

Edited by
JOEL FAFLAK and
JULIA M. WRIGHT



A Handbook of
Romanticism
Studies

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Editorial Offices

350 Main Street, Malden, MA 02148-5020, USA
9600 Garsington Road, Oxford, OX4 2DQ, UK
The Atrium, Southern Gate, Chichester, West Sussex, PO19
8SQ, UK

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Notes on Contributors

James Robert Allard is Associate Professor at Brock University, author of *Romanticism, Medicine, and the Poet's Body* (2007), and co-editor of *Staging Pain, 1580-1800: Violence and Trauma in British Theater* (2009).

Stephen C. Behrendt is George Holmes Distinguished University Professor of English at the University of Nebraska. In addition to his work in interdisciplinary studies in Romanticism, including his recent book *British Women Poets and the Romantic Writing Community* (2009), he is a widely published poet.

Julie Ellison is Professor of American Culture, English, and Art and Design at the University of Michigan. Her monographs include *Emerson's Romantic Style* (1984), *Delicate Subjects* (1990), and *Cato's Tears and the Making of Anglo-American Emotion* (1999).

Joel Faflak is Associate Professor of English and Theory and Criticism at the University of Western Ontario. He is the author of *Romantic Psychoanalysis* (2007), co-author of *Revelation and Knowledge* (2011), and editor of Thomas De Quincey's *Confessions of an English Opium-Eater* (2009). Among his edited and co-edited volumes are *Sanity, Madness, Transformation* (2005) and *The Romanticism Handbook* (2011).

Elizabeth A. Fay is Professor of English at the University of Massachusetts Boston. Her two most recent monographs are *Fashioning Faces: The Portraitive Mode in British Romanticism* (2010) and *Romantic Medievalism* (2002).

Jillian Heydt-Stevenson is Associate Professor of English at the University of Colorado. She has written *Austen's Unbecoming Conjunctions* (2005), co-edited *Recognizing the*

Romantic Novel (2008), and was Associate Editor of *Last Poems of William Wordsworth* (1999); she has written articles on Austen, St. Pierre, Burney, Edgeworth, Coleridge, and landscape aesthetics.

Jerrold E. Hogle is University Distinguished Professor in English at the University of Arizona and Past President of the International Gothic Association. His books include *Shelley's Process* (1988), *The Cambridge Companion to Gothic Fiction* (editor, 2002), and *The Undergrounds of "The Phantom of the Opera"* (2002).

Anne Janowitz is Professor of Romantic Poetry at Queen Mary, University of London. She is the author of *England's Ruins* (1990), *Lyric and Labour in the Romantic Tradition* (1998), and *Women Romantic Poets: Anna Barbauld and Mary Robinson* (2004).

Steven E. Jones, Professor of English, Loyola University Chicago, and co-editor, *Romantic Circles*, is author of *Satire and Romanticism* (2000) and editor of *The Satiric Eye: Forms of Satire in the Romantic Period* (2003).

Theresa M. Kelley is Marjorie and Lorin Tiefenthaler Professor of English at University of Wisconsin, Madison. She is the author of *Wordsworth's Revisionary Aesthetics* (1988), *Reinventing Allegory* (1997), and *Clandestine Marriage: Botany and Romantic Culture* (forthcoming), and co-editor of *Voices and Countervoices: Romantic Women Writers* (1995). She has published essays on Romantic poetics, aesthetics, visual culture and philosophy, Keats, Mary Shelley, Smith, Percy Shelley, Blake, Hegel, Goethe, and Adorno.

Peter J. Kitson is Professor of English at the University of Dundee. He is the author of *Romantic Literature, Race and Colonial Encounter* (2007) and co-author of *Literature, Science and Exploration: Bodies of Knowledge* (2004). He is also editor or co-editor of several volumes, including *Placing*

and Displacing Romanticism (2001) and *Slavery and the Cultures of Abolition* (2007). He has also edited collections of Romantic period travel writing (2001-2002) and transatlantic slavery texts (1999).

