

# Post-Romantic Identities

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**Tim Fulford (Nottingham Trent): 'The Modern Prometheus: the Romantics and the Power of the Scientist'**

**Ed Larrissy (Leeds): 'Blake and Modern Culture'**

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**Romantic Impact on Chinese Modern Writers**

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## Keynote Speakers:

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Criminal as Artist/ Artist as Criminal?: Oscar Wilde, Thomas Mann and the Legacy of Romanticism

By Cecile Brich (Leeds) and Katherine Cooper (Kingston)

Although the past two decades of scholarship on Oscar Wilde have appropriated his work as anti-humanist, we will argue that his consistent defence of individualism firmly roots it in Romantic notions of identity, and particularly representations of the artist. We will show his portrayals of criminals to be a case in point: 'Pen, Pencil and Poison' thus draws on De Quincey's characterisation of criminals as artists in 'On Murder Considered as One of the Fine Arts' (1827), while the murderous Faustian Dorian Gray is argued to embody the transgressive potential of the Rousseauist creed of the authentic self. (CB)

Thomas Mann viewed Wilde as little more than a third-rate Nietzsche (*Last Essays*), yet his initial writings show the influence of a similarly Romantic aesthetic inheritance: the artist exists in a realm where "aesthetic misdemeanour" is the only truly heinous crime. Yet Mann's novellas display an increasing disillusionment with Romantic constructions of the artist and the 'art for art's sake' mentality. Moving from the lofty isolation of "Tonio Kroger" (1903), through the pitfalls of Romanticism in *Death in Venice* (1911), Mann eventually attempts to repudiate the post-Romantic aesthetic in his 1947 novel *Doctor Faustus*, in some respects a post-War inversion of *Dorian Gray* in which the hermetically-sealed artist is represented as a criminal. Yet Mann remained in thrall to the dictum that "the artist is the brother of the criminal and the madman" (*Faustus*) even as he sought distance himself from a Romantic legacy which he came to regard as an inadequate anachronism. (KC)

Players and Painted Stage: The 'Last' Poems of W.B Yeats

By Tom Bristow (Leicester)

The last poems of W.B Yeats are of significant cultural and historical value. In the essay 'Players and Painted Stage', the final poems of Yeats are set in context; it is at first a test of his poetry in general, and secondly an aid to organising thoughts on Yeats's oeuvre.

Primarily focusing on poems from the two volumes *New Poems* (1938) and *Last Poems* (1938-1939 from *Last Poems and Two Plays*) the essay uncovers relationships of these works to Yeats's modern framework - that of the significant symbolism heralded in *The Tower*, his interest in occultism, and his developing political and 'religious' ideas based fundamentally in *A Vision*.

Starting with Yeats's association with Romanticism, early political nationalism and the deep interest with his Irish heritage, the essay leads into the modern, isolationist Yeats; showing how the myth and folklore transformed into a 'language and tradition more universal and ancient'. As Yeats

turned from the political world to the artistic the essay finds conclusive commentary upon his images and introduces direct analysis of Yeatsian poetics.

The commentary offers insightful discussion of the parallels and influences driven by Yeats's eclectic readings of - among others - Blake and Nietzsche. These are assimilated into a rich treatment of the joy and despair in tragedy, and drawn into an investigation of Yeats's purpose with cultural memory and the universal imagination. At times the essay reflects upon Yeats's desire to escape the distractions of the physical world whilst he pondered the limits of death. Such a tension contained his poetic vision: 'his philosophy tried to find a place free from tension, where the poet is not constrained by life or death': this would be the legacy of his artistic struggle.

The later poetry of Yeats allows us to see into the 'mystical, complex and unresolved images' of his poetry, its language and thought. The essay provides fresh insight to these works as it traces the fingerprints of an imagination 'tainted with a dark subliminal quality of unknowing' yet one that embraced a unique integrity.

## **Goethe and Eliot: In Search of the Human** **By Jane Brunning (Central Lancashire)**

In Goethe's *Faust* parts I & II, the Romantic struggle of the individual for sublime transcendence experiences a transformation. The Faust of Part I (1808) seeks to escape the stagnation of earthly human cares for sublime union with Romantic nature and the knowledge of a god, and in Part II (1832), the more mature Faust rejects the Romantic sublime for a visionary human project to create a new society. He reconciles the drive for human progress with the sublime human imagination in an engagement with Romantic anxiety regarding progress and its consequences to human values and lives.

