

# Romanticism and Periodisation: A Roundtable

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*Taking the format of a closing roundtable discussion—with prepared statements followed by a formal response (Laurent Folliot) and an open-ended debate between the five contributors—this coda explores the issue of literary periodisation in Romanticism, starting from the Romantics' own efforts at self-periodisation and the emergence of a new critical discourse on the 'spirit of the age' (David Duff, 'Phases of British Romanticism'). It examines the terminology of periodisation, charting the history and shifting meaning of key terms, and the new awareness of historical beginnings and endings prompted by the French Revolution and other world-changing events (Nicholas Halmi, 'Periodisation and the Epochal Event'). The difficulties of periodising a movement so diffuse in its origins and so differentiated in its national and regional manifestations are addressed, as is the impulse to find unifying characteristics amid the unprecedented cultural diversity of the period (Fiona Stafford, 'Romanticism and the "Four Nations": Not Quite in Time'). While the stress is on British Romanticism through its different historical phases and national traditions, the next contribution takes up a more cross-border approach by examining the relationship between British, European, and American Romanticism (Martin Procházka, 'Periodisation as a Problem: The Case of American Romanticism'). In each case, questions of chronology are set alongside other theoretical and methodological problems, the aim being to arrive at tentative conclusions about the usefulness or otherwise of a concept of the 'Romantic period' or of potential subdivisions of it that could reflect the continuities and discontinuities of Romantic literature.*

## Introduction: Phases of British Romanticism

*David Duff*

Periodisation is an intellectual process intimately connected with Romantic thought, and the idea of a 'Romantic period' has its roots in the Romantics' own reflections on time. Yet these are highly problematic concepts, which have been vigorously debated since the inception of the Romantic movement and still provoke controversy. Other contributors to this volume have touched on some of the issues we are about to raise but this roundtable discussion confronts them directly, from a range of different perspectives. We start with the Romantics' efforts at self-periodisation and the emergence of a new literary discourse on the 'spirit of the age'. We then examine the terminology of periodisation, charting the history and shifting meanings of key terms such as 'period', 'epoch', 'age', and connecting these semantic shifts with the new awareness of historical beginnings and endings prompted by the French Revolution and other world-changing events. Next, we address the difficulties of periodising a movement so diffuse in its origins and so differentiated in its national and regional manifestations, while also analysing the impulse—as pronounced among Romantic-era writers as among later literary historians—to find unifying characteristics amid the unprecedented cultural diversity of the period. The emphasis of our discussion is on British Romanticism—its different historical phases and national trajectories—but we also consider the relationship between British and European Romanticism, as well as the more problematic case of American Romanticism. At each stage, we set empirical questions of chronology alongside theoretical and methodological problems, the aim of the discussion being to explore the conceptual foundations of periodisation and to assess the usefulness or otherwise of the idea of a 'Romantic period', or potential subdivisions or extensions of it that can register the continuities and discontinuities of Romantic literature. After some introductory remarks, the roundtable will consist of three position statements followed by a prepared response and a final stage of open-ended, ad hoc discussion.

To begin on a personal note, my awareness of the problem of periodisation was heightened by the experience of editing *The Oxford Handbook of British Romanticism*, in which the question took a very practical form: where chronologically to begin and end, what range of forward and backward reference to include, and what sort of diversity and unity to present under the title phrase 'British Romanticism'.<sup>1</sup> I took two key editorial decisions. The first was to foreground the different literary traditions of the 'four nations'—England, Scotland, Ireland and Wales—and to show how they all contributed to the making of 'British' Romanticism. The aim was to trace both the cross-fertilisation and the tensions and rivalries between these traditions, and also to reflect on the significance of the key moment of constitutional change in this period, the Act of Union of 1800, which brought the four nations together to form the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Ireland—but with many of those tensions and rivalries still intact.

The Handbook has a dedicated 'Region and Nation' section with separate chapters on each of the four home nations together with their border regions (Scotland and the North, Wales and the West), but this also was an organising principle throughout the Handbook, so that many other chapters also explore national and regional demarcations and relationships. The book offers, then, a 'discrimination' of British Romanticisms, in Lovejoy's sense, but not one that leads to his negative conclusion, that 'Romanticism' has such a diversity of meanings and applications as to be a largely worthless concept that can tell us nothing definite about the movement or period it supposedly defines.<sup>2</sup> Rather, the premise of the Handbook is that the British Romantic movement is *constituted* by those differences: by the sharpened sense of cultural diversity within the British Isles, and by the opening up of new forms of creative and critical engagement between the various national traditions and scenes of writing.

This internal transnationalism coincides with a broader internationalism, a developing engagement with other countries across Europe and other parts of the world. These exchanges are explored in

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1 *The Oxford Handbook of British Romanticism*, ed. by David Duff (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2018), <https://doi.org/10.1093/oxfordhb/9780199660896.001.0001>

2 Arthur O. Lovejoy, 'On the Discrimination of Romanticisms', *PMLA*, 39 (1924), 229–53, <https://doi.org/10.2307/457184>

another section of the Handbook, labelled 'Imports and Exports', though again they feature in other chapters too, and I was concerned that the 'four nations' emphasis should not reduce the attention to the broader international connections of British Romanticism, which need asserting equally strongly in face of insular accounts which have sometimes held too much sway.

The second editorial decision was to break down the Romantic period into five sub-periods: pre-1789, the 1790s, the 'new century' to 1815, the post-war years 1815–19, and the 1820s and beyond. These I characterise as different 'historical phases' of the Romantic movement, each with its own set of historical conditions, its own political character, its own cultural and literary preoccupations, and its own mini-zeitgeist, explicitly articulated in some cases. The temporal boundaries—1789, 1800, 1815, 1819/20—were not arbitrary, and the Handbook shows how British literature shaped itself in relation to them, mapping itself onto the chronology produced by the decisive political, military and constitutional events of the period. This new way of conceptualising the period, and understanding its conceptualisation of itself, is linked to the 'four nations' perspective, though two of the turning points are connected with external rather than internal events: the outbreak of the French Revolution and the ending of the Napoleonic Wars.

This self-mapping along the contours of contemporary history was part of the historical consciousness of Romanticism, but there were at least two other kinds of self-periodisation at work. One involved the emergence of a larger sense of period, the idea of an overarching age of literature that linked these historical phases, or micro-periods, and the disparate cultural phenomena they encompassed. When Leigh Hunt, in *The Feast of the Poets* (1815), spoke of Wordsworth as 'being at the head of a new and great age of poetry'; or when Shelley, in *A Defence of Poetry* (1821), spoke of 'the literature of England' as having 'arisen as it were from a new birth', what both writers were voicing was a perception that they were part of a new literary era, radically different from the one that preceded it.<sup>3</sup> The fullest expression of this view, which began to crystallise around 1815, is Hazlitt's *The Spirit of the Age* (1825), a

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3 Leigh Hunt, *The Feast of the Poets*, 2nd ed. (London, 1815), p. 90; *Shelley's Poetry and Prose*, 2nd ed., ed. by Donald H. Reiman and Neil Fraistat (New York: Norton, 2002), p. 535.

retrospect on the previous forty years focussed on the writers, thinkers, politicians and opinion-formers he saw as having embodied and shaped British culture in this period. But there are many other examples of such reflexive analysis, enough to justify James Chandler's description of the Romantic period as the 'age of the spirit of the age', that is, the age of relentless self-definition and constant preoccupation with the idea that ages have such a thing as a 'spirit'.<sup>4</sup> Another way of putting this is to say that this was the period of periodisation—not the first historical era to periodise, certainly, but the one in which the desire to periodise, to *self*-periodise, became constitutive.

One modification I would propose to Chandler's influential account is suggested by Maike Oergel's recent book about the concept of *zeitgeist*.<sup>5</sup> Written by a comparative Anglo-German cultural historian, this is the first sustained treatment in English of this topic and it contains much of relevance to our subject. Oergel shows how the concept of *zeitgeist* has a very long history, and that it first gains currency not in the nineteenth but in the early seventeenth century, in discussion of the *genius saeculi* (the genius of the age, or of the times). In the Romantic period the concept acquires new meaning and force, and the terminology shifts. In the wake of the French Revolution, the concept becomes linked to the idea of public opinion, and the *power* of public opinion: the ability to manipulate and alter the way people think and behave. The idea of *zeitgeist* is used by contemporary observers to explain the phenomenon of revolutionary change, and the rapid transmission of ideas that was part of the revolutionary dynamic. This explanatory function is a major reason for the concept's remarkable currency in this period. The same applies to the English phrase 'spirit of the age', which becomes common in the 1820s. To understand the history of this term, we therefore need also to trace the related concepts of 'public opinion' and 'public spirit'—to which I would add a third term, 'public mind', another widely used phrase of the time which makes explicit the idea of a collective consciousness (and which gives a psychological, quasi-medical colouring to contemporary cultural commentary). Oergel's work has

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4 James Chandler, *England in 1819: The Politics of Literary Culture and the Case of Romantic Historicism* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1998), p. 105.

5 Maike Oergel, *Zeitgeist—How Ideas Travel: Politics, Culture and the Public in the Age of Revolution* (Berlin: De Gruyter, 2019), <https://doi.org/10.1515/9783110631531>

important implications for the way we think about periodisation, and her analysis sheds new light on the central question Chandler asks: *why* was this 'the age of the spirit of the age'? What was it that produced this distinctive kind of historical consciousness?

We have, then, the 'micro-periods' of British Romanticism, and we have the overarching Romantic age whose spirit was being so compulsively invoked and analysed. But there was a third kind of self-periodisation at work at this time, which drew even broader boundaries and sought to connect contemporary literature with the genres and styles of the Middle Ages and Renaissance, which British writers from the 1760s onwards were actively reviving. From this perspective, the literature of the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries formed a continuum with these earlier traditions, and this was precisely the sense in which the term 'romantic' was often used, by Continental theorists especially: to denote that continuum, and to contrast it with the classical tradition. Thus defined, Romanticism was a retro movement as well as a revolutionary one, an aesthetic of archaism and innovation, delighting both in the antique (actual or invented) and the thoroughly modern.<sup>6</sup> Moreover, as well as being immersed in the past it was a future-orientated movement, which saw literature, the 'romantic poem', in a state of becoming, progressive and perfectible but never perfected or completed. The Romantics had an acute sense of contemporaneity, of the distinctiveness of their own historical moment, but they were not content to remain in it, instead projecting themselves imaginatively into other periods, past and future, and dissolving temporal boundaries.