Jacqueline Labbe is Professor of English and Comparative Literary Studies at the University of Warwick. Her monographs include *Charlotte Smith: Romanticism, Poetry and the Culture of Gender* (2003) and *Writing Romanticism: Charlotte Smith and William Wordsworth* (2011), and she has edited Smith's *The Old Manor House* (2002) and *Poetry* (2007).

Kari Lokke is a Professor of Comparative Literature at the University of California, Davis. She is the author of *Gérard de Nerval: The Poet as Social Visionary* (1987) and *Tracing Women's Romanticism: Gender, History and Transcendence* (2004). With Adriana Craciun, she co-edited *Rebellious Hearts: British Women Writers and the French Revolution* (2001). She is currently writing a book on eighteenth- and nineteenth-century European representations of enthusiasm and fanaticism.

Marc Redfield is Professor of English and Comparative Literature at Brown University. His most recent book is *The Rhetoric of Terror: Reflections on 9/11 and the War on Terror* (2009).

Kristin Fliieger Samuelian, Associate Professor at George Mason University, is the author of *Royal Romances: Sex, Scandal, and Monarchy in Print, 1780-1821* (2010) and articles in *Studies in Romanticism* and *Nineteenth-Century Studies*, and the editor of the Broadview *Emma*.

Mark Schoenfield, Professor at Vanderbilt University, is the author of *British Periodicals and Romantic Identity: The "Literary Lower Empire"* (2009), as well as articles in *Studies*

in Romanticism, Literature Compass, and the Wordsworth Circle.

Michael Scrivener, Professor of English at Wayne State University, has published *Radical Shelley* (1982), *Seditious Allegories* (2001), *Two Plays by John Thelwall* (2006), *Poetry and Reform* (1992), *Cosmopolitan Ideal in the Age of Revolution and Reaction, 1776-1832* (2007), and *Jewish Representation in British Literature, 1780-1840* (2011).

Richard C. Sha is Professor of Literature at American University in Washington, DC. He is the author of *Perverse Romanticism: Aesthetics and Sexuality in Britain, 1750-1832* (2009) and *The Visual and Verbal Sketch in British Romanticism* (1998). He has edited two volumes: *Romanticism and Sexuality* (2001) and *Historicizing Romantic Sexuality* (2006).

Sophie Thomas is Associate Professor of English at Ryerson University in Toronto, where she teaches eighteenth- and nineteenth-century literature. She is the author of *Romanticism and Visuality: Fragments, History, Spectacle* (2008).

Michael Tomko is Assistant Professor of Literature at Villanova University. His research focuses on the intersection of politics, religion, and Romantic literature, and he is the author of *British Romanticism and the Catholic Question* (2011).

Ted Underwood is Associate Professor of English at the University of Illinois, Urbana-Champaign, and the author of *The Work of the Sun: Literature, Science, and Political Economy 1760-1860* (2005). His articles on Romantic-era historiography have appeared in *Modern Language Quarterly*, *Representations*, and *PMLA*.

Orrin N. C. Wang is Associate Professor of English and Comparative Literature at the University of Maryland. The

author of *Fantastic Modernity: Dialectical Readings in Romanticism and Theory* (1996), Wang has published widely on British and American Romanticism, as well as Boswell, Wollstonecraft, Shelley, and a number of postmodern theoretical schools.

David Worrall is Professor of English at Nottingham Trent University. He has written *Theatric Revolution: Drama, Censorship and Romantic Period Subcultures* (2006), *The Politics of Romantic Theatricality: The Road to the Stage* (2007), and *Harlequin Empire: Race, Ethnicity and the Drama of the Popular Enlightenment* (2007).

Julia M. Wright is Canada Research Chair in European Studies at Dalhousie University. She is the author of *Blake, Nationalism, and the Politics of Alienation* (2004) and *Ireland, India, and Nationalism in Nineteenth-Century Literature* (2007), and the editor or co-editor of a number of volumes, most recently a two-volume *Companion to Irish Literature* (editor, 2010) and *Reading the Nation in English Literature* (co-editor, 2009).

