figure into this equation? And what about the rise of the literary annual in the 1820s? As these became more elaborate, were they – or are they today – susceptible to being called (probably pejoratively) "consumer goods"? If so, is that because of what they *were*, as physical objects, or because of their *intended audiences*, or because of the function(s) they played within interpersonal, social settings?

12. And what about libraries themselves, from the relatively private ones maintained by "clubs" and "institutes" (or affiliated institutions generally, from the scientific to the medical to the mechanical and "trades"-oriented) to for-profit circulating libraries like those maintained, supplied and marketed by publishers like the Minerva Press or like Lackington's "Temple of the Muses" in London. How did these libraries both respond to and shape and condition the tastes of the readers who patronized them?

13. In his *Defence of Poetry* (1821) Percy Bysshe Shelley seems to situate "poetry" (by which he appears clearly to mean more than simply "verse") as a virtual (or an actual) subcategory of "morals." If we take that formulation more or less at face value, what may we reasonably conclude about how that particular author, at that particular historical and cultural moment, in his particular personal circumstances, and at that particular stage of his intellectual and artistic development, saw as the relationship between those two terms? What about the ways in which Shelley (and others?) appear to be defining their terms – at any time during this period? Do other artists/authors suggest any comparable connections, then or at other points in the era? Conversely, do any others overtly reject any such connections at any point?

14. These preliminary questions and considerations also point toward several other related subjects that may bear upon our discussions and our projects:

a. What is the nature of "creativity" (variously called "vision," "genius," "inventiveness," "ingenuity," "originality" and other things? How do judgments about an artist/author's "genius" or "creativity" (a seemingly internal and inherent quality) interact with that artist/author's "art" (or formal execution in her or his medium)? What sorts of privileging (if any) are involved here?

b. When authors work in more than one genre or literary form, to what extent does that formal "versatility" enter into critical assessments of their work? Is such "versatility" regarded as an advantage? A disadvantage? And what about the critic or commentator who typically responds to a particular genre (say, poetry, as opposed to prose fiction or drama); do genre-based biases or deficiencies emerge in that commentator's responses? If so, how should we deal with them?

c. Frankly, at what point does the "layering" of evaluative critical commentary (whether formally "published" or less formally disseminated) become an obstacle to straightforward assessment of primary works, both for us working today and for the artist/author's contemporaries and successors?

d. What assumptions, preconceptions, biases and cultural influences – if any – appear to differ in critical assessments coming from London (in particular) and the emerging population centers (generally), as opposed to those that originate in what we might call "provincial" locales?

e. The question posed in “d,” above, is not quite the same question as the other one that probably needs to be asked along these lines: What differences are evident in assessments published in places outside “England” proper – in Scotland and Ireland especially? This is probably another way of asking about some of the issues of nationhood, cultural ethnicity, and religious practice addressed earlier in these questions.

Fundamental Questions II

Coming at the matter from a different direction, one that is grounded more in our own times and in contemporary theory, here are some other matters that we should consider in our thinking, talking and writing.

1. Must any “new” aesthetics be strongly – or even exclusively – *formalist* in nature? Jonathan Loesberg’s 2005 *A Return to Aesthetics: Autonomy, Indifference, and Postmodernism* suggests that modern (i.e., “postmodern”) aesthetics are rooted in essentially the same critical philosophy found in Kant, including his notion of beauty as a symbol of morality. Loesberg suggests that a split developed during the nineteenth century between notions of (1) a direct link between the *experience of* “aesthetic pleasure” and the physical aspects of the “work” of art, and (2) a counter-notion that any experience of pleasure is secondary (at most) to the more important symbolic relationship between the “work” and the abstract “content” – or “signified” – toward which the physical “work” points. This is essentially a difference between focusing upon the “end” (or objective) and focusing upon the (ostensibly pleasurable) *experience* of getting to that end.
2. Is absolute “objectivity” desirable in aesthetics, even if it is actually or even potentially attainable? How would we attain it? And how would we know that we had done so? Who decides?
3. Is any sort of critical, interpretive process (including aesthetics) ever capable of operating without any “white noise” of ideological “overcoding” (analogous to what linguists call “dialect interference”)?
4. What mechanisms – if any – are in place (or otherwise available to us) to offset the inevitable consequences of ideological overcoding in aesthetic inquiry?
5. Classical notions of aesthetics privilege terms like “beauty,” “good,” “bad,” etc., and systems of aesthetics have often used a variety of criteria to define each of these terms and then to apply them to particular “works.” In the *Poetics*, Aristotle appears to have worked from a sort of “consensus” model, establishing his criteria on the basis of elements that he found in a broad variety of works he considered (yes, this *is* over-simplifying Aristotle). Subsequent critics then use his “yardstick” to measure other “works,” rather than considering that subsequent “works” may be taken in an aggregate to establish other, alternative “yardsticks.” Is this how **canons** originate?
6. Do we need an alternative taxonomy that enfranchises and empowers terms like “effective,” “ineffective,” etc., rather than more exclusionary terms like “good” or “bad”? Or would that be nothing more than taking the old terminology and passing it through a series of ideological filters to produce results and criteria that are in keeping with – and that therefore perpetuate – inherent attitudes and biases rather than offering anything like genuine objectivity?

