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QUESTIONING THE ROMANTIC NOVEL

STEPHEN C. BEHRENDT

Any discussion of the English novel during the Romantic period necessarily begins and ends in paradox, especially when one also considers curricular, pedagogical and canonical issues as they are reflected in undergraduate and graduate course offerings at colleges and universities. First, the most notably canonized novelist of mid-period, Jane Austen, is routinely regarded more as a latter-day eighteenth-century novelist than as a definitively Romantic one. Second, perhaps the most prolific novelist of the period, Sir Walter Scott, seldom appears in any but the most exhaustive or chronologically restricted surveys of the English novel. Third, the presence of Mary Shelley's perennially popular *Frankenstein* in the academic curriculum often reflects on one hand the desire to include women more visibly in the canon, and on the other the impulse among many teacher/scholars to leaven their courses in Romantic poetry with an accessible work of prose fiction whose affinities with that poetry are both apparent and compelling. Finally, Gothic novels, whose wave of popularity crested during the Romantic period, are typically relegated to the periphery of the fiction scene, their presence acknowledged by the literary-critical equivalent of the inclusion at family holiday meals of the poor relations who have to eat in the back room. In short, the "Romantic novel" has often seemed to be a non-entity devoid equally of dramatically successful practitioners and of any definable avid readership, either two hundred years ago or today.

Whether this sort of casual assessment, which has long washed about in the backwaters of critical discourse concerned with the history and development of the English novel, still has any real value is a matter of some dispute. Certainly a review of the traditional academic offerings in the English novel would seem to suggest that there is a sizable desert to be crossed between Sterne (and Mackenzie) and the early Dickens. Austen furnishes a pleasant oasis in this arid environment, but as I have already suggested, her work is often represented both in criticism and in the classroom as steeped in a nostalgic sense of a fading gentility and elegance—even wit and decorum—to which subsequent fiction offers no equivalent. Moreover, considered in

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historical context, Austen's works strike one as oddly out of place and anachronistic in the flamboyant Regency. One would scarcely associate the publication of *Emma*, for instance, with the year of Napoleon's final humiliation at Waterloo, nor that of *Persuasion* and *Northanger Abbey* with the increasingly brutal political suppressions in England that would culminate in eighteen months in the violence of the "Manchester Massacre." Scott's "invention" of the historical novel, too, tends to lead one away from the actual temporal reality of his times; *Waverley* appeared the year before Waterloo, for instance, but it focuses by design upon other times, other places, other conflicts—although the events of 1745 were relevant to the emerging sense of a British nationhood which Scott celebrated and which was a theme for other authors as well during the Regency. In this respect the Waverley novels continue the program of nostalgic, post-chivalric tale-telling that had begun with the neo-medieval verse narratives which first established the Scottish bard's reputation.

Not surprisingly, surveys of fictional literature, and of the novel in particular, have for the most part either ignored the Romantic period (the skip to the early Dickens is an easy and convenient one) or denigrated it in one way or another. Pronouncements like W. L. Renwick's are typical:

> The curious inquirer who samples the commercial novels [of 1789-1815] may find, at long intervals, an amusing phrase or touch of observation, but he will soon be content to leave them to the economist, the sociologist, and the bibliographer, and accept the few writers who enjoy established reputations by virtue of some individual significance which cannot be diminished by the mob who exploited the vogues they created.[1]

Ironically, it is among precisely this latter group of economists, sociologists, and inquirers into the operations of culture that reassessments of Romantic literature have begun to yield the most startling insights. Nor is it mere coincidence that marxist and feminist studies have found in the supposedly "negligible" novels of the period documents of real cultural significance—traditional literary-critical "standards" notwithstanding. It is a matter of perspective, and it is surely revealing that the application of the principles of New Historical inquiry have contributed in meaningful fashion to the reawakening of interest in Romantic fiction.

Renwick observes that "the significant novelists are, from the death of Smollett to the rise of Scott, women" (p. 62). Nevertheless, this admission is tempered by Renwick's suspicion that the women achieved their significance by default, their male counterparts having been "too much concerned with the urgent public causes of the time" to busy themselves with novel-writing (p. 62). And while he remarks that the "appropriate moral seriousness" of the early novel tradition "remained with the women," he is quick to dismiss the

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novels of women like Elizabeth Inchbald, Charlotte Turner Smith, Amelia Opie, Sydney Owenson, and Ann Radcliffe, even where he distributes some grudging praise. The only women spared are Maria Edgeworth—who "stands for sense and responsibility" (p. 80)—and Jane Austen—who "was entirely novelist" (p. 89) and who possessed "solid morals, realistic common sense, and artistic discrimination" (p. 90). Renwick's observations betray a typical preference for the tradition of moral fable and an obvious unwillingness to accept on their own terms novels whose intellectual premises and artistic execution deviate from the model of authority inscribed by the patriarchal line stretching from Richardson and Fielding, through Scott, and on to Dickens.