Introduction

Joel Faflak and Julia M. Wright

This *Handbook of Romanticism Studies* is organized around a set of key terms. Some of these terms have been central to Romanticism studies for some time, such as imagination, sublime, and poetics. Other terms reflect critical trends of the last thirty years, including philosophy, race, historiography, and visual culture. And yet other terms name a selection of genres and modes on the margins of canonical Romanticism but increasingly important to a wider Romanticism studies, including satire, gothic, drama, and sensibility. The list of terms addressed here is not exhaustive, but it does offer a wide range of entry points to the study of Romanticism, from debates over the formal properties of high art to the complex world of Romantic-era theater to the impact of philosophical and scientific debates on conceptions of culture and cultural works.

Romanticism studies, like other literary fields, has undergone a series of sea changes in the last thirty years. Until the 1980s, Romanticism scholarship and teaching were dominated by the so-called “Big Six”: William Blake, William Wordsworth, Samuel Taylor Coleridge, Lord Byron, John Keats, and Percy Bysshe Shelley. Sometimes this was reduced still further, to the “Big Five” or “Big Four,” dropping the unlyrical Blake and/or the too-worldly Byron. Then the field was reshaped by canon reform, spurred largely by feminist theory, the general turn to theory in English departments, and critical studies that rethought and resituated received ideas about Romantic transcendence and lyricism, such as Tilottama Rajan's *Dark Interpreter* (1980) and especially Jerome McGann's *The Romantic Ideology* (1983). Canon reform led to new classroom

anthologies, such as Jennifer Breen's *Romantic Women Poets* (1992), McGann's *Romantic Period Verse* (1993), Duncan Wu's *Romanticism* (1994) and companionate *Romantic Women Poets* (1997), Andrew Ashfield's *Romantic Women Poets* (1995), Anne Mellor and Richard Matlak's *British Literature 1780-1830* (1996), and Paula R. Feldman's *British Women Poets of the Romantic Era* (1997), not to mention dozens of new single-author editions of long-out-of-print novels and verse, particularly through new publishers such as Broadview Press, founded in 1985, and the short-lived Pandora Press, active in the 1980s. In recent years, the Romantic canon has been significantly shaped by New Historicism not only in its interest in material culture and its contexts – the sciences, historical events, labor conditions, the cost and hence accessibility of cultural works – but also in its reframing of culture itself on broader terms, embracing materials pitched at “popular” as well as elite audiences and media beyond that of the printed volume, including the stage, the single-sheet print or ballad, magazines, public spectacles, and oral culture in general.

Romanticism studies never really focused exclusively on a small set of lyric poets, though. There was a well-established “sub-canon” of writers, many personally connected to the Big Four: William Godwin and Mary Shelley (P. B. Shelley's father-in-law and wife, respectively); Robert Southey, Thomas De Quincey, and William Hazlitt (friends of Wordsworth and Coleridge); Thomas Love Peacock (friend of P. B. Shelley); Leigh Hunt (friend and mentor of Keats). Some of these writers were sub-canonical because they wrote prose rather than verse; along with Godwin, Mary Shelley (*Frankenstein* only), and Thomas Love Peacock, Jane Austen and Sir Walter Scott rounded out the canon of Romantic fiction. This ground began to shift with the canon reform of the 1980s, initially focused on women writers through the influence of such feminist texts as Gilbert and Gubar's *The*

Madwoman in the Attic (1979): Mary Robinson, Felicia Hemans, Anna Letitia Barbauld, Amelia Opie, Sydney Owenson (Lady Morgan), Maria Edgeworth, Letitia Landon (L.E.L.), Charlotte Smith, and myriad other significant authors were incorporated into scholarship and thence into anthologies and modern editions. Moreover, as Julie Ellison suggests in her chapter here, such rethinkings of the canon opened the door to previously marginalized (feminized) modes, such as sensibility – and, we might add, sub-genres largely associated with women writers, such as the national tale and the silver fork novel.