This is the synoptic vision of literary history that Mikhail Bakhtin later termed 'great time', and Bakhtin makes the methodological point that we need to study works of literature not only in their 'near' contexts, in the time of their own production and reception, but also in their 'remote' contexts, which lie before and afterwards.<sup>7</sup> Great works of literature, he

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6 See David Duff, 'Archaism and Innovation', in *Romanticism and the Uses of Genre* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009), pp. 119–59, <https://doi.org/10.1093/acprof:oso/9780199572748.003.0005>

7 M.M. Bakhtin, 'Response to a Question from the *Novy Mir* Editorial Staff', in *Speech Genres and Other Late Essays*, ed. by Caryl Emerson and Michael Holquist, trans. by Vern W. McGee (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1986), pp. 4–6; 'Toward a Methodology for the Human Sciences', *Ibid.*, pp. 169–70. For the genealogy of this

says, 'are prepared for by centuries', they 'break through the boundaries of their own time' and come to fulfilment in 'great time', across the course of their posthumous life. Our critical methodologies, he urges, must take account of these longer historical perspectives and liberate authors from the captivity of their own time. This view of literature, so forcefully articulated by Bakhtin in the twentieth century, derives essentially from the Romantic period, from the Schlegels, Novalis, Hegel and other German theorists. An exact analogy to it was Shelley's conception in *A Defence of Poetry* of the 'great poem, which all poets, like the co-operating thoughts of one great mind, have built up since the beginning of the world'.<sup>8</sup> Shelley, like other Romantic poets, saw his own work as a contribution to this 'great poem': as part of the cumulative, collaborative wiki-poem to which all writers, of all periods, knowingly or unknowingly contribute. Rejecting the trajectory of decline posited by Thomas Love Peacock in his *Four Ages of Poetry* (1820), Shelley presents a progressive vision of literature in which chronology is suspended and the 'four ages' become one.

In the temporal consciousness of Romanticism, then, we can discern three levels of periodisation: the micro-period (the different historical phases of the Romantic movement); the macro-period (the Romantic age as a whole); and 'great time' (what might be termed the mega-period, which conceives of all literature, across all time, as part of one seamless, interconnected whole). Understanding how these different constructions of literary time intersect and complicate one another is one of the many challenges we face in addressing the question of periodisation. To elucidate these complexities, and uncover others, I now turn to our other speakers.

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motif, see David Shepherd, 'A Feeling for History? Bakhtin and "The Problem of Great Time"', *Slavonic and East European Review*, 84.1 (2006), 32–51; and Duff, *Romanticism and the Uses of Genre*, pp. 191–200.

8 *Shelley's Poetry and Prose*, p. 522.

## Periodisation and the Epochal Event

Nicholas Halmi

Periodisation is so deeply embedded conceptually and institutionally in our historical understanding and historiographical practice that we do not easily recognise it to be itself the product of historical developments. Semantic history helps illuminate the emergence of periodisation as we are familiar with it, namely as the segmentation of historical time and the identification of the segments with specific events or prevalent conditions. The English word *period* derives from the Greek *περίοδος*, meaning a circuit or cycle. A synonym of *period* in this etymological sense is *revolution* (from the Old French *revolucion*) in its original sense, as the full course of a recurrent event—expressed, for example, in Lord Bolingbroke’s posthumously published ‘Reflections upon Exile’: ‘We shall feel the same revolutions of seasons, and the same sun and moon will guide the course of our year.’ Towards the end of the seventeenth century, and particularly in connection with the succession of William and Mary to the British throne, *revolution* acquired the new meaning of a singular, radical change—a turning point from which there is no turning back. Bolingbroke used the word in this sense as well: referring in 1735 to the events of 1688, he declared that ‘James’s mal-administration rendered a revolution necessary and practicable’.<sup>9</sup>

In the eighteenth century, *period* too, without losing its original sense, acquired a new connotation of temporal singularity as ‘any specified portion or division of time’ (*OED*). The earliest example attested by the *OED* is once again from Bolingbroke: ‘The particular periods into which the whole period should be divided’.<sup>10</sup> The Grimms’ dictionary confirms the same semantic development in German from the 1760s, citing for example Lessing’s distinction between the first (Shakespearean) and second (Restoration) *Perioden* of the English theatre. A synonym of *period* in its modern historiographical sense is *epoch*, which derives

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9 Henry St John, Viscount Bolingbroke, ‘Reflections upon Exile’ (1726), in *Letters on the Study and Use of History* (London, 1752), vol. 2, pp. 246–47, and ‘Of the Study of History’ (1735), in *Letters*, vol. 1, p. 44.

10 Bolingbroke, ‘Of the Study of History’, *Letters*, vol. 1, p. 236 (proposing to divide ‘modern history’, from the fifteenth century to the eighteenth, into three periods).



from the Greek *ἐποχή* via the Latin *epocha* and originally denoted not an expanse of time but the opposite, a fixed point in time from which chronology could be reckoned: the Creation, the Flood, the foundation of Rome, the birth of Christ, the election of a new pope, the accession of a new king. An epoch in the old sense, if perceived to be sufficiently momentous, could be identified as initiating an epoch in the new sense. Thus Helen Maria Williams, recalling in 1795 her reaction to the fall of the Bastille, reports that she viewed ‘the revolution with transport, persuaded that it was the epocha of the subversion of despotism’. And Robert Southey, also retaining the Latinate terminal *a*, refers to the ‘invention of the steam-engine [as] almost as great an epocha as the invention of printing’.<sup>11</sup>

When history is periodic, it does not require periodisation. Cyclicity ensures predictability and hence exemplarity: the broad patterns discernible in the past can be assumed to apply to the present and the future. It was on this basis that Thucydides recommended the study of history and, over two millennia later, Frederick the Great still did so in the preface to the *Histoire de mon temps* (1746): ‘History is the school of princes; it is for them to study the errors of the past centuries in order to avoid them.’ But the semantic shifts that occurred during Frederick’s lifetime attest to the emergence, in close connection with the concept of indefinite rational progress, of a linear or, as Reinhart Koselleck called it, temporalised conception of history, one that simultaneously enabled and necessitated periodisation.

Necessitated? Periodisation is of course not the only method of organising cultural history—classification by genres, stylistic ‘schools’, types of artists or audiences, and so on are equally possible—and it can be justified on the strictly pragmatic grounds suggested by the art historian Heinrich Wölfflin: ‘Everything is change, and it is difficult to counter someone who considers history an endless flow. For us it is a requirement of intellectual self-preservation to order the infiniteness of events according to a few points of reference [*Zielpunkten*].’ Or as, more recently, Marshall Brown has put it, cautioning against reifying periods while conceding their necessity, ‘We cannot rest statically in periods,

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<sup>11</sup> Helen Maria Williams, *Letters Containing a Sketch of the Politics of France* (London, 1795), vol. 1, p. 283; Robert Southey, *Letters from England* (London, 1807), vol. 3, p. 74.

but we cannot rest at all without them.<sup>12</sup> But if periodisation were in practice a purely nominalistic exercise, we would not be discussing it in fora like this. Periodisation is contentious precisely because the temporal segments it distinguishes are supposed to correspond in some way to an empirical historical reality. The issue is analogous to that of taxonomic classification, in which the nomenclature may be arbitrarily chosen, but the characteristics distinguished by means of it are supposed to be genuinely present in the objects of classification. For his part René Wellek defends periodisation as an instrument of literary history by emphasising its realism while trying to dissociate it from taxonomy: 'a period is not a type or a class but a time section defined by a system of norms embedded in the historical process and irremovable from it'.<sup>13</sup> This claim seems to me excessive. But certainly the persistent sense of the empirical justification of periodisation accounts for our inability to dispense with the practice in general and with the concept (which Wellek was defending) of Romanticism in particular, despite the fact that the difficulty of defining it has been lamented since the 1820s and the expedient of abandoning it altogether has been proposed repeatedly.

What distinguishes a period from other kinds of chronological classification? Distinctions between *antiqui* and *moderni* date back to the sixth century, when the word *antiquus* entered the Latin vocabulary. But philological research by E.R. Curtius and Salvatore Settis has established that, until the *Querelle des anciens et des modernes* in the late seventeenth century, the referents of these terms were relative and not historically fixed.<sup>14</sup> In the *Querelle* itself they were only broadly fixed, with all of classical antiquity (Greek and Roman) designated *ancient* and roughly the seventeenth century onwards *modern*. Such broad-brush

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12 Heinrich Wölfflin, *Kunstgeschichtliche Grundbegriffe: Das Problem der Stilentwicklung in der neueren Kunst* (Munich: Bruckmann, 1915), p. 238; Marshall Brown, 'Periods and Resistances', *Modern Language Quarterly*, 62 (2001), 309–16 (p. 312), <https://doi.org/10.1215/00267929-62-4-309>

13 René Wellek and Austin Warren, *Theory of Literature*, 3rd ed. (Harmondsworth: Penguin Books, 1966), pp. 265–66.

14 Ernst Robert Curtius, *European Literature and the Latin Middle Ages*, trans. by Willard Trask (London: Routledge, 1953), pp. 251–55; Salvatore Settis, 'Continuità, distanza, conoscenza: tre usi dell'antico', in *Memoria dell'antico nell'arte italiana*, vol. 3: *Dalla tradizione all'archeologia*, ed. by Settis (Turin: Einaudi, 1996), pp. 375–486 (pp. 465–73).

historicisation also characterises August Wilhelm Schlegel's distinction between *classical* and *romantic* drama, the former referring to the productions of pagan Greece and Rome and the latter to those of post-classical Europe. But a period, apart from being typically shorter in duration than Schlegel's two eras, is supposed to possess a unifying set of dominant characteristics, or what Wellek calls 'a system of norms', which allows it to be distinguished from other periods. In broader historical usage, such a system of norms would constitute what was first conceptualised in the eighteenth century—most explicitly by Johann Gottfried Herder—as a *zeitgeist*: 'the prevailing views, manners, and customs' of an age.<sup>15</sup>

From the outset of the nineteenth century, two distinct concepts of Romanticism, one typological and the other historical, have co-existed. In his *Histoire du romantisme en France* of 1829—the earliest self-described history of Romanticism—the critic Eugène Ronteix (publishing under an anagrammatic pseudonym) maintained simultaneously that it was a rebellious tendency 'in every century, in every epoch', rejecting conventional ideas and established forms, and that it was a contemporary, primarily French artistic movement inaugurated by René de Chateaubriand in 1801. A sense of the historical specificity of Romanticism as a movement or cultural phenomenon has proved remarkably stable. While defining literary Romanticism in terms of *generic* characteristics—'imagination for the view of poetry, nature for the view of the world, and symbol and myth for poetic style'—Wellek tellingly adhered to the conventional *chronological* designation of Romanticism as extending from the late-eighteenth to the mid-nineteenth century. Wellek's Romantic period thus included a writer whom his normative concept of Romanticism effectively excluded, Lord Byron. For Wellek there was no contradiction between the generic and chronological definitions of Romanticism, because the latter derived from the former: the years in which the aesthetic values identified as Romantic were predominant. To the extent that Byron