In George Eliot's novel *The Mill on the Floss* (1860), Maggie Tulliver is also a questing soul who experiences the stagnation of the past, enshrined within the familial and societal expectations that confine her. My paper will argue that *The Mill on the Floss* takes on the problematic aspect of Faust's rejection of Care in Maggie's refusal to relinquish the ties of human love, sympathy, and *responsibility*. She recognises (and symbolises) the human consequences of the negation of other human beings, and herself represents the demonised and victimised "other" as illustrated by her depiction as Ovid's Medusa. Faust's recognition of *all* human Care as stagnating is rejected in *The Mill on the Floss*; stagnation lies solely within Victorian patriarchal rationalism and the familial and societal coercion that crushes individual human aspirations. The deaths of Maggie and Tom in the symbolic flood recognises that the inhuman (because *anti-human*) expectations of St.Oggs society has destroyed them both.

## **Elizabeth Bishop, Confessional Writing and Romanticism** **Nichola Deane (St. Andrews)**

Elizabeth Bishop often reacted with hostility to the trend, in American poetry, towards confessional verse. Her own writing is guarded and reticent, and might be described as anti-confessional. Yet she has a well-documented fascination with lives and letters (she was particularly fond of Keats's letters), and in her own letters mentions a prose piece she planned to write which would link Coleridge's letters with F. Scott Fitzgerald's equally self-lacerating autobiographical memoir *The Crack-Up*. This project was never completed, and yet the fact remains that Bishop attempted to examine her anxieties about confessional poetry, and her theories about the nature of the artist at least in part through her reading of Romantic autobiographical writing. The question of how one

might endure suffering, and how one might write about personal suffering is an important one, given her own personal difficulties, and also given her dismayed reaction to the self-exposure and self-destruction that seemed almost *de rigueur* amongst her friends and contemporaries: Lowell, Jarrell, Berryman, Sexton, Plath. This paper will briefly demonstrate some of the ways in which Romantic familiar letters in particular might have helped Bishop to evolve a self-protective mode of autobiographical writing. The central case-study will compare Keats's use of letter-writing and Bishop's own, arguing that Keats used letters to work out his aesthetic theories, and to bolster his identity as a writer, and that Bishop is attempting to imitate Keats's epistolary practice.

## Thomas De Quincey and the Self as Palimpsest

**Sarah Dillon (Sussex)**

In 1828, Samuel Taylor Coleridge's fragmentary poem, "The Wanderings of Cain" was published in *Bijou* with a preface by the author declaring "I have in vain tried to recover the lines from the palimpsest tablet of my memory." Seventeen years later, Thomas De Quincey published in *Blackwood's* his essay on 'The Human Brain as Palimpsest' (1845) part of his great work *Suspiria De Profundis*. In part due to his close connections with the Wordsworth circle as a young man, De Quincey is often considered to be a late Romantic. However, his prolific writings spanned a period of some forty years, many, including the *Suspiria*, appearing in the 'post' romantic period. De Quincey's thought and writing is thus peculiarly positioned across two literary periods. This paper explores De Quincey's construction of the self as palimpsest, a construction, as the Coleridge reference makes clear, both influenced by early Romantics, and, in its turn, hugely influential in future constructions of the self.

## Romanticism and the Representation of Subjectivity in Modern American Poetry

**By David Ten Eyck (Oxford)**

This paper will examine the formal experimentation of some major twentieth-century American poets and point out the ways in which their technical innovations offer partial responses to questions about individual and public identity which had been posed by Romantic poets such as Coleridge and Shelley. Especial attention will be paid to the manner in which recent American poets have responded to crises of personal identity by fashioning dialogic poetic models wherein 'self' is made to stand as a provisional construction, emerging from a continual, necessarily fragmentary, interaction with the material world. Such poetic models, interestingly, are repeatedly defended not only on aesthetic, but also on ethical grounds. They are seen as offering a potential blueprint for the type of constructive public action which might result from a transformed understanding of the individual subject's relation to his or her society.

I will establish the frame of reference for my discussion of Modern American poetry by referring at some length to Coleridge's and Shelley's criticisms of Idealism and Materialism in 'Aids to Reflection' and in 'On Life'. Working from this basis, I will then focus extended attention on Ezra Pound's *Pisan Cantos* and John Berryman's *Dream Songs*. In so doing, I hope to demonstrate the ways in which poets writing in two distinctly different historical contexts endeavoured to construct a subjective identity which would successfully negotiate between Idealism and Materialism and, in so doing, offer an effective response to a perceived public crisis.