I have singled out Renwick's comments, which are representative of much writing on the Romantic novel, partly because they occur in the "authoritative" *Oxford History of English Literature* series, a series located very much at the center of the canon-making (and canon-enforcing) activities that have been such a curious preoccupation of post-Romantic literary study. Partly, too, I have chosen these comments as a point of departure because they are, as I write, precisely thirty years old. And yet they are dated—dramatically and irreversibly so. I believe it useful to question how and why such confident declarations come to be so dated in such a relatively brief period of time. It is with this issue—although it will seldom be in the foreground—that the remainder of this discussion is going to be concerned.

In assessing the Romantic novel, I wonder if we have not been guilty of asking the wrong questions, of looking at the landscape only after first consulting a map, so that we see what we expect to see rather than looking around on our own and seeing what is actually there before us. In a sense, we have preconditioned ourselves to find in Romantic prose fiction a rather amorphous and unarresting entity. This may stem in part from traditional assumptions about the English Romantic period in general which have in recent years come under increasing scrutiny. The masculinist, heroic ideology (encompassing the roles of bard and prophet) long associated with Romantic poetry, for instance, is beginning to appear both less monolithic and less accurate than was long assumed. Investigation of women writers of the period has revealed a lively, active, and articulate counter-voice to the "philosophic mind" Wordsworth commemorated in the Intimations Ode, to the rowdy, often misanthropic and misogynistic escapades of Byron's heroes (including himself), and to the increasingly philosophical classicism of Percy Shelley. That Anna Letitia Barbauld's rollicking terrestrializing of epic machinery in "Washing Day" appeared in print in the same year (1797) as Coleridge was composing "This Lime-Tree Bower My Prison" must inevitably tell us something.

Literary historians used to reduce the vast literature of the Romantic period to a survey of the five or six major male poets. And yet, if anything

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characterizes Romantic poetry it must be the sheer *diversity* that is to be found there. Subject matter varies as widely as the political, spiritual, and socioeconomic orientations or agendas the individual male and female authors—of whatever celebrity or notoriety—bring to bear on and in their works. Moreover, when one begins to tally up the actual number of literary publications (in all genres), as well as the total number of persons actually engaged in writing for public consumption, one confronts a genuine explosion in literary activity.[2] In the drive for consensus and succinctness initiated by the likes of Matthew Arnold and followed by his countless canon-making successors, an artificial construct was created; it was called Romantic literature, and it seemed narrow, centered (even when its axis included both radical and reactionary poles), and—perhaps because of its seeming unanimity of nature and scope—easy to caricature. In fact, this is anything but the historical reality, and current scholarship into the nature of that historical reality is dramatically rewriting the landscape of Romantic poetry.

A comparable rewriting is overdue for Romantic fiction, and in particular for the novel. I want to return, therefore, to some of the questions that seem to beg for answers—and these answers may well prove to be contradictory and enigmatic—as a precondition for any such rewriting. First, what can we say about the actual literary scene in fiction? That is, what was actually being published, and by whom, and in what numbers, and for what readerships? The first three questions involve purely statistical matters that systematic number-crunching can begin to answer. Indeed, Cheryl Turner's recent detailed statistical and bibliographical analysis of eighteenth-century novels by women offers a splendid model for the sort of study that is needed to lay a solid foundation for discussions concerning production and consumption of Romantic fiction by authors and readers of both sexes.[3]

The question about readerships, on the other hand, is another matter. Previous studies of the reading public have failed adequately to address such relevant problems as *actual* readership (i.e., literate *readers* as opposed to illiterate *listeners* to the reading acts of others), accessibility of copies of literary works (personal ownership or group ownership as opposed to circulating libraries), and marketing techniques (including format, pricing, advertising, and the inclusion of illustrations). To cite only one aspect of this latter point, the primary printed documents from the period alert one early on to the presence on the scene of major individual publishers like Joseph Johnson, William Lane, John Murray, or Richard Stockdale. But one notes, too, the constantly shifting combinations of booksellers whose records may be traced on the title pages of their publications, combinations that suggest ways in which in some cases joint efforts proved economically advantageous even when they may have entailed extra labor for all parties. Terry Lovell's discussion of the economic realities involved in successful operations like William Lane's Minerva Press or Charles Mudie's immensely profitable

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"Mudie's Select Library" puts together the pieces of this puzzle suggestively and points to areas of potentially revealing further inquiry.[4]