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15 Johann Gottfried Herder, 'Briefe zur Beförderung der Humanität' (1793–97), in *Werke in zehn Bänden*, vol. 7, ed. by H. D. Irmscher (Frankfurt: Deutscher Klassiker Verlag, 1991), p. 103.

did not share those values, then, he was not a Romantic, despite his contemporaneity with Romantic poets like Wordsworth and Novalis.<sup>16</sup>

Wellek cautions that the unity constituting a period 'can be only relative', for if it were absolute 'periods would lie next to each other like blocks of stone, without continuity of development', rather as the classical and modern *épistémès* do in the epistemological 'archaeology' of Foucault's *Les Mots et les choses*. But how do we determine when a system of norms begins or ceases to be dominant? A nominalist objection to periodisation is that the practice is inevitably retrospective, for people experience their lives as a temporal continuum and do not recognise as epochal transitions the events subsequently proclaimed to have been such. Defending the realism (as opposed to the nominalism) of the concept of the historical period, Hans Blumenberg nonetheless concedes, 'There are no witnesses to epochal ruptures [*Epochenumbrüchen*]. The epochal turn [*Epochenwende*] is an imperceptible frontier, bound to no obviously epitomic [*prägnante*] date or event.' He thus illustrates the transition from the medieval to the modern age by contrasting the thought of two philosophers he considers exemplary, Nicholas of Cusa (1401–64) and Giordano Bruno (1548–1600). The specification of a singular event as an epochal threshold can only be, in Blumenberg's view, an act of retrospective self-mythologisation, as in Goethe's purported assurance to the dejected Prussian soldiers at the Battle of Valmy on 19 September 1792 that they were witnesses to the beginning of a 'a new epoch of world history'.<sup>17</sup>

From the perspective of a realist vindication of periodisation, it makes no difference whether the 'inhabitants' of an epoch recognise themselves as such. As Blumenberg observes, one can hardly expect the early Christian philosophers, who sought to minimise the appearance of their differences with pagan philosophy, to have declared an epochal rupture. But if it is true that, as he claims, the concept of the epoch is itself a significant aspect of the modern epoch, then this is more particularly true of Romanticism. For one important source of the sense of Romanticism as a period is the preoccupation of writers towards

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16 René Wellek, 'Romanticism Re-examined', in *Concepts of Criticism* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1963), pp. 199–221 (pp. 200–01).

17 Hans Blumenberg, *Die Legitimität der Neuzeit*, 3rd ed. (Frankfurt: Suhrkamp, 1988), pp. 545, 531–34.

the end of the eighteenth century, and especially in connection with the French Revolution, with the historical categorisation of their own time. In his introduction to *The Oxford Handbook of British Romanticism* and again in this volume, David Duff has rightly called attention to the self-periodising statements of Romantic writers, with regard to both literature and broader historical developments. A single example here will stand for many: writing to Byron on 8 September 1816—so after Waterloo and the Congress of Vienna—Percy Shelley declared the French Revolution ‘the master theme of the epoch in which we live’. Invested with the status of an epochal boundary, that event (and it is telling that Shelley treats it as a single event) continued to provide the focus for historical self-orientation nearly three decades later.

By allowing the possibility of the appearance of the radically new—a possibility excluded from the older model of exemplary history, which assumes the cyclicity of historical patterns—historicisation fosters not only periodisation as such but the identification of revolutionary turning-points between periods or collective *Weltanschauungen* (the latter a concept that was itself first formulated in the nineteenth century). The crisis or revolution (in the modern sense of the word) is what, by virtue of seeming incommensurable with the historical self-understanding of the existing epoch, terminates that epoch and defines the opposing character of the succeeding one. In its singularity and disruptiveness, the revolution creates the illusion that epochs themselves are self-contained totalities, within which phenomena may be compared synchronically and precisely as representative of an epoch. The epoch-making event in this understanding is more radical and disruptive than the *epocha* of older chronological divisions. Whether, as is likely, Goethe embellished his speech at Valmy when he wrote up the *Campagne in Frankreich* thirty years after the events is beside the point: the plausibility of his account among contemporary readers depended not on their willingness to attribute prophetic powers to him, but on their recognition that he needed no such powers because the French Revolution and its ensuing wars self-evidently constituted an epochal threshold. If he did say in 1792 what he later claimed to have said, it was no more than others were saying at the time, and indeed earlier.

Virginia Woolf’s famous declaration, in her essay ‘Character in Fiction’, that ‘on or about December 1910 human character changed’

appears jocular only because no event in that month could plausibly have produced such an effect. But we so readily accept that the French Revolution, for example, was an epochal threshold that we do not question the epistemological or empirical bases for that judgement. After all, in France itself many of the Revolutionary reforms (e.g., the Declaration of the Rights of Man, property rights for women, abolition of slavery in the colonies) were reversed under Napoleon, and after Napoleon's defeat the old monarchies re-asserted themselves throughout Europe. To a large extent, however, we remain the children of the first Romantic generation, so to speak, and their historical self-conception. From its beginning the French Revolution was interpreted as an epochal event, historically unprecedented and therefore inexplicable by reference to the past. Within a month of the fall of the Bastille, the British Whig leader Charles James Fox proclaimed it 'much the greatest Event that has ever happened in the world, [which will] in all probability have the most extensive good consequences', and not much later an antipathetic observer, Edmund Burke, declared it 'the most astonishing [thing] that hitherto happened in the world'.<sup>18</sup> How could they know that? The Revolutionaries themselves tried to institutionalise this contemporary perception of permanent historical rupture by instituting a new calendar on the grounds that, in the words of the playwright Philippe Fabre d'Églantine (who devised the calendar's seasonal nomenclature), 'We can no longer count years during which the kings oppressed us as a time in which we lived.'<sup>19</sup> Periodisation demands historical caesurae, so if the French Revolution had not occurred, it would have been necessary for the Romantic generation to invent it.

The theorisation of historical ruptures is a product of exactly what it seeks to account for, the demand for or experience of radical change. Yet

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18 Fox quoted in L.G. Mitchell, *Charles James Fox* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1992), p. 110; Edmund Burke, *Reflections on the Revolution in France*, ed. by L.G. Mitchell (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1993), p. 10. For further discussion see Nicholas Halmi, 'European Romanticism: Ambivalent Responses to the Sense of a New Epoch', in *The Cambridge History of Modern European Thought*, ed. by Warren Breckman and Peter Gordon (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2019), vol. 1, pp. 40–64 (pp. 44–48), <https://doi.org/10.1017/9781316160855.003>

19 Quoted in Mona Ozouf, 'Revolutionary Calendar', in *A Critical Dictionary of the French Revolution*, ed. by Ozouf and François Furet, trans. by Arthur Goldhammer (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1989), pp. 560–70 (p. 561).

insofar as periods are systems of norms, and hence cannot be separated absolutely from one another, the concept of revolution makes it hard to account for epochal transitions, and indeed is intended to do so, for it allows the present to distinguish itself by its clean break from what it consigns to a definitively overcome past. The challenge for a realist use of periodisation, therefore, is to understand the emergence of norms as a process rather than as an event—to understand an epoch in the new sense without an epoch in the old sense.

## Romanticism and the ‘Four Nations’: Not Quite in Time

*Fiona Stafford*

English literary history is widely understood as a succession of distinct periods—the demarcations have been variously amended and modified over the years, but the idea of a roughly chronological organisation of texts, authors and prevailing concerns has proved remarkably resilient. David and Nick have already spoken of the beginnings of Romanticism as a recognisable cultural phenomenon, but it is also worth considering the effect of the widening study of English literature in its establishment. In 1843, when Robert Chambers published *A Cyclopaedia of English Literature*, aimed at ‘the moral advancement of the middle and humbler portions of society’, he arranged numerous extracts into a series of ‘Periods’, with the last, listed rather unimaginatively as ‘seventh period’, running ‘From 1780 to the present Time’.<sup>20</sup> As English continued to develop as a university subject, more elegant labels became standard, with ‘Romantic’ sandwiched between ‘Augustan’ and ‘Victorian’ literature. Romanticism later became the successor to ‘the Eighteenth Century’, which often ran back to the 1660s as Augustanism refused to be laid entirely to rest. Romanticism is currently being absorbed into both the ‘Long Eighteenth Century’ and the ‘Long Nineteenth Century’, though this is unlikely to continue because if all centuries lengthen in this way, they must cease to be ‘centuries’ at all. If the recent move to revive strictly temporal terms

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<sup>20</sup> *A Cyclopaedia of English Literature*, 2 vols, ed. by Robert Chambers (Edinburgh: William and Robert Chambers, 1843), preface.

arose from uneasiness with the perceived connotations of broad, and not very consistent, terms such as Augustan, Romantic and Victorian (each derived from different kinds of identification—classical, aesthetic, regnal), the subsequent tendency to extend centuries demonstrates a conflicting unease about cultural divisions informed entirely by arbitrary units of time. Romanticism seems to attract and resist the idea of being ‘in time’.

During the 1980s, resistance to what was then seen as a prevailing emphasis on the ‘Big Six’ poets—Blake, Wordsworth, Coleridge, Shelley, Keats (and sometimes Byron)—led Jerome McGann, Marilyn Butler and other historicist—and feminist—critics to call for recognition of a ‘Romantic Period’ rather than ‘High Romanticism’, which also entailed a redirection of critical attention to writers whose work had been unfairly neglected.<sup>21</sup> Replacement of ‘Romanticism’ with the ‘Romantic period’, however, soon brought back many of the problems aired by Lovejoy and Wellek, and already discussed in this forum. A central difficulty relates not so much to time as to the other great co-ordinate, space. Once the idea of the ‘Romantic’ moves beyond England and literature to Europe and other art forms, it becomes increasingly difficult to define a distinct ‘period’. International movements in painting, music or architecture that are widely known as ‘Romantic’ don’t keep quite in time with English literature.