The rise of postcolonial theory and “four nations” historiography followed feminism in reshaping our sense of Romantic literature, opening the door not only for Scottish, Irish, and Welsh writing as nationally distinctive (no longer to be collapsed into an ill-defined “English” or “British” category), as well as the literature of empire in general, but also for a rethinking of even canonical writers' positions. Scott, heralded by Georg Lukács as the originator of the historical novel, became important as a writer of the Celtic periphery, and Southey, known to the previous generation for dubbing P. B. Shelley and Byron “the Satanic school of poetry,” became known instead as a demagogue for empire. This was assisted by New Historicism, a Marxist revision of “old” historicism that attends to historical forces beyond the elite and major events to consider minority and oppressed groups, regional distinctiveness, and a range of cultural as well as documentary sources. With New Historicism came a concomitant turn to the details that round out the larger picture of culture – urban life, entertainment, learning, the thousands of printed works that never saw a second edition – and a sense of Romantic literature not as a collection of authors' major works but as a cultural moment in which myriad texts were produced, many anonymous, pseudonymous, or bearing the names of authors about

whom we know little or nothing. In other words, as Romanticism studies turned its gaze toward marginalized populations – women, the colonized, the Celtic periphery, the lower classes – the field's sense of the literature of the period broadened as well. And, as it broadened, it moved away from not only the centrality of the Big Six but also the centrality of the author. In the wider print culture, authorship is a much more tenuous category, from the composite authorship of periodicals to the collaborative authorship of the stage and the concealed authorship of the radical press. It has also moved away from the idea of a dominant “Romanticism” that unifies the literary period as a coherent cultural moment, largely because, as a number of chapters here note, that unification proceeded through exclusion – not only of kinds of writers, but also of kinds of writing and cultural production, including those addressed here in chapters on the gothic, drama, satire, narrative, and visual culture.

It is a commonplace to point out that “romantic,” when it was used at all, was a somewhat pejorative term in the early 1800s, usually implying naïve idealism or troubling fantasy, and it is not a term with which any writer we now call “Romantic” identified. Subsequent Victorian writers such as Matthew Arnold and Robert Browning *did* reinforce notions of an incomplete, insecure, and thus ineffectual Romanticism, despite the fact that later movements such as the pre-Raphaelites, the Symbolists, and the Decadents were influenced by what had by then crystallized as a “Romantic” influence. What this designation meant, however, was the cause of some confusion, as Arthur O. Lovejoy complained in 1924; this lack of conceptual focus was to plague the period until the mid twentieth century when such influential works as Abrams's *The Mirror and the Lamp: Romantic Theory and the Critical Tradition* (1953) helped to consolidate a sense of Romanticism in relation to

the expression of genius – the lyric gush of individuality. But Romanticism was never fully consolidated in relation to literary history, partly because it was never a purely historical category. While many literary periods are named for objectively defined eras – the Early Modern era, the eighteenth century, the Victorian period – Romanticism names a transhistorical attitude that resists the imposition of temporal or even national boundaries. German Romanticism is roughly contemporary with English Romanticism, but they are variously dated. For English Romanticism, 1789 (French Revolution) and 1798 (Wordsworth and Coleridge's *Lyrical Ballads*) were traditionally used starting dates, and the most common end-dates are still 1837 (Queen Victoria's ascension to the throne) and 1850 (the death of Wordsworth). In recent years, the starting date has been pushed back to 1785, to approach the publication dates of early volumes by William Blake, Robert Burns, and Charlotte Smith, and even back to 1750 (see Wolfson), an expansion followed by a number of contributors here.¹ French Romanticism postdates English Romanticism, as does American Romanticism, which overlaps with a broader “American Renaissance,” partly because it was defined as an offshoot of English Romanticism. And contemporary poets such as Seamus Heaney are sometimes dubbed “Romantic” if they show debts to William Wordsworth or P. B. Shelley. Romanticism as a literary period, moreover, supplanted earlier periods such as the Regency (1811–1820), which approximates the heyday of the so-called “second-generation” Romantics – P. B. Shelley, Keats, and Byron. To add to the complications, some scholars are uncomfortable with the implication that a unifying “ism” can describe a diverse period of literature, and many now eschew the term “Romanticism” in favor of formulations such as “literature of the Romantic period.”