Some Useful Sources of (Selected) Documentary Evidence

- Nixon, Cheryl L., Ed. *Novel Definitions: An Anthology of Commentary on the Novel 1688-1815*. Peterborough ONT: Broadview, 2009.
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- Waters, Mary A., Ed. *British Women Writers of the Romantic Period: An Anthology of their Literary Criticism*. Houndsmills: Palgrave Macmillan, 2009.

On Books, Publishing, Audiences, Reading and Reviewing

- Altick, Richard D. *The English Common Reader: A Social History of the Mass Reading Public, 1800-1900*. Columbus: Ohio State UP, 1957.
- Jackson, H. J. *Romantic Readers: The Evidence of Marginalia*. New Haven: Yale University Press, 2005.
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- . *Graphs, Maps, Trees: Abstract Models for a Literary History*. London: Verso, 2005.
- Rajan, Tilottama. *The Supplement of Reading: Figures of Understanding in Romantic Theory and Practice*. Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1990.
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- Richardson, Alan. *Literature, Education, and Romanticism: Reading as Social Practice, 1780-1832*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994.
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- Webb, R. K. *The British Working-Class Reader 1790-1848: Literacy and Social Tension*. London: Allen and Unwin, 1955.
- Wheatley, Kim, Ed. *Romantic Periodicals and Print Culture*. London: Frank Cass, 2003.

Bibliographical Resources

- Forster, Antonia, Ed. *Index to Book Reviews in England 1775-1800*. London: British Library, 1997.
- Garside, Peter, and Rainer Schöwerling, Eds. *The English Novel 1770-1829: A Bibliographical Survey of Prose Fiction Published in the British Isles: Volume II: 1800-1829*. Oxford: Oxford UP, 2000.
- Jackson, J. R. De J., Ed. *Annals of English Verse 1770-1835: A Preliminary Survey of the Volumes Published*. New York: Garland, 1985.
- . *Romantic Poetry by Women: A Bibliography, 1770-1835*. Oxford: Clarendon P, 1993.
- Raven, James, and Antonia Forster, Eds. *The English Novel 1770-1829: A Bibliographical Survey of Prose Fiction Published in the British Isles: Volume I: 1770-1799*. Oxford: Oxford UP, 2000.
- Sullivan, Alvin, Ed. *British Literary Magazines: The Augustan Age and the Age of Johnson, 1698-1788*. Westport, CT: Greenwood, 1983.
- . *British Literary Magazines: The Romantic Age, 1789-1836*. Westport, CT: Greenwood, 1983.
- Ward, William S. *Literary Reviews in British Periodicals 1789-1797: A Bibliography*. New York: Garland, 1979.
- . *Literary Reviews in British Periodicals 1798-1820: A Bibliography*. 2 vols. New York: Garland, 1972.
- . *Literary Reviews in British Periodicals 1821-1826: A Bibliography*. New York: Garland, 1977.

Scanned Materials on the Flash Drive (PDF format)

In addition to the scans of articles in the periodical press, the drive contains these files:

- Jno. Chas. O’Reid [Josiah Conder]. *Reviewers Reviewed: . . .* Oxford, 1811.
Dunlop, John. *The History of Fiction: being a Critical Account*, 3rd. Ed. (Excerpt). London, 1845.
Fawcett, Joseph. *The Arty of Poetry, According to the Latest Improvements. A Poem*. London, 1797.
Godwin, William. *The Enquirer: Reflections on Education, Manners, and Literature* (excerpt). [London} Philadelphia, 1797.
Hazlitt, William. “On the Living Poets.” *Lectures on the English Poets*. London, 1818.
Hunt, Leigh. “The Feast of the Poets.” London, 1818, 1832.
Jamieson, Alexander. *A Grammar of Rhetoric and Polite Literature* (excerpt) [London] New Haven, 1820.
M’Dermott, M. *The Beauties of Modern Literature*. London, 1824.
Murray, H[ugh]. *Morality of Fiction*. Edinburgh, 1805.
—. *The Periodical Press of Great Britain and Ireland*. London, 1824.

A complete copy of the Corvey Catalogue of *belles lettres* editions in the Microforms collection at the University of Nebraska. This is a **large** file.

The same Corvey Collection catalogue, but broken onto four smaller files.

The list of Preliminary Questions and Considerations for the seminar, with mini-bibliography