My focus is on the difficulties surrounding literary periodisation within the four nations of England, Ireland, Scotland and Wales—sometimes understood as British Romantic literature, sometimes as quite separate traditions. Romantic writers were often self-consciously dialogical (to invoke Bakhtin again), acutely aware of both predecessors and readers and creating texts fraught with the twin anxieties of influence and reception.<sup>22</sup> Their yearnings for literary immortality were

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21 See, e.g., Jerome McGann, *The Romantic Ideology* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1983); *The Beauty of Inflections: Literary Investigations in Historical Method and Theory* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1985); ed., *The New Oxford Book of Romantic Period Verse* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1993). Marilyn Butler, *Romantics, Rebels and Reactionaries: English Literature and Its Background 1760–1830* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1980).

22 Bloom’s influential work on *The Anxiety of Influence* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1973) has inspired numerous critical analyses not only of Romantic poetry’s engagement with ‘strong’ writers of the past, especially Shakespeare, Milton, Spenser and Dante, but also of their anxious reception by readers: see, e.g., Lucy



piqued by past greats and premised on the recognition that readers of future centuries were inherently unpredictable. Romantic texts might strive to be out of time, but remain dependent on later generations of readers, editors and publishers, whose attitudes are conditioned by their own times—and places. The interpretation of history is conditioned by later events and by the identity of the interpreter.

If literary history is imagined as a long line, it demands stops along the way—if only for the practical purposes of teaching students or providing boundaries for anthologies and critical studies. David has already addressed the issue of how best to divide literary time—by capacious periods or narrower spans of dates—and in either case the timeline needs to begin somewhere. For English Romantic literature, the starting point might be Cowper's *The Task* in 1785, or perhaps Blake's *Songs of Innocence* in 1789, or even *Lyrical Ballads* in 1798 or 1800. There might then be further stops along the way at 1805 (*The Prelude*), 1811 (*Sense and Sensibility*), 1812 (*Childe Harold's Pilgrimage*), 1818 (*Frankenstein*), 1819 (*Don Juan*) and so on and so on (the end point being another tricky matter for debate). These major stops on the English line don't, however, seem quite adequate for twenty-first-century literary travellers—especially if they hail from Ireland, Scotland or Wales. The line of Scottish Romantic period literature might begin a year later in 1786, with Burns's *Poems Chiefly in the Scottish Dialect*, running on to 1802 with the *Edinburgh Review* and *Minstrelsy of the Scottish Border*, to 1805 (*The Lay of the Last Minstrel*), 1810 (*The Lady of the Lake* and *The Scottish Chiefs*), 1814 (*Waverley*) and so on: roughly parallel with the English line, but markedly different. But I would extend the Scottish Romantic period as far back as 1760 and the publication of Macpherson's first *Ossian* poems—which would seem idiosyncratic to many English scholars of the period, but might make sense to Europeans and art historians. When Germaine de Staël, for example, attempted to order European literature in 1800, she opted for a broad geographical division and celebrated *Ossian* as representative of 'La Littérature du Nord'.<sup>23</sup>

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Newlyn, *Reading, Writing and Romanticism: The Anxiety of Reception* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000); Andrew Bennett, *Romantic Poets and the Culture of Posterity* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009), <https://doi.org/10.1093/acprof:oso/9780198187110.001.0001>

23 Germaine de Staël, *De la Littérature, considérée dans ses rapports avec les institutions sociales*, in *Œuvres Complètes*, 8 vols. (Paris, 1820), vol. 4, p. 258.

In addition to the problem of when the Romantic period begins, other issues arise from attempting to disentangle English and Scottish literature. Should the Scottish line include Boswell's *Life of Johnson*—one of the most important publications of the 1790s and yet rarely considered 'Romantic' or 'Scottish'? Separating out national literary lines is not easy—where does Byron sit? His mother was Scottish and he grew up in Aberdeenshire until the age of ten, when he inherited the Byron family estate in England. He was educated at Harrow and Cambridge, spent two years travelling after university and then left the UK at the age of twenty-eight, never to return. Although a single English literary line is inadequate, parallel lines are also problematic. Perhaps what we need are interweavings, intersections and key junctions—a complicated map rather than a timeline. Recent decades have seen increasing demand for distinct national literary histories, along with calls for Scottish political independence, but in terms of literary and cultural history, entirely separate lines may generate as many objections as the absorption of every text into a single narrative. And what about Scottish Gaelic, Irish or Welsh literature? Poems composed in Celtic languages are at once integral parts of the larger nations and yet often very resistant to integration. Are these Romantic literary texts because they were composed in the later eighteenth or early nineteenth centuries? In the case of poems that have survived in the oral tradition, often no one knows when they were written, so placing them in time is much more difficult than locating them geographically, in distinct regional or linguistic traditions.

To see writers historically demands recognition of key events, so Romantic timelines generally include public dates as well as literary births, deaths and publications. 1789 is obviously a key date, irrespective of Blake, and 1815 is better known for Waterloo than Wordsworth. But how many dates and which ones? As Nick has demonstrated, the French Revolution has been a defining aspect of the Romantic period since 1790, but often historical events are brought into focus by modern values. The French Revolution provoked an explosion of contemporary literary responses, but so did Napoleon, and Nelson, and the Battle of the Nile. In the later twentieth century, critical attention focussed heavily on the Revolution debate and the 'radical years' of major poets, while largely ignoring much of the ensuing war. 1805 was the year of

*The Prelude*, not Trafalgar. In the 1970s and 80s, the price of bread and post-war manifestations of discontent attracted more attention than the war itself from many literary scholars with Marxist and social-historical concerns. There has been far more work on the Revolutionary and Napoleonic Wars in the last two decades and new areas of research continue to emerge from the same rich period: the recent spate of bicentenaries brings home the way we re-read old books according to current concerns. The eruption of Mount Tambora and the ensuing dark summer attracted fresh interest in 2016—whether because of contemporary interest in the Gothic, or the environment, or Europe. In 2009, Scottish celebrations of Robert Burns's 250th birthday were swept along on a wave of devolutionary energy—a very different experience from the low key commemorations of the 1996 bicentenary of his death. Inevitably, we see the past from the present—and this has a major bearing on how we see national literary history—or histories.

In 2008 Murray Pittock's *Scottish and Irish Romanticism*, driven by irritation over the marginalisation of major poets such as Burns from English Romantic literary studies, urged scholars to turn their attention to Scottish and Irish texts and rethink the established paradigms of Romanticism. The impact of his work is still being felt. Although 'Irish Romanticism' is an emerging field, the conjunction of 'Romanticism' and Irish (or Anglo-Irish) texts is far from straightforward, as evident in Jim Kelly's carefully chosen title for his edited collection of 2011, *Ireland and Romanticism*. Claire Connolly's avoidance of the adjective 'Romantic' and choice of dates with special resonance in Ireland for her *A Cultural History of the Irish Novel, 1790–1829* (2012) shows similar sensitivity to the contemporary political dimensions of literary history. Connolly's emphasis on contextualisation and inclusivity is part of the new mainstream, following the widespread rejection of Romantic claims of transcendence by historicists of the 80s and 90s and the concomitant redirection towards regional distinctiveness, politicised language, gender and colonialism. The literature of early nineteenth-century Ireland, which included regional novels, Gothic fiction and non-fictional prose was ripe for critical revisiting. And yet, Ireland remains as much at odds with the 'Romantic period' as with 'Romanticism', because the key dates for English literature have very different resonances. 1798 is the year of the United Irishmen, not *Lyrical Ballads*.

The Irish challenge to traditional English literary history is obvious in *The Field Day Anthology of Irish Writing*, first published in 1991 under the general editorship of the nationalist critic Seamus Deane. Volume One stopped at c. 1850 and erased customary literary periodisations by presenting instead 'Drama 1600–1800' and 'Literature in Irish 1600–1800'.<sup>24</sup> Anyone in search of 'Irish Romanticism' has to work hard: Robert Emmet's *Speech from the Dock* of 1803 comes in a section beginning with Oliver Cromwell's *Letters from Ireland* (1649). Key dates and words—'Revolution', 'Republic'—have different connotations in Ireland, while 1800, when the Act of Union was passed, is the great dividing line. For many literary scholars outside Ireland, however, the Act of Union is less likely to appear in a brief timeline of the Romantic period than Waterloo. The question of how helpful it is to separate out the national lines refuses resolution nevertheless—a key text from the key year, Maria Edgeworth's *Castle Rackrent* of 1800, has been widely heralded as foundational, but its pioneering status depends on the critic and the literary heritage being traced. Is Edgeworth's novel more or less significant when seen as an influence on Sydney Owenson, Walter Scott or Jane Austen? This is a small but telling example of the slipperiness of literary history—are texts best understood in a national or international frame? In historical context or a transcendent realm of art?

And what about Wales? The very fact that this question so often appears almost as an afterthought, even in discussions turning on the 'four nations', tells its own tale of prevailing perspectives on the past. Surprisingly few of the numerous analyses of Wordsworth's poetry mention that the climactic ascent of Snowdon took place in North Wales, or that 'the Banks of the Wye' run in sinuous bends along the Welsh/English border, from the river's source in the mountains of Wales. The generic expansion of 'Romanticism' that has begun to transform attitudes to Irish literature of this period is also influencing assumptions about Wales. The *Curious Travellers* project, run by Mary-Ann Constantine and Nigel Leask from the twin points of Aberystwyth and Glasgow, has been tracing the work of Thomas Pennant, a Welsh

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24 As discussed in Fiona Stafford, 'The Literary Legacies of Irish Romanticism', in *Irish Literature in Transition 1780–1830*, ed. by Claire Connolly (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2020), pp. 402–21, <https://doi.org/10.1017/9781108632218.023>

antiquarian who travelled widely in Scotland.<sup>25</sup> In the past, Pennant and his many followers might have merited only a footnote in a history of Romantic literature, but this exciting new project places travel-writing at its centre. As David's new *Oxford Handbook* makes so clear in its organisation and method, 'Romanticism' is a multi-dimensional phenomenon, whose richness invites approaches through space and place and through literary traditions that are not quite in time.

## Periodisation as a Problem: The Case of American Romanticism

*Martin Procházka*

Periodisation as a problem emerges with the arrival of structuralism and its emphasis on the description of the system, viewed primarily in the synchronic perspective. In order to assume this perspective, structuralists have to shift their focus from history to historicity.

However, historicity is, as Derrida writes, 'difficult to *acknowledge*'.<sup>26</sup> In *Speech and Phenomena* he connects it with an 'ideality', which is 'another name for the permanence of the same' given by 'the possibility of repetition'.<sup>27</sup> Later, in *The Gift of Death*, he discusses historicity in ethical terms, as the responsibility for the *past*, the *future* or the *other*, which is linked with the self, the nation, the state, etc., by historical events. History, says Derrida commenting on Jan Patočka's *Heretical Essays*, 'can be neither a decidable object nor a totality capable of being mastered, precisely because it is tied to *responsibility*, to *faith*, and to the *gift*'. Despite this, 'historicity must be *admitted to*', which implies that it must remain the 'problem of history', a problem that is never to be resolved.<sup>28</sup>

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25 <http://curioustravellers.ac.uk>

26 Jacques Derrida, *The Gift of Death*, trans. by David Wills (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1995), p. 5.