What were the working relationships among booksellers/publishers and their "stable" of authors, and how did those relations affect the production and consumption of writing of all sorts? Joseph Johnson, for instance, was the publisher for Mary Wollstonecraft (whom he in fact hired "on staff" on the *Analytical Review* when she left Lady Kingsborough in 1787[5]), and Johnson's circle included as well William Godwin, William Blake, Henry Fuseli, Thomas Paine, Joseph Priestley, Maria Edgeworth, and others. These authors and artists knew one another and their works (indeed, Fuseli is reputed to have observed that "Blake is damned good to steal from"), and so the mutually beneficial relationships that emerged among them led to a natural cross-fertilization in their works. But their association with Johnson meant that they all had access to Johnson's customers, to the readership whose attention he commanded. Like his publishing contemporaries whose "interpretation of demand was a key determinant of publication,"[6] Johnson had a keen sense of his market, and he knew how to engage promising authors to help him expand and diversify his readership. Thus while we tend most to remember the more radical among Johnson's authors, most of them were "reliable, honest men and women who wrote to benefit society by sharing experiences and theories with a wide range of readers."[7] This point was surely not lost upon the young Wordsworth who, upon his return from France, sought out Johnson as publisher for his long poem, *An Evening Walk*, whose section on the pathetic war widow reflects the poem's grounding in radical social consciousness. By examining relations like these, which center in a publisher or bookseller frequented by multiple authors and a readership that gradually comes to be something of a known quantity, we may begin better to understand the dynamics of literary converse in the actual public marketplace. In 1817, for example, the title-pages of works intended for popular mass consumption reveal the intersection in common publishing ventures of booksellers and publishers who occasionally published alone or in varying combinations: Baldwin, Cradock and Joy is one example; a more elaborate instance is the linking-up of Longman, Hurst, Rees, Orme and Brown.[8] More study is needed to clarify the shifting dynamics of such affiliations and their consequences for authors and reading publics alike.

Another question, and one that is more immediately relevant to the larger issues I am addressing here, has to do with reassessing just what Romantic novels actually are. "Consensus" is obviously too broad and restrictive a word to invoke in any such reassessment, and in any event it militates against the very diversity I have been stressing. Perhaps the most useful way to approach this question is to observe that over the course of some century and a half (say 1710 to the 1860s) the novel in England changed in a number of significant ways. The discursive moral tale defined by Defoe, Richardson, and Fielding

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had become something very different by the time it passed into the hands of Dickens, Eliot, and Trollope. For one thing, the pretense that a novel was a "history" (and that it should therefore be approached as History) was largely dropped from the forms, just as it was from the titles or subtitles, of individual novels.

Acknowledging openly the fictive nature of the novel in some ways legitimized the genre by freeing it from that pretense of historicity. At the same time, however, as Nancy Armstrong has demonstrated, the novel had by the high-water mark of the nineteenth century become a vehicle for at once shaping and enforcing social—and especially domestic—codes of behavior. Armstrong's perspective on the ways in which the novel's handling of history had by mid-century been recast in domestic terms is particularly suggestive, for she argues that already by the time of Austen and the Brontës "it had been established that novels were supposed to rewrite political history as personal histories that elaborated on the courtship procedures ensuring a happy domestic life."[9] The point is that "the political" is never entirely removed from the novel, just as "history" is retained at least by implication because each novel is a record either of its own times or of its times' view of other, usually previous and relatively familiar, times.

Moreover, as Lovell has observed, the preponderance of women among later eighteenth-century novelists suggests that it had become clear to all parties by the Romantic period that novel-writing held the potential to become "a feminized occupation, with all the characteristics of such occupations—low pay and low status."[10] Indeed, Margaret Ezell has recently proposed that Western literary history has depicted the novel almost from its beginnings as "a uniquely 'feminine' literary form."[11] Nevertheless, the obvious potential for economic (and social) profit drew men into the picture in increasing numbers, so much so that by the 1840s women made up only about 20 per cent of the writers of fiction.[12] And with the increasing number of male novelists came also the assumption that the novel—as befitting their participation in the genre—should be seen to be intellectually and morally weightier, like those other traditionally male literary forms: the epic poem, the sermon, and the philosophical treatise. In fact, the *nature* of the novel changed too. The early discursive nature of the novel that facilitated exchange and exploration of wide-ranging ideas—a characteristic of the *salon* as well as of later eighteenth- and early nineteenth-century novels, especially by women—gradually moved to the background. With the increasing literary activity of male authors who held both a personal and a social (or "class") stake in the novel's reorientation, the novel shifted increasingly toward the sort of authoritarian moral absolutism that characterizes other male-dominated institutions of governance, ranging from moral and political legislation to military or paramilitary activities.