## A Miraculous Inheritance: Double Vision in Okri and Blake By Matt Green (Nottingham)

'We are the miracles that God made  
To taste the bitter fruit of Time.'  
-- Ben Okri, 'An African Elegy'

'One never inherits without coming to terms with some specter,' Derrida writes, adding that what one comes to terms with is 'the fault but also the injunction of *more than one*' (*Spectres of Marx* 21). Though Derrida's remarks occur in the context of a larger discussion of Hamlet and Marxism, they are equally applicable to the inheritances of Ben Okri and William Blake. The process of engagement through which we as readers inherit from the works of both writers demands that we open ourselves to a world in which the material and the spiritual coexist in a moment of experience that dissolves the barrier dividing the 'mythic' from the 'real'. It is in this sense that the act of reading their works requires that we deal with spectres, that we negotiate an understanding of the conjunction between the natural and the supernatural which forms a central part of the legacies received and transmitted by both writers.

Paying particular attention to Blake's early works and Okri's *The Famished Road*, this paper will examine the manner in which these texts incorporate what Blake terms 'double vision' (E721)—the simultaneous perception of body and spirit. This examination will be undertaken with a view to exploring the contributions that this 'double vision' makes to the ethical and political perspectives presented by both authors. In addition to suggesting possible lines of inheritance running from Blake to Okri, a comparative reading of this sort can be expected to yield insight into the complex ontological positionings presented in their respective works.

## Aesthetics of the Sublime: The Romantic Artist in A S Byatt's *The Shadow of the Sun*

By Debbie Hayfield (North East Wales Institute)

There is a consistent ambivalence within Byatt's novels that shifts between acknowledgement of modern theoretical ideas and nostalgia for lost certainties, which is underpinned by a Romantic faith in genius and imagination.

*The Shadow of the Sun* contrasts the Romantic Artist with those who wish to understand, criticize and/or emulate him. The novel sets up a tension between Romantic subjectivity and critical objectivity and the characters function to present different critical and philosophical viewpoints: Henry Severell (Artist/Writer); Oliver Canning (Critic), Anna Severell (female writer in the shadow of the Male Genius).

I shall analyze this representation of the Romantic Artist by applying Lyotard's theory in *The Postmodern Condition* that postmodernism is a condition rather than an epoch, and that it is an aesthetic of the sublime, divorced from the real. His theory relies heavily on the Kantian and Romantic sublime and I shall argue that, according to Lyotard's model the character of Henry Severell is constructed as much as an artist of the Postmodern sublime as the Romantic. In Lyotard's terms his aesthetic is *avant garde* and reaches after the unattainable.

While the Romantic notion of the self is consistently argued with in the text, and challenged via modern theoretical positions which are supposed to have superseded such a notion, there is a sense in which the text insists that the Romantic Self is resilient to attack by theory.

## Narratorial Persona and the Representation of Consciousness In E.A. Poe's *Arthur Gordon Pym*

By **Rana Khoudary (Nottingham)**

Extensive research has been carried out on Edgar Allan Poe's characteristic type of fiction: his short stories. Little attention was given, however, to his only novel, *Arthur Gordon Pym*. This text which was written in the late 1830's carries many features that link it to the Gothic Romantic tradition.

The paper looks into the various instances of formal experimentation displayed in the novel, particularly the fragmentation of the narratorial persona, which disappears at times in favour of a more impersonal third person narration of events and re-emerges later as part of a collective 'we'. Another key point that will be examined is the focus on the individual consciousness of the narrator and the modes of representing this consciousness. Thus it hopes to demonstrate the complexity and originality of a novel that was discarded at the time of its publication for being, in the words of its author, 'a very silly book', and after lying for more than a century in the shadows, is nowadays considered a 'crucial text' for the understanding of Poe.