27 Jacques Derrida, 'Speech and Phenomena', in *Speech and Phenomena and Other Essays on Husserl's Theory of Signs*, trans. by David B. Allison (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 1973), p. 52.

28 Derrida, *The Gift of Death*, p. 5.

Since it resists objectification and closure, history cannot be converted into a system that could be studied by a structuralist method. The effort to get out of this impasse is typical of the new historicist approach, focusing on the links between individual narratives, events and objects and structuring them by simple yet exceedingly versatile patterns: circulation, oscillation, substitution, or exchange.

Although the meaning of period as a portion of time appears, as Nick noted, only in the seventeenth century, or—in the specific literary historical context—in the later eighteenth century, the origins of period as a structural pattern can be traced to the antiquity, and specifically to the third book of Aristotle's *Rhetoric*. Here, time is transformed into empirical sequences (rhythmic patterns), which in turn are formalised by mathematical means. The totality of the Aristotelian period is no longer supported by the supreme authority of myth as in the case of 'ages'. Nor does it stem from what Benedict Anderson called 'simultaneity along time' typical of time perception in traditional religious communities. It is based on *intrinsic balance* controlled by a certain metre called *paian*. This way of structuring can be related to what Anderson calls the 'homogeneous empty time [...] marked [...] by temporal coincidence'.<sup>29</sup>

These features of Aristotle's concept may be said to anticipate some structuralist approaches to systems, whose balance is alternately disrupted and regained in the course of time, such as the notions of the dynamic nature of natural language as a system and of the 'national literature' discussed by the representatives of the Prague School including Jan Mukařovský, and especially Felix Vodička.

It may be objected that this perspective is no longer relevant for the 'world republic of letters'.<sup>30</sup> However, even within this republic, large and influential national literatures may be said to spread 'Eurochronology' or 'ethnocentrism of literary-historical periodisations' and the problem of a structuralist approach to periodisation reappears on a global level.<sup>31</sup>

29 Benedict Anderson, *Imagined Communities* (London: Verso, 1991), p. 24.

30 Pascale Casanova, *The World Republic of Letters*, trans. by M. B. DeBevoise (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2004), pp. 236–37

31 Arjun Appadurai, *Modernity at Large: Cultural Dimensions of Globalization* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1996), p. 30; Emily S. Apter, *Against World Literature: On the Politics of Untranslatability* (London: Verso, 2013), p. 41;

Vodička's theory of literary historical periods explained in his principal work, *The Structure of Development*, is characterised by a certain ambiguity. On the one hand, a period in literary history should be 'an autonomous field', given by 'dominant elements of literary structures and forms,' that is, chiefly by 'the immanent development' of principal genres. On the other hand, Vodička refers to the extrinsic causes, such as the socio-cultural and political dynamics of 'the community of language users' or 'the morals and morality in literature of a certain period' as determining factors of this development.<sup>32</sup>

The last-mentioned proposition, however, contradicts the previous assumption that literary history must have its own, 'intrinsic' periodisation method. The system ultimately derives its existence from the empirical status of language as a 'community' of its users, which in turn is seen as the origin of its principal unit, the totality of a 'national literature'.<sup>33</sup>

In other words, structuralism can grasp periods only as means of pragmatic systemisation of heterogeneous material, consisting of a number of phenomena which are arbitrary from the point of view of the intrinsic development of literature. Among the responses to this approach, the effort to shift the focus from the totality of the system to the pragmatic nature of its boundaries as *power structures* has to be mentioned, since it plays a great role in a number of attempts at a periodisation of American literature and hence also in American Romanticism.<sup>34</sup>

This term was rarely used by U.S. scholars until recently. The alternative concepts, such as Emerson's 'Transcendentalism' or Matthiessen's 'American Renaissance', are products of ideological assumptions about the exceptionality and world leadership of the U.S. Emerson's 'new idealists', able to look beyond the empirical realities to 'Heaven's own truth' (as Melville put it), are both a construct derived

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Christopher Prendergast, 'Negotiating World Literature', *New Left Review*, 8 (2001), 100–21 (p. 104).

32 Felix Vodička, *Struktura vývoje* (The Structure of Development, 1969), 2nd enlarged ed. (Prague: Dauphin, 1998), p. 67, my translation.

33 Ibid., pp. 66, 73.

34 Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari, *Anti-Oedipus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia*, trans. by Robert Hurley, Mark Seem and Helen Lane (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1983), p. 170.

from Kant's transcendental philosophy, modified by the thoughts of Fichte, Coleridge and Carlyle (whose *Sartor Resartus* had a great influence on Emerson), and the sign of a desire to cross the limitations and divisions of U.S. society and its climate in the early 1840s.<sup>35</sup> While the term 'Transcendentalism' can be understood as an expression of the desire for spiritual change, the phrase 'American Renaissance' implies the desire for supremacy in terms of 'Eurochronology': the triumph of art as a form of national consciousness and a privileged representation of a nation as a collective body. In the mid-nineteenth century, this allegedly homogeneous, ethnocentric and male-governed community is, to quote F.O. Matthiessen, 'coming to its maturity and affirming its rightful heritage in the whole expanse of art and culture'.<sup>36</sup> Coining the term 'American Renaissance', Matthiessen does not go beyond numerous assertions of U.S. cultural independence, which were the foundations of all ideological statements of Americanism since the Declaration of Independence. His reduction of the principal canon to Emerson, Thoreau, Hawthorne, Melville and Whitman, and only three rather brief mentions of Emily Dickinson, in *American Renaissance* more than amply demonstrate the arbitrariness of his teleological approach. The power structure of Matthiessen's expanding boundaries of American literature collapses when he discusses the relationship between Emerson and Nietzsche, or Whitman and Hitler, as mere 'apparent harmonies' which were deliberately disrupted by Nietzsche's and Hitler's 'natures less temperate' than Emerson's own.<sup>37</sup>

This rather bizarre conclusion may exemplify numerous reductive statements by earlier historians, which made some later scholars abandon their attempts at using periodisation as a method of defining and integrating objects of literary history. In his 'Introduction' to *The Cambridge History of American Literature*, Sacvan Bercovitch explains

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35 Herman Melville, *Pierre, or, The Ambiguities*, ed. by Robert S. Forsythe (New York: Knopf, 1930), p. 235. Melville refers to Emerson's essay 'The Transcendentalist' (1842).

36 F.O. Matthiessen, *American Renaissance: Art and Expression in the Age of Emerson and Whitman* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1941), p. vii.

37 George Blaustein, *Nightmare Envy and Other Stories: American Culture and European Reconstruction* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2018), p. 178, <https://doi.org/10.1093/oso/9780190209209.001.0001>. Blaustein quotes *American Renaissance* (pp. 436, 546).



his notion of American literary history as ‘a polyphony of large-scale narratives [...] ample enough in [their] scope and detail [...] persuasive by demonstration (rather than by assertion) and hence authoritative in [their] own right’.<sup>38</sup> This ‘diversity of perspectives’ is complemented by their ‘overlap’ as ‘a strategy of multivocal description’ which, among other things, rules out attempts at drawing fixed periodisation boundaries.<sup>39</sup>

Although this experiment may raise serious doubts, it may also suggest a different approach to periodisation. Instead of deriving boundaries from the totality of a system, we may explore them as loci of complexity and sites of transformation. And the research of American Romanticism as a process of transformation and merging of traditional and popular genres (as in the case of Emily Dickinson), novel and essay (in Melville, who both develops and repudiates Emerson’s Transcendentalism), novel and romance (in Hawthorne), or even the re-invention of major philosophical and aesthetic categories (as in the case of the ‘self’ in Whitman’s ‘Song of Myself’) may lead to a *transnational as well as transitional* view of American Romanticism as a core cultural development of modernity, pointing back to the pitfalls of the Enlightenment (as in the Gothic novels of Charles Brockden Brown) and forward to modernist and avant-garde experiments (as in Whitman’s and Dickinson’s poetry).<sup>40</sup> This approach should not engender a new statement of exceptionalism but lead to a recognition of the limits of ‘Eurochronology’ and a shift of attention from the European roots of American Romanticism to its transformative powers shaping the new consciousness of literature and the literary public in the post-Civil-War era.

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38 Sacvan Bercovitch, ‘Introduction’, in *The Cambridge History of American Literature: Prose Writing 1820–1865*, vol. 2 (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994), pp. 4–5.

39 *Ibid.*, p. 5.

40 See, e.g., Cristianne Miller, ‘Dickinson and the Ballad’, *Genre*, 45.1 (2012), 29–45, <https://doi.org/10.1215/00166928-1507029>; Martin Procházka, ‘Walt Whitman’, in *Lectures on American Literature*, 2nd ed., ed. by Justin Quinn (Prague: Charles University Press, 2011), p. 111.

## Response

Laurent Folliot

It might be best, in view of the wealth and variety of the statements we have just heard, to declare from the outset some theoretical affiliations, or at least inspirations. For my part, I have been very much impressed by the approach outlined by Paul Veyne (later one of Foucault's close associates) in his 1971 *Comment on écrit l'histoire*—a book translated into English as *Writing History*, but whose title might also read as *How They Write History*, such was its polemical thrust against historicist readings of history.<sup>41</sup> Against what would soon become known as grand narratives, Veyne argued for a return to the Aristotelian view of historical events as essentially sublunary—hopelessly particular, singular even—and therefore unamenable to the formality of historical 'laws'; the result was, so to speak, an atomistic view of the historical domain in which the notion of essentially distinct periods appears quite as hopeless as that of a sense or *telos* of history, but in which, at the same time, any particular attempt at periodisation can become relevant, according to the subject considered and the historian's heuristic intentions. Now I wish to suggest that such a conception is not necessarily incompatible with Martin Procházka's, which sees the boundaries of a given system (or period) as 'loci of complexity and sites of transformation'—meaning, as I take it, that a given liminal fact or event may well look backward and/or forward beyond the period it is usually associated with; and it is certainly consistent with the kind of short-term periodisation David has brilliantly put forward as one of several chronological 'scales' on which to consider British Romanticism.