This decentering has been reinforced through a series of sea changes at the theoretical level. As Jerrold E. Hogle notes in his contribution to this volume, the New Criticism that dominated literary study by the mid-1900s shared a number of values with contemporary understandings of Romanticism, particularly Coleridgean organicism.² James Benziger begins a 1951 essay on Coleridge, “Perhaps only one who has been long interested in the phrase *organic unity* is wholly aware of how commonplace it has become in twentieth-century criticism” (24). A fuller history of this trajectory might link Coleridge's aesthetic theory to the “Romantic” poets of the American Renaissance, particularly Emerson (mentioned by Benziger 25), and thence to the US New Critics of the early twentieth century, a transatlantic theoretical genealogy founded upon the valorization of transcendence through the unifying forces of the individual, the imagination, and organicism. “The organic form, said Coleridge – translating Schlegel almost word for word, ‘is innate; it shapes as it develops itself from within, and the fullness of its development is one and the same with the perfection of its outward form’” (Benziger 24), the parts working together synergetically so that the whole is greater than the sum of its parts. In a reading of a latter-day Romantic, W. B. Yeats, foundational New Critic Cleanth Brooks thus writes of a “flowering of a few delightful images,” urging, “We must examine the bole and the roots, and most of all, their organic interrelations” (186). There is a seductive symmetry to this kind of organicism that follows Romantic ideas of the relationship between the human and the divine – the poet (from the Greek *poesis*, or “maker”) echoes, on a lower register, the creative force of the Christian God or, as Coleridge puts it, “primary imagination” is “a repetition in the finite mind of the eternal act of creation in the infinite I am” (I:263). The “well wrought urn,” in Brooks's phrase, is both metaphor and proof of the

capacity of the imaginative individual to create order out of chaos - to transcend the material world and all of its limits and contradictions, and to approach the divine or ideal. But along with this organicism comes a naturalizing that obscures the theorization that the organic, originally, merely tropes: organic verse and New Critical readings alike become "natural," objective truths that transcend the messy politics, textual histories, and literary climates from which both literature and critical readings emerge. Brooks's study, after all, his dedication suggests, came at least partly out of a class he taught in the summer of 1942, just a few months after the United States entered World War II, and its Preface is deeply concerned with what Brooks calls "The temper of our times" (x).

To borrow two terms from French thinkers Deleuze and Guattari, we might say the idea that Romantic writing forms an arborescent body of thought has gradually been replaced by a conception of a more diffuse or rhizomatic Romantic *culture*. This process began in the late 1970s and 1980s as "theory" writ large pushed New Criticism out of its naturalized dominance: first feminism (bifurcated into French feminism and Anglo-American feminism), deconstruction, psychoanalysis (Freudian, then Lacanian as well), and Marxism and post-Marxism offered new ways of reading texts, then postcolonial theory, New Historicism, gender theory, cultural studies, and even a revised editorial theory. But crucial to this theoretical shift was an insistence on calling attention to the theorizing that the New Critics rendered nearly invisible. Thus, while "organic unity" is, as Benziger implies, a term that operates in New Criticism as a "commonplace" rather than the theoretical construct that he reveals it to be, the proliferation of theoretical schools went hand in hand with the proliferation of specialized terms that were never commonplace: *différance*, the Imaginary, intertextuality, Capital, the metropole, Ideological State