## The Post-Romantic Sublime: *Generation X* and the Intransigence of the Surplus Jouissance

By **Wing-Chi Ki (Edinburgh)**

This paper is dedicated to the study of the peculiar behaviour of Generation X in Douglas Coupland's novel, arguing it as a manifestation of the post-romantic sublime. The argument can be briefly summarised as follows: in contradistinction to the Kantian 'perceptual' sublimity (Nature or an item—in Lacanian terms—a Thing—that gives displeasure to the subject), or the Gothic 'transformative' sublimity (mundane articles are changed to become objects of terror), the post-romantic sublime turns the 'self' to a subliminal object, a chaotic, intriguing 'Thing'. In opposition to the love of harmonious order in the capitalistic production line (which can be compared with Kant's notion of beauty), Generation X is notorious in its love of contingencies and disorderliness, thereby causing disruption to the workforce, displeasure to the management class (owing to its acute distrust of capitalistic work ethics, hierarchy, notions of loyalty, or production logic—even though X-people are firmly anchored in the network of consumeristic ideology). Instead of seeking ambition and prosperity, Generation X looks for romantic excesses, the 'X' in the surplus jouissance, through excessive passion, excessive consumption, excessive indifference while they despise the yuppie's ideal of (entrepreneurial) beauty. The incomprehensible, desert-like 'Thingness' in the centre of Generation X's being is mirrored by X-people's nonsymbolizable attempt to seek excitement, their impotence to work out a logical future for themselves. In contrast to the adamant self-respectability of the middle-class, Generation X sometimes feels a great self-disgust amidst its defence and love of confusion, chaos, disorder and contingencies. As the post-romantic subliminal selfhood defies the linear, rational logic of self-preservation or calculation, it thrives and withers in an isolated state. The outgrowth of this phase marks X-people's return to normativity, whilst harbouring a residual love towards the intransigent surplus 'X' jouissance.

## Shelleyan Identity in T. S. Eliot's 'The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock' By Peter Lowe (Durham)

This paper traces the echoes of Percy Shelley's view of selfhood in one of Eliot's early poems, and shows how Eliot, although attacking the Romantics in his criticism, found himself addressing their concerns in his poetry. With reference to 'Alastor' I will show how Shelley perceives self-awareness to be both a blessing and a torment. Shelley's young poet is a man of great sensibility and thoughtfulness. Upon receiving a vision in a dream, he feels that he has been blessed with a greater awareness of ideal beauty than the common multitude but, believing that others would not understand this vision, he prefers to retreat into introspection and reverie. This withdrawal is so pronounced that the young poet literally wastes away to death, feeling alienated from the world that inspired his higher feelings, and unable to express what he feels to anyone else. In the more modern figure of Eliot's J. Alfred Prufrock we encounter another self-conscious individual who doesn't know how to convey his thoughts and feelings to those around him. Prufrock is famously tongue-tied, but he feels simultaneously that he has some deep truth to express. Like Shelley's poet, he is a sensitive nature who feels both blessed and alienated in the midst of society. In one of the key poems of the twentieth century, therefore, we can see that the problematic relationship between the individual and society, which so preoccupied Shelley and the other Romantics, continues to trouble one of the great figures of a century later.

## Petar II PetroviæNjegoš: Ecce Homo By Slavica Rankoviæ(Nottingham)

'This world is a tyrant to a tyrant,  
Let alone to a truly noble soul!'  
(Njegoš, *The Mountain Wreath*, 1847)

Brought up among shepherds in the wild mountains of Montenegro, yet a cultivated poet and a leader of the state as well as the church, 'tall, dark, and handsome,' Njegoš is as much a Romantic dream-come-true as a Romantic himself. He was loved and revered during and after his lifetime, his masterpiece, *The Mountain Wreath*, 'a must' on the educational curricula of the posterity.

It is this inventive and deeply reflective epic that makes Njegoš 'a great European poet, not only Montenegrin and Serbian' (Edward Goy). The events that have transposed what was once known as 'gallant little Serbia' into the breeding ground of 'the butchers of the Balkans,' have also (and with the same sense for irony) made this 'great European poet' *known* to Europe as the poet of genocide.

My presentation aims to examine this claim and introduce Njegoš to a wider audience. But this is not its sole purpose. Long charged with overflow of sentimentality, through their rediscovery/revival/recreation of 'national' epics, Romantics lately stand accused of more suspect passions. On Njegoš's example, my paper would suggest that, as much as it is dangerous not to see a forest for the tree, it is not less dangerous to allow the forest (be that the pressures of the contingent present or the blanket application of the term 'Romantic') annihilate individuality of a tree.

## Oedipal Visuality: Freud's Father Figures

By Mark Robson (Nottingham)

One of Freud's most well-known claims is that: 'the [Oedipal] conflict in *Hamlet* is so effectively concealed that it was left to me to unearth it.' Elsewhere he suggests of *Hamlet*: 'it was not until the material of the tragedy had been traced back analytically to the Oedipus theme that the mystery of its effect was at last explained'. Freud's identification of the Hamlet/Oedipus connection appears no earlier than a letter to Fliess of 1897, but the link between Hamlet and Oedipus, whatever Freud's suggestions to the contrary, had already been made.