But maybe this was by the way. To (finally) begin with, I would like to come back to what seemed to me the premise of two of the statements we have just read. On the one hand, Nick Halmi has shown us that the need for periodisation could only arise once history had ceased to be periodic in the older sense—i.e., cyclical—and 'a linear [...] temporalised conception of history' had emerged (and here I must say from the outset

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41 Paul Veyne, *Comment on écrit l'histoire*, 2nd ed. (Paris: Seuil, 1978); *Writing History: Essay on Epistemology*, trans. by M. Moore-Rinvolucri (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1984).

that I am tempted to understand ‘temporalised’ as at least suggesting ‘secularised’). On the other hand, Martin has suggested that there is an analogy between the Aristotelian period itself—mathematically formalised and wrenched away from mythical temporality—and the ‘homogenous, empty time’ Benjamin would associate with progress. In both cases, then, the need to periodise seems to stem from a necessity of coming to terms with a secularised understanding of time and history, of history as time. Yet secularisation itself is more of an ongoing, indefinite process than a sudden caesura—it has no clear ‘epoch’, to take up Nick’s first definition of that word—and I want to wonder, with reference both to the French Revolution and to British Romanticism, to what extent older, metaphysical or mythical schemes remained at work in their own historical self-understanding (rather as, in Benjamin’s eye, the dwarf theology was to animate the automaton of historical materialism).<sup>42</sup> On the one hand, revolution itself (a quondam synonym for ‘period’, as Nick has reminded us) was still frequently envisioned, along classical republican lines, as repristination, as a Machiavellian *ritorno ai principii* which was not, ultimately, without relying upon some notion of sanctified origin or *archè*. If Saint-Just said that happiness was a new idea in Europe, he also claimed that the world had been empty since the Romans, and the angel of the Terror, as he has been dubbed, was one who looked backward as well as forward.<sup>43</sup> On the other hand, Romanticism, at least in the case of Wordsworth, Coleridge, and more problematically Blake, was informed by a (very partially) secularised version of the Apocalypse, and the Romantic project might be roughly located, simultaneously, in the repristination of natural man (through a return to natural poetry, for Wordsworth) and in the indefinite unfolding of his higher faculties on a superior level. The question I want to ask, very tentatively, is whether British Romanticism, unlike some of its French and German counterparts, should not be understood as showing some reluctance, some resistance even, not just to the annoying or elusive spirit of the age, but to age-spirits generally, as threatening to trivialise its own endeavours, its own hopes of imminent regeneration?

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42 Walter Benjamin, ‘On the Concept of History’, in *Illuminations*, ed. by Hannah Arendt, trans. by Harry Zohn (New York: Schocken Books, 1969).

43 Saint-Just, *Œuvres complètes*, ed. by Michèle Duval (Paris: Gérard Lebovici, 1984), pp. 715, 778.

As an aside, we may remember that modern periodisation could be said to begin with the Italian Humanists who coined the phrase 'Middle Ages' (*media tempestas*) to designate the long period of 'Gothic' darkness between the splendour of Antiquity and the incipient Renaissance of their own time; and we might suggest (a little tongue-in-cheek, perhaps) that there was in Romanticism, insofar as it conceptualised itself as a Renaissance of sorts, a tendency to view all periods between sundry idealised pasts and the present much in the same way as Byron saw the middle age of man, which 'is—I really scarce know what'.<sup>44</sup>

Another related point I wish to make has to do with periodisation in other arts, which tends to re-shuffle temporal units just as much as the four-nation perspective Fiona Stafford has charted. In music, as Charles Rosen and Henri Zerner remind us, Classicism largely overlaps with the Romantic period in literature; Beethoven is the last of the great classical triad, but he also is the fountainhead of Romanticism, which persists up to Wagner and his disciples, and in fact Haydn and Mozart themselves could be seen as Romantics by contemporaries like E.T.A. Hoffmann.<sup>45</sup> Romanticism, therefore, covers most if not all of the nineteenth century, until it is fulfilled and transcended by the Second Viennese School. In architecture, the Neoclassicism that prevailed in countries both revolutionary and counter-revolutionary was soon displaced by eclecticism, a paradoxical consequence of the historicism so often singled out as the defining characteristic of the Romantic era: an ironic consequence of historical awareness in nineteenth-century architects was that, even as they strove to seize and celebrate the spirit of the age, they merely ranged through past centuries, shifting from Venetian to Northern Gothic to Italianate or French Renaissance and back again to neoclassical, as they felt the occasion at hand most specifically required, until the Bauhaus (at least according to teleologically-minded art historians like Nikolaus Pevsner) finally inaugurated the new age that had eluded previous generations for so long. What this might suggest, I think, is that the age of progress may have been somehow averse to self-periodisation, and postponed, as much as possible, the Hegelian dusk in which the owl of Minerva would take its wing and pronounce

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<sup>44</sup> *Don Juan*, Canto XII, line 3.

<sup>45</sup> Charles Rosen and Henri Zerner, *Romanticism and Realism: The Mythology of Nineteenth Century Art* (London: Faber, 1984), p. 34.

its closure (perhaps present ages do in general resist seeing themselves as mere periods, and pace Alain Badiou's urgings that we should finally enter the twenty-first century).<sup>46</sup> What it might also suggest is that the epochal character of both the Revolution and Romanticism resulted in the increased difficulty of periodisation, as the present became freer, more atomised, and less amenable to grand syntheses.

Which may bring us, finally, to the apparently simpler question of when British Romanticism begins and ends. Fiona Stafford has reminded us of the inaugural value of Macpherson's *Ossian* for Scotland, and in fact for Britain and Europe more generally: *Ossian*, as Wordsworth contemptuously noted, was a great favourite with Lucien Bonaparte, and there may well have been a temptation with French commentators (apt as they were to fall into *Franco-chronologies*) to view Romanticism as originally a Scottish/Celtic creation, later fostered and bestowed upon Europe by Gallic taste! The European perspective thus opened, at any rate, might lead us to conjure up the dreaded spectre of 'Pre-Romanticism', and only half-jestingly to ask whether Romanticism was not, somehow, Pre-Romanticism (an 'age of dissatisfaction', as Marshall Brown has called it) made conscious of itself, *für sich*, by the French Revolution.<sup>47</sup> If we consider endpoints, on the other hand, my personal impression is that Romanticism had *la vie dure*, as we say in French (we often view Baudelaire, the Symbolists and even realist and naturalist prose writers as belated offshoots of Romanticism). Although Arnold's 1881 view of Shelley as a 'beautiful ineffectual angel' must have been based in part on the conviction that Arnold's contemporaries had earned whatever convictions they might have the hard way of historical change, it is, I suspect, difficult to understand Tennyson and Browning and Swinburne and Ruskin—or indeed the American Renaissance or American Romanticism, as Martin has reminded us—without reference to the founding/restoring moment that we call Romanticism. 'Romantic' and 'Victorian', for instance, are heterogenous categories; yet the traditional English periodisation through reigns is valid in its cautious empiricism, just as the fuzzy label of 'Romanticism' is valid in its adequacy to the inchoate character of so much nineteenth-century art.

46 Alain Badiou, *Le Siècle* (Paris: Seuil, 2005); 'Le XXI<sup>e</sup> siècle n'a pas encore commencé', interview with Elie During, *Art Press*, 310 (March 2005).

47 Marshall Brown, *Preromanticism* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1991), p. 3.

Discussion<sup>48</sup>

DD: Nick, would you like to reply first to Laurent's comments? He has taken up your point about how the French Revolution altered the experience of time and sharpened the distinction between periods—the sense of radical turning points in history, a 'before' and 'after', even if the French Revolutionaries often fantasised about restoring some pristine state of society rather than creating something altogether new.

NH: I would like to address two points raised by Laurent. The first concerns the contemporary interpretation of the French Revolution as an historical caesura. Historians like Stephen Bann and Peter Fritzsche have emphasised the formative role of the Revolution in the modern conception of temporalised history—or what François Hartog calls the modern *régime d'historicité*. By this account the Revolution was perceived as so socially and politically disruptive that the experience of the present and expectations of the future ceased to be interpretable by reference to the past. But as Laurent noted, temporalisation, as the replacement of a cyclical with a linear understanding of historical time, was itself a process, and one result of this process was the possibility of interpreting the fall of the Bastille and its consequences as a uniquely significant event marking a permanent change in European political arrangements. As early as 1762, in Book 3 of *Émile*, Rousseau had forecast an approaching 'state of crisis and century of revolutions', and the early reception of the French Revolution—in contrast, for example, to that of the Seven Years' War—confirms that the expectation of a new epoch preceded any experience that could have justified this expectation. So the Revolution served not to create a temporalised, periodising *régime d'historicité*, but to affirm the one that had already developed in the course of the eighteenth century.

Laurent also mentioned contemporary resistances to the 'spirit of the age', understood as the acceptance of the radically new. This is a very important point, insufficiently acknowledged, I think, by Koselleck and those who accept his basic theories of the temporalisation of history and the experience of temporal acceleration in the so-called *Sattelzeit*

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48 With DD standing for David Duff, NH for Nicholas Halmi, MP for Martin Procházka and FS for Fiona Stafford.

(‘saddle period’) of 1750 to 1850. Laurent referred to temporalisation as secularisation, and I would accept the latter term only in the specific sense used by Blumenberg, namely the use of a theological vocabulary to describe secular concepts and events, as in Coleridge’s prose ‘Argument’ to his poem ‘Religious Musings’ (1794): ‘The French Revolution, Millennium. Universal Redemption.’ An imminently caused, historically unfolding event is precisely not comparable to the divine intervention prophesied in the Book of Revelation. But the rhetorical identification of the two serves to disguise their conceptual incommensurability, and hence to mitigate the most troubling implication of the admission of epochal ruptures into historical self-understanding—the radical uncertainty of the future. In the aesthetic sphere the eclecticism to which Laurent referred—notably the accurately copied but decontextualised use of multiple historical architecture styles, Doric Greek, Imperial Roman, French Gothic, Florentine Renaissance, etc.—represents an analogous response to the recognition that historicisation, and its consequent demand that art express the contemporary zeitgeist, entailed a severance from artistic traditions and a renunciation of long-established aesthetic norms. The use of historically referential styles fosters the *appearance* of an historical continuity that is recognised not to exist; but exactly because it doesn’t exist, all styles are theoretically equivalent and available for use, none having a sustainable claim to normativity. From a philosophical perspective such forms of resistance may be incoherent, but we should not minimise the anxieties underlying them.

DD: Martin, you too invoked classical models of periodicity to set against modern understandings of the term. Do you draw similar conclusions to Nick’s from this comparison? Laurent, on the other hand, suggested that your conception of period boundaries as ‘loci of complexity and sites of transformation’ was compatible with anti-historicist models of history-writing. Do you accept that inference?