Apparatus, and so on. Using the terms both made precise theoretical distinctions and flagged the theoretical frame being applied, so that Romanticists became not only Wordsworthians or Coleridgeans but also Derrideans, de Manians, Kristevans, Marxists, Foucauldians, or Habermassians. But this opacity was then read not only as a reaction against the self-effacing theory of New Criticism or an openness about the theoretical assumptions being applied, but also as obscurity - or, worse, an elitist obscurity that relies on a "jargon" that alienates readers. Such theories hence became known, collectively and somewhat wryly, as "High theory," echoed in Romanticism studies through the naming of canonical, transcendent Romantic writing as "High Romanticism." "High theory" then spawned its own counter-movement, particularly through the influence of a Marxist-inflected New Historicism that sought to recover lost voices, introduce forgotten texts, and draw a more finely detailed picture of the historical moment.

This turn may seem "anti-theory," but, like New Criticism, this revived historicism has its own theoretical contours, beyond simple materialism, even if it tends not to foreground them - it is broadly Marxist and often feminist in its interest in non-elite culture and life, for instance, and often implicitly Foucauldian in its understanding of and interest in the operation of power or Habermassian in its attention to a public sphere of complex sociopolitical interactions. It also gestures toward a healthy suspicion of the schematizing impetus to emerge from many 1980s theoretical schools as specialized terms became treated as nearly universal concepts. Scholars thus disputed the merits of using Marxist ideas to analyze preindustrialized Britain, or the appropriateness of applying Pierre Bourdieu's remarks about twentieth-century French culture to any other time or place. "High theory," in other words, as it was sometimes used, was legible as Romantic transcendence by other

means - a philosophizing turn that, like the lyric moment itself, took us out of history.³ The historicist reaction against "High theory" is thus another corrective, an effort to counter abstraction with materialism, and systematization with a heterogeneous mass of detail that refuses generalization. No counter-movement, however, has erased its precursors, and we now operate in a complex theoretical field in which New Criticism, "High theory," and (New and old) historicism are all in play, to one degree or another.

Romanticism studies has thus moved from naturalized organicism (New Criticism), to self-conscious conceptualization ("High theory"), to an almost sublime avalanche of details about Romantic-era culture, one that has, most strikingly, radically changed our sense of the Romantic canon far beyond the inclusion of women writers and lower-class authors of both genders. There is some nostalgia in the field for the days in which Romanticists could quote Wordsworth's 1850 *Prelude* at each other - for a time in which the theoretical frame was monologic and the Romantic canon compact enough to be known intimately by all. But as much as our circumference (of theoretical approaches, of texts and authors, of historical conditions) has expanded almost exponentially, the center still holds: the first conference of the North American Society for the Study of Romanticism (NASSR) in 1993 had ten papers explicitly on William Wordsworth and five on P. B. Shelley; the eighteenth NASSR conference in 2010, about twice the size of the first conference, had nineteen papers on Wordsworth and seven on Shelley. Readers of this volume will find these poets' names again and again in its pages - but will find them alongside repeat appearances by such newly canonical writers as Barbauld. Romanticism studies has changed dramatically over the last thirty years, and it is now as crucial to recognize the names Hemans, Moore, and Barbauld as it is still expected that we will know that

Wordsworth wrote *Michael* and Coleridge about the “infinite I AM,” and essential to be aware that Romanticism studies is now broadly concerned with scores of authors, popular culture, spectacle, visual culture, and other pieces of the complex puzzle that is Romantic-era culture. One might argue that this change sometimes reflects an “archive fever” to document Romanticism so exhaustively that it exhausts whatever conceptual power the terms “Romantic” or “Romanticism” might still hold. The opposite is also true, however, for now perhaps more than at any other time we are aware of the heterogeneous range of authors, texts, events, documents, and cultural artifacts that make the terms more vital to us than ever before.