Much has been done to question the originality of Freud's insights (not least Slavoj Žižek's claim that 'the myth of Hamlet is *older* than that of Oedipus'). What I would like to do in this paper is to add another strand to this by tracing Freud's oedipal identification back through French Symbolism, and in particular the work of the painter Gustave Moreau, to European Romanticism. Moreau's *Oedipus and the Sphinx* (1864) was the subject of praise from his contemporary Théophile Gautier in the following terms: 'We are rather pleased to find a little of Hamlet in Oedipus.' What does Gautier mean here? What Gautier finds in Moreau's painting is a romantic hero: reflective, potent, androgynous and doomed. That Gautier sees Hamlet in Oedipus (and not the other way around) offers a first point from which to unpick Freud's privileging of the oedipal narrative, and to begin to explore the complex relationships of Freud's thought to his many 'fathers'.

## Nightmare Excursions: Aesthetics, Ethics and Post-Romantic Identity

By Richard J Walker (Central Lancashire)

This paper focuses on James (B.V.) Thomson's poem of urban nightmare *The City of Dreadful Night* (1874). This radical, atheist text renegotiates the Wordsworthian excursion, with its moral and elevating dimensions, into a haunting exercise in *Flanerie* where the speaker represents the 'hero' of modern life: Charles Baudelaire's alien and alienated dandy-artist. It explores the possibility that an aesthetic emerges in later nineteenth century English poetry that echoes the poetic of 'evil' found in the French *avant-garde* tradition (Baudelaire, Rimbaud), and which troubles the equation between art and morality found in Wordsworth's 'Preface' to *Lyrical Ballads* (1800). However, it can be seen that Wordsworth's own writing, and that of the 'High Priest' of Victorian culture (Matthew Arnold), is troubled by a sense of the fragility and fluidity of identity in a modern world. Thomson's text posits a religious, political and artistic position that interrogates Romantic certainties, shadows the evocation of the modern experience in French Post-Romanticism, and questions the notion of a coherent and autonomous modern identity.

## 'This is essentially a Romantic attitude': Peter Ackroyd's 'Chatterton', Thomas Chatterton, and the making of post-modern Romantic Identities and Attitudes

By John Richard Williams (Greenwich)

In this paper I argue that Peter Ackroyd's 'Chatterton' (1987) may be read as a representation of English Romanticism as it has evolved since Thomas Chatterton became an iconic point of reference for poets and artists in the latter part of the eighteenth century. I shall propose that Ackroyd's post-modernist narrative technique constitutes a manifestation of late Romanticism. I begin by considering the reception of Chatterton's writings and his suicide by some of his contemporaries, noting the consequences of the later influence of Byron's life, work, and death on the way 'Romanticism' came to be perceived in the nineteenth century. As well as frequently cited figures who referred to Chatterton, I shall include here reference to John Flaxman, Edward Bulwer



Lytton, and Henrietta Ward. I shall then discuss the manner in which Ackroyd's novel explores what Chatterton's work and fate came to epitomise for future generations of writers and artists associated with Romanticism. In particular I shall look at how Ackroyd's manipulation of linear narrative serves as a means to interrogate assumptions that are associated with ideas of accuracy and honesty in relation to cultural production and scholarly research; at how the novel investigates the relationship between culture and market forces; and at how Ackroyd presents the past as a persistent presence which acts to subvert and undermine the literary and political establishment by destabilising orthodox hierarchies in both spheres of authority. Ackroyd's 'Chatterton' provides evidence to support the suggestion that post-modernism is 'essentially a Romantic attitude', although the novel itself may appear to resist this.

## Romantic Impact on Chinese Modern Writers

**By Jie Zhou (Shandong Finance Institute)**

Romantic writers in English literature have left a strong impact on Chinese modern writers from the May Fourth period in early-twentieth-century China. To trace these impacts, we may come to examine the historical background, the biographies and works of some important writers of this period. Through the examination, we may find these writers are greatly influenced by western culture and literature; we may find in their writings patriotism or a sense of responsibility for their country's fate, which can be found in English Romantic writers too; we may also find their emphasis on individuality, on nature, on love, and on freedom.

In order to do the above examination, we may choose to look at some of the most outstanding writers whose writings have been translated into English, eg. Lu Xun, who exposes the suppression of individuality in Feudal China in his writings; Guo Moruo, whose poem 'An Impression of Shanghai' shows his patriotism and resembles 'London'; Xu Zhimo, who once studied at Cambridge University, found inspiration for his artistic creation in England, was influenced by Romantic poets to such a degree that in his poetry the English Romantic impact can be easily found, and is thus considered as one of the best Romantic poets of the May Fourth Period.