MP: I have suggested connecting the term ‘period’ with the Greek word *peras*, meaning limits, or ‘everything that can be expressed by numbers

or arithmetical relations'.<sup>49</sup> In Aristotle's *Metaphysics*, reviewing the teaching of the Pythagoreans, *peras* are static and firmly set boundaries of things: 'We call a limit the last point of each thing, i.e., the first point beyond which it is not possible to find any part, and the first point within which every part is'.<sup>50</sup> However, *peras* do not merely determine the 'spatial magnitude' but also 'the end of each thing', its *telos* or purpose ('that towards which the movement and action are [...], that for the sake of which'), and they are also understood epistemologically, as 'the limit of knowledge'.<sup>51</sup>

Commenting on the teaching of the Pythagoreans, Aristotle combines the notions of limit and number: 'the elements of number are the even and the odd, and of these the former is unlimited, and the latter limited', and points out that, according to the Pythagoreans, 'number' is 'forming both [the] modifications and [the] states' of things.<sup>52</sup> As a result, Aristotle's reflections on *numbers as limits* imply that the latter may not only mark the contours of being (as Heidegger put it) but reveal its dynamics, consisting in transitions and transformations.

Aristotle's reflections on numbers read almost as an anticipation of the digital. The dynamic view of *peras* may have a crucial influence on our understanding of period and periodisation. As I have pointed out in my introductory talk, '[i]nstead of deriving boundaries from the totality of a system', 'we may explore them as loci of complexity and sites of transformation'.

Why do I use 'loci' or 'sites', and not 'foci', as Laurent suggests? Because I am aware of the importance of spatial imagination for our understanding of periods as temporal phenomena, evident in our use of terms like 'landmark' but also in more complex approaches to limits and boundaries. An example is the approach of Deleuze and Guattari, who understood a boundary as a specific power structure regulating

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49 Vassilis Karasmanis, 'Continuity and Incommensurability in Ancient Greek Philosophy and Mathematics', in *Socratic, Platonic and Aristotelian Studies: Essays in Honor of Gerasimos Santas*, ed. by Georgios Anagnostopoulos (Dordrecht: Springer, 2011), pp. 389–99 (p. 393), [https://doi.org/10.1007/978-94-007-1730-5\\_22](https://doi.org/10.1007/978-94-007-1730-5_22)

50 Aristotle, *Metaphysics* 1022a4–5, in *The Complete Works of Aristotle: The Revised Oxford Translation: One Volume Digital Edition*, ed. by Jonathan Barnes, Bollingen Series LXXI.2 (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1984), p. 3472. The subsequent quotations follow the text of this edition.

51 Aristotle, *Metaphysics* 1022a5–11.

52 Ibid. 986a16–17.



desire by moving it 'in the direction of more intense and more adequate investments of the social field'.<sup>53</sup> (Their approach is related to Paul Veyne's 'anti-historicist approach to history writing' mentioned by Laurent and David.) Deleuze and Guattari have illustrated their rather general notion by a metaphor of colonial expansion: Oedipal desire is 'colonization pursued by other means, it is the interior colony, and we shall see that even here at home'.<sup>54</sup>

In other words, the spatiality of boundaries and limits is fundamentally important not only with respect to periodisation, but in the discussion of the history of literatures and cultures, including recent notions as interculturalism or transculturalism, since the understanding of historical development has always been linked to the notions of territoriality or globality, evident even in the recent notions of 'world literature'.<sup>55</sup> And it has a specific importance in American literature.

DD: Has that got something to do with the frontier mentality?

MP: Definitely. Starting from the American Revolution, the identity of the Americans was being defined in a new way, namely with respect to the polysemic term 'frontier' and its crossing, or rather pushing it westward. In a letter of 12 June 1817, Thomas Jefferson defended the 'natural' right of expatriation as a foundation of 'the pursuit of happiness', which he saw, anticipating Deleuze's and Guattari's view, in the common, 'natural' desire to cross the frontier, specified as a 'geographical line' drawn by 'the whole body of English jurists': if God

has made the law in the nature of man to pursue his own happiness, he has left him free in the choice of the place as well as mode; and we may safely call on the whole body of English jurists to produce a map on which Nature has traced the geographical line which she forbids him to cross in pursuit of happiness.<sup>56</sup>

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53 Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari, *Anti-Oedipus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia*, trans. by Robert Hurley, Mark Seem and Helen Lane (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1983), p. 170.

54 Ibid.

55 See, e.g., the previously cited works by Pascale Casanova, Arjun Appadurai and Christopher Prendergast.

56 Quoted in Charles A. Miller, *Jefferson and Nature: An Interpretation* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1988), p. 170.

In 1893, Frederick Jackson Turner formulated his Frontier Thesis, representing the U.S. identity as a collective experience of the Frontier and its westward movement that 'molded the distinctive character of Americans, shaping traits such as individualism, hard work, and self-reliance; it was the major determinant of the democratic character of their political institutions'. In doing so, Turner emphasised 'the dominating American character', namely 'perennial rebirth' and 'fluidity of American life' as well as 'its continuous touch with the simplicity of primitive society'.<sup>57</sup> Sadly enough, Turner, following the 'melting-pot theory', imagined this experience as a homogeneous process, in the course of which the myths of the West came to triumph over the 'wild nature' or the 'primitive society' of the Native Americans. Turner ignored the actual history of the settlement of the American West that included the genocide of the Indians and was a product of diverse waves of migration which always had a multi-ethnic and multicultural character.

This takes me back to my original comments on Sacvan Bercovitch's concept of American literary and cultural history. The 'polyphony of large-scale narratives' establishing 'a diversity of perspectives' leads also to the understanding of American literature as a typical frontier phenomenon: 'meanings and possibilities generated by competing ideologies, shifting realities and the confrontation of cultures'.<sup>58</sup> Hence also my approach to the periodisation of American Romanticism.

DD: In his response to your paper, Fiona, Laurent welcomed your nomination of Macpherson's *Ossian* as an inaugural moment for Scottish Romanticism, and perhaps for Irish Romanticism too, since *Ossian* was also claimed by the Irish and the debate over national ownership was at least as heated as the debate over the authenticity of the *Ossian* poems. But he was less confident about assigning end points. Do you share his discomfort on that score? A 'four nations' perspective disrupts the chronology of English Romanticism as regards starting points, but does it prove even more disruptive of end points?

FS: I agree that Romanticism's end point is just as elusive as its beginning—not least because a defining characteristic is the emphasis on

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57 Frederick Jackson Turner, 'The Significance of the Frontier in American History', in *The Frontier in American History* (New York: Henry Holt, 1921), pp. 1–38 (p. 5).

58 Bercovitch, 'Introduction', p. 6.

process rather than perfection, of striving towards rather than arriving. In the light of today's discussion, we might conclude that Romanticism is so various and pervasive that it never really ended, whether we are thinking in terms of the later nineteenth-century poets recalled by Laurent, or of the 'American Renaissance' and 'Transcendentalism' discussed by Martin, or of Bakhtin's notion of 'great time' invoked by David, or of the later legacy of Romantic writers to twentieth- and twenty-first-century literature, or in less specifically literary terms, of the aesthetic appreciation of landscape, ecology and animal rights, the rise of nationalism and the concept of psychology and the modern self. As Nick put it, 'we remain the children of the first Romantic generation'.<sup>59</sup> If we have to think more practically, as editors of literary anthologies and handbooks do when drawing the final lines around their studies, the boundary between 'Romantic' and 'Victorian' (though conveniently erased by the 'long nineteenth century') could be placed at 1824 with the death of Byron, or at 1832 with the death of Walter Scott, the passing of the Great Reform Act and Tennyson's *Poems*, or at 1837, with the accession of Victoria. In Ireland, however, though part of the United Kingdom at this time, the end (in the sense of an achieved purpose) might be 1829 with Catholic Emancipation, or (in the sense of a catastrophe) 1845 when the Famine struck. Romanticism is resistant to ending and yet subject to multiple ends.

One reason why *Ossian* strikes me as an intriguing starting point is that this beginning is inherently elegiac—Ossian, the last of his race, is quintessentially a poet of aftermath, dwelling on the times of old. If, as Nick reminds us, Rousseau was predicting revolution and crisis in the 1760s, James Macpherson and contemporary Scottish Highlanders had already experienced violent upheaval and irreversible social change. The return to antiquity in *Ossian* was therefore a glimpse of the future (and we might extend this future to nineteenth-century America, and the experience of the native peoples, which Martin has already mentioned). At the same time, poems that appealed to later eighteenth-century readers as a glimpse of an earlier, simpler society—of 'natural man'—were also the fragments of an ancient culture, broken almost beyond recognition. And this might resonate with Nick's brilliant point about historically

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59 Nicholas Halmi in his opening position statement above.

referential styles that offer the appearance of historical continuity, while disguising the underlying anxieties. If decontextualised imitations of the past do signal severance from rather than continuation of living tradition, Macpherson's blend of old and new, translated and created, Celtic and classical is a forerunner of Romantic (and later) eclecticism. In this way, the *Poems of Ossian* could be seen as pre-postmodern as much as pre-romantic.<sup>60</sup>

Macpherson's cultural translation from a predominantly oral culture into print is also worth considering in relation to our thinking about linear time and the sense of history, since legends and traditional tales passed on from generation to generation remain alive and open to remaking, when free from any ideal of the definitive, original, authored text with an established date of composition. The extension of print culture and newspapers was, as Benedict Anderson has argued, a crucial element in the development of the modern imagined communities that began to replace older senses of connection.<sup>61</sup> *The Poems of Ossian* drew on the undated 'times of old' but, in attempting to justify its existence through reference to historical records, exposed its mythic aspect to modern critique.<sup>62</sup>

DD: Laurent also raised a broader question, whether British Romanticism was at some level resistant to 'the annoying or elusive spirit of the age', and to age-spirits generally, insofar as they threatened to trivialise its endeavours and its hopes of regeneration. If he is right, this suggests another modification to Chandler's view of the Romantic period as the 'age of the spirit of the age'. It's also the age of *contestation* of the spirit of the age, of *anti*-periodisation: an era which imagines a future without the need for further radical breaks and period boundaries. That's the French Revolutionary dream in its purest form, a dream which is also, as Laurent says, a secularised version of apocalypse, or what Shelley called the 'far goal of time', the vision of a time beyond time, without the curse of mutability or periodicity. But the Revolutionary dream was

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60 For postmodern Ossian, see my essay on 'Romantic Macpherson', in *The Edinburgh Companion to Scottish Romanticism*, ed. by Murray Pittock (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2011), pp. 27–38.