A key aim of this volume is to help the reader through this renovated and diverse field, both center and circumference. While our general focus throughout is British Isles Romanticism, the significance of continental writing and European Romanticism is a recurring concern, particularly in essays on the sublime, philosophy, gender and sexuality, science, and psychology. We need to remember that the British Romantics read, wrote, and often traveled widely across national boundaries. William Wordsworth and Helen Maria Williams were frontline witnesses to events unfolding on the continent, although a comparison of Wordsworth's sublime “crossing” from Switzerland to Italy in Book 6 of *The Prelude* and Williams's *Letters Written in France* (1790) indicates how diverse British reaction to affairs beyond the metropole could be. Disaffected with British conservatism, the Shelleys and Byron exiled themselves to Italy, from where they wrote British cultural identity and politics large in more continental terms, and Byron met his fate at the “margins” of the West. This transnational exploration unfolded at once with and against both the progressive and repressive aspects of British colonial and imperialist expansion. British Isles Romantic writing thus articulates

and reflects the hopes, desire, and anxieties of the metropole, both from within and from without: Byron's and Southey's orientalist narratives, the xenophobic fantasia of De Quincey's various opium writings, Sydney Owenson's novel of cross-cultural confrontation, *The Missionary* (1811), and Olaudah Equiano's *Interesting Narrative* (1789) all offer telling counterpoints here. More often than not, the engagement was more metaphoric or psychic than empirical. The jingoism of De Quincey's various writings on the Opium Wars in the later nineteenth century was buttressed by the fact that their author never actually visited China, and in Sweden, Norway, and Finland, Mary Wollstonecraft, though an actual visitor, used their topography to map the melancholy of her introspective nature. But, as Kari Lokke reminds us in her chapter here, British Romantic thought and writing were also generatively cosmopolitan affairs, a libidinous economy of knowledge and desire that reflected the enlightened and global *frisson* as well as anxieties of transnational human interaction.

This volume begins with a cluster of chapters on "Aesthetics and Media," partly to register the shift in Romantic studies from one to the other and partly to highlight the ways in which Romanticism remains fundamentally yoked to form - to the lyric, the sonnet, the dramatic poem, and the epic; to emergent print culture and thriving theatrical culture; to the capitalizing of the "p" in Poet. The first essay in this section, inevitably if not naturally, is on the Romantic imagination. Richard C. Sha traces its elevation on the one hand as near-mythic in its power to transform and transcend, and on the other its recent critical pathologization as the vehicle of concealed ideology and the corruptions of history. Sha instead argues that we need to move away from deterministic views of the relationship between interiority and the material world (either transcendence or historical embeddedness) to

consider instead the complex interplay between self and world imagined in Romantic literature. In the period, that interplay, as Sha suggests, could be understood as pathological – bad stimuli could make diseased imaginations and so diseased minds; unhealthy imaginations could negatively affect the body – but also transform bodies through the proper stimuli and training. Julie Ellison, in the second chapter in this section, deals with another aesthetic theory concerned with the disciplining of the subject's response to exteriority – sensibility. Sensibility might seem to stress interiority through its interest in the subject's sympathetic identification with the feelings, and especially sufferings, of others. But, as Ellison makes clear, it was also entangled with the transformation of public culture through, for instance, the emergence of politeness and the public display of morality, including opposition to slavery and other forms of social injustice. Sensibility redefined the civic leader as the “man of feeling,” and martial scenes of suffering to argue against myriad social ills. The third chapter in this section deals with efforts to theorize overwhelming exteriority – the sublime. Anne Janowitz traces the larger history of the sublime back to Longinus and Lucretius, and then forward through the emergence of translations of classical writings to the eighteenth century in which the sublime was a key concept in aesthetic thought across an array of disciplines, and not only through the familiar icons of Burke and Kant. As Janowitz's chapter makes clear, the idea of the philosophic poem – taken from Lucretius by early eighteenth-century writers and carried through to Wordsworth, Coleridge, and Barbauld – is entwined with efforts, through the sublime, to think through the nature of the cosmos.

In the final two chapters in this section, we turn from the traditional interest of Romantic studies in the individual's experience of and escape inward from external phenomena,