61 Benedict Anderson, *Imagined Communities* (London: Verso, 1991).

62 James Macpherson, *The Poems of Ossian*, ed. by Howard Gaskill (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 1996), p. 127.

of course shattered, and the Romantic zeitgeist is characterised as much by the shattering of the dream as the having of it. So we are back to periodicity, periodisation, and back to historical phases, or 'moments', blissful dawns and not-so-blissful afternoons and evenings. Where does this leave us?

FS: If we are thinking about the French Revolutionary, or Shelleyan-Godwinian, secularised version of apocalypse, we might also think about the way in which this finds a dark mirror in the futuristic fiction of a post-human world. Mary Shelley's novel, *The Last Man* (1826) is, by some reckonings, a late Romantic text, which can be read as a rebuke to the ideals her husband expressed in *Prometheus Unbound* and *A Defence of Poetry*. Here we find a secularised apocalypse without any millennial fulfilment—and no possibility of further periodisation, as the human race peters out.

Since *The Last Man* is the work of a woman writer, it is also an opportunity to think about whether our debates over Romanticism and periodisation are affected by gendered traditions. Patterns of patrilineal inheritance have not always been especially beneficial to women, so perhaps linear thinking is less congenial to them as well? It is telling that Helen Maria Williams saw the French Revolution in terms of the 'subversion of despotism'—as a liberation from inherited systems.<sup>63</sup> If the new age depends on the subversion of the old, then literary forms that offer ironic comment on dominant structures are as important as the invention of something new. This may be a reason why the novel, which (again following Bakhtin) is now widely understood as a 'parodic-travesty' genre rather than the agent of a Protestant father figure, appealed to so many women in the Romantic period.<sup>64</sup> Jane Austen's early, unpublished writings are a parodic cornucopia, showing a brilliant young woman rewriting the received, male-authored history of her nation and many of its literary masterpieces. Not that parody,

<sup>63</sup> As quoted by Nicholas Halmi above.

<sup>64</sup> M.M. Bakhtin, *The Dialogic Imagination: Four Essays*, ed. by Michael Holquist, trans. by Caryl Emerson and Michael Holquist (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1982). Bakhtin's argument was a major spur to the numerous critical challenges to Ian Watt's influential case for *Robinson Crusoe*'s foundational status in *The Rise of the Novel* (1957): see, e.g., Michael McKeon, *The Origins of the English Novel, 1600–1740* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1988).

novels or irony were the exclusive province of women in the period, of course. Percy Bysshe Shelley's vision may have been reflected—or distorted—in his widow's novel, but his own great *Defence* was in itself a response to Thomas Love Peacock's satirical *Four Ages of Poetry*. And yet, if the Romantic yearning towards timelessness seems inseparable from mocking voices asserting the triumph of time, such laughter often had its own redemptive potential. Romanticism is propelled by oppositions, engagements, conversations and reflections, as we seem to be demonstrating among ourselves.

DD: Undoubtedly, though I think we have also demonstrated some agreement about the fundamental issues. I have a final question about René Wellek, whom several of you have cited and whose conceptualisation of 'period' and of 'Romanticism' set the terms for modern discussion of this topic, despite the many challenges it has received. Re-reading some of his work, I was struck by the cogency of the claims he makes about Romantic self-definition, and the wealth the evidence he assembles, in refuting Lovejoy, to show how widely accepted in the Romantic period was the idea that this was a 'new age' of poetry. In my opening remarks, I cited Leigh Hunt, Shelley and Hazlitt as examples, but Wellek cites many other British authors and critics who expressed this view: Southey, Wordsworth, De Quincey, Walter Scott, Nathan Drake, Francis Jeffrey, Thomas Babington Macaulay, James Montgomery, later R.H. Horne in *The New Spirit of the Age* (1844).<sup>65</sup> These are just some of the names. These writers rarely use the term 'Romantic' to describe it but they have a very clear sense of their time as a distinct period, and there is a high measure of agreement about when it began: either in the 1760s, with Percy's *Reliques*, 'the great literary *epoch* of the present reign', as Southey called it (using the term in its old sense, as Nick helpfully explained); or, alternatively, in 1798, with the publication of *Lyrical Ballads*, another epoch-making literary event which radicalised that earlier revivalist aesthetic to produce a true 'revolution in literature', as it was subsequently often called. Wellek's point is that this was a view articulated and widely accepted *at the time*, not a retrospective construction. Contrary to Lovejoy's scepticism, the Romantic movement

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<sup>65</sup> René Wellek, 'The Concept of Romanticism in Literary History', *Comparative Literature*, 1 (1949), 1–23, 147–72.

was a transformative process that writers and critics observed and commented on *as it was happening*, just as they wrote about the spirit of political transformation that was so palpable a feature of their time. The question of what set that literary transformation in motion, and when, became inescapable. This is how the idea of a 'Romantic period' began, not in the textbooks of later nineteenth-century literary historians, as sceptics allege.

My question, then, is, can we still accept Wellek's argument, in the face of the complications we have explored? And—a more technical question, for Martin especially—given Wellek's roots in Czech structuralism, was he faithful to the methodology of the Prague School? Do we need to understand its tenets to make sense of the debate about periodisation in Romantic studies?

MP: Wellek's methodology developed in a context widely different from that of other members of the Prague School. It was shaped by his early detailed reading of Nietzsche, who inspired him mainly by his perspectivism.<sup>66</sup> Wellek was influenced by the interpretations of Nietzsche by his teacher Otokar Fischer, Professor of German Language and Literature in the Czech section of Charles University. Fischer was isolated in the Czech literary context in his acceptance of the internal contradictions and anti-traditionalism of Nietzsche's doctrine, whose major role he saw in the intuitive diagnostics of the future stages of European culture. For both Wellek and Fischer, one of the most influential of Nietzsche's writings was the second of the *Untimely Meditations*, 'On the Use and Abuse of History for Life' (1874). Fischer also motivated Wellek to study Wilhelm Dilthey, Benedetto Croce, Leo Spitzer and Oskar Walzel. Other scholars recommended to Wellek by Fischer included especially Levin Ludwig Schücking, a Shakespearean and one of the founders of the sociohistorical study of literary taste.

Although Wellek's objectivist notion of the work of art was modified by Wilhelm Dilthey's hermeneutics emphasising the role of intuition, Wellek was still critical of some of Dilthey's concepts, especially that of 'lived experience' (*Erlebnis*). Similarly, he never fully accepted the

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<sup>66</sup> Martin Procházka, 'A Spectre or an Unacknowledged Visionary? Coleridge in Czech Culture', in *The Reception of S.T. Coleridge in Europe*, ed. by Elinor Shaffer and Edoardo Zuccato (London: Continuum, 2007), pp. 254–74 (pp. 268–69).

focus on the close analysis of form, typical of Russian formalism, to the detriment of the study of content and had reservations even as to the methodological orientation of Prague structuralism. Wellek used some formalist terminology (for instance *ostranyenie*, estrangement) but also criticised the formalists for their lack of deeper understanding of Romantic verse theorists. He stressed the principal tension between the formalist approach and German psychologically-oriented theory and maintained that the Prague structuralist theory of verse differed from the Romantic approaches only by a greater degree of formalisation.

This theoretical and critical stance might have led Wellek to express his reservations about the requirement that the members of the Prague Linguistic Circle should use only the structuralist methodology. In his letter to the Committee of the Prague Linguistic Circle, dated 21 September 1934, Wellek claimed that 'the admiration I have for the method of Structuralism does not exclude my use of other, mainly ideographical, methods in literary history, as follows from all my scholarly activities so far'.<sup>67</sup>

Wellek's initially objectivist approach to the work of art was also modified by his emphasis on its fictional nature, influenced by Hans Vaihinger's seminal work *The Philosophy of 'As If'* (1911). Later, Wellek found important inspiration, evident in his and Austin Warren's *Theory of Literature* (1949), in Roman Ingarden's phenomenological structuralism. As Ivo Pospíšil pointed out, 'René Wellek moved [...] on the boundaries of literary methodologies' and the power of this *liminal* approach has not yet been sufficiently appreciated.<sup>68</sup>

DD: That's very helpful, thank you. The theoretical underpinnings of what is sometimes called, reductively, the 'history of ideas' are not well understood, but you've clarified the conceptual basis of modern debates about literary periodisation, just as Nick has explained the history of the terminology the Romantics themselves employed. Perhaps we have begun to embrace some of the possibilities of a 'liminal' methodology by approaching the question of Romantic periodisation in relation to

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67 Ivo Pospíšil and Miloš Zelenka, *René Wellek a meziválečné Československo (Ke kořenům strukturální estetiky)* (René Wellek and Czechoslovakia between the Two Wars: Towards the Roots of Structural Aesthetics) (Brno: Masarykova Univerzita, 1996), p. 61.

68 *Ibid.*, p. 17.



different national literatures, and from the standpoint of different academic traditions—English, Scottish, French, German, American, Czech. That is part of the value of an international forum of this kind. The conversation we have started will doubtless continue in other times and places, but we need now to bring it to a close. What have we learned? Readers can draw their own conclusions from the arguments put forward, but we have, I think, shown that the question of periodisation in Romanticism is inseparably bound up with questions of secularisation, localisation and institutionalisation. It is the shift away from religious models of time, from Christian teleology and its sequential, providential, symmetrical plot, which throws open the question of how epochs are differentiated from one another, even if ‘universal histories’ continue to proliferate and the idea of an apocalyptic dénouement retains its hold. The French Revolution crystallises that question by proclaiming a radical break with the past, redefining the measurement of time and imposing its own secular teleology. Although things did not go according to plan, and attention transferred to how, or when, the Revolution ended, that question too became a model for literary historiography. Alongside the search for origins, for a starting point for the ‘new age’ we now call Romantic, there was an equally intense search for an end point (a search that, in Britain, dominated the critical writing of the 1820s). In trying to determine the first and last Romantics, to demarcate the beginning and ending of the literary revolution on which so many contemporary observers commented, we continue that quest, sharing their obsession and re-enacting the complications of their effort at self-periodisation. Whether, in our institutional practices, we extend the Romantic period (give it its own ‘Romantic Century’, as the journal *Studies in Romanticism* does, 1750–1850), or assign it a permanent, typological presence (as some analysts of Romanticism propose), or whether we subdivide it into a sequence of micro-periods, each with its own mini-zeitgeist, we are inevitably confronted with the problem of conflicting chronologies as we move from nation to nation, language to language, art form to art form. What seems beyond dispute is that time-consciousness is of the essence in Romanticism, and that part of the adjustment in consciousness that defines the Romantic movement is a desire to constitute itself as a period, however long or short its duration, and however porous and contested its boundaries.

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