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We are able to mark out certain important historical or chronological shifts in the nature and direction of the novel, of course. One comes with the publication in 1764 of Horace Walpole's *The Castle of Otranto*, which furnished a prototype for one variety of the English Gothic novel. This variety of novel was watered and fertilized alike by post-Burkean philosophical speculation on the Sublime, by the growth of Sentiment in all aspects of culture, by the growing vogue of the "wild" English landscape garden (itself advocated by William Shenstone and subsequently aided and abetted by William Gilpin and the school of the picturesque), by the emerging trend toward emphasizing the particular over the generalized in the visual arts, and by the increasing public preference for the spectacular (and therefore the Sublime) in theater (including state political pageantry) and opera. Novels of this stamp, calculated to plumb the depths of *effect* more than of substance, marked a radical departure from both the ostensible rationalism and equilibrium inscribed by earlier novels and the traditional prevailing "centrist" moral fiber underpinning those novels. They replaced the convention of refined, discursive storytelling aimed at general, mixed audiences that had largely characterized the earlier novelistic voice with a more strident, sensationalist voice that targeted more narrowly and carefully selected readerships. The development of the cult of the sublime, which includes the rise of the Gothic novel as well as the novel of sentiment (like Sterne's *Sentimental Journey* or Mackenzie's *Man of Feeling*), found its parallel in the visual arts in the works of artists like James Barry, Henry Fuseli, William Blake, and even the later Benjamin West. If the Gothic novel introduced a new sort of central male character—the energetic, athletic, handsome, but deeply troubled and frequently violent man whose descendants are the protagonists of Byron's Turkish tales and, even more, Emily Brontë's Heathcliff—that figure is merely the literary counterpart of similar characters who begin to appear in visual art of the later eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries, characters like Satan as he is portrayed—handsome, energetic, powerful, haughty—in later eighteenth-century illustrations to *Paradise Lost*.[13] Indeed, the French Revolution (and, to a lesser extent, the American before it) produced a remarkable convergence of the political and historical with the artistic and mythological, as may be seen not only in the enormous number of works of literary, theatrical, musical, and visual art based directly upon events relating to the revolution(s), but also in the vast number of works which may be regarded as displaced allegories of revolution (e.g. Percy Shelley's *Laon and Cythna* [*The Revolt of Islam*] or *Prometheus Unbound* and Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein*).

The French Revolutionary period, and the Napoleonic era that followed it, in fact, defines the very period about which I am asking pointed questions here with respect to the English novel, and I shall return to it shortly. But we should first consider two other "moments" that contributed heavily to the

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development of the English novel. The first is the anonymous publication in 1814 of Scott's *Waverley*, which gave birth to what was subsequently called the historical novel: not novels that purported to *represent* history (Gothic novels set in foreign locales in previous centuries, for instance), or novels that use history as a mere backdrop, but novels whose attention and fidelity to historical accuracy reflected the sort of principled "old historicism" visible in John Philip Kemble's attempts to represent Elizabethan drama on the stage in historically accurate terms.[14] With Scott's innovation, the waves of nationalism that had surged in ever-increasing magnitude throughout British culture during the eighteenth century crested in a literary vehicle that capitalized on the enculturated historical sense of nationhood. Here was a form that could capitalize on self-congratulatory nationalism—if only by means of its invitation to readers to trace their historical "roots"—while at the same time presenting rattlingly good narratives. Paradoxically, as subsequent fiction went on to demonstrate, this reversion to "history" bore with it a scripting (or re-scripting) of history that was often dramatically and intentionally at variance with actual historical fact, a trend that increased in both force and ideological significance through the colonial and imperial period and on well into the twentieth century.[15]

The last pivotal moment came in 1837 with the accession of Victoria to the throne of England. However one chooses to read the actual relationships of power and authority that held at various moments of her reign among herself, her consort Albert, her various prime ministers (and thus her government) and Parliament, there is no escaping either the symbolic or the social significance for British culture of the presence on the throne of what would prove to be the longest-reigning monarch in British history, a monarch who was woman, wife, and mother. The extent to which fiction in particular continued in England to develop along the lines of domestic concerns, even as it was increasingly produced by a self-reinforcing male literary establishment that possessed a large stake in the formulation and perpetuation of particular domestic paradigms, cannot be separated from this dramatic historical, social, cultural, and ideological *fact* of Victoria's reign. At the same time, it is surely instructive to reflect on the fact that perhaps the most influential study of English fiction, Ian Watt's *The Rise of the Novel* (1957), so completely undervalued the contributions of women to the early history of the genre that it required responses like Ellen Moers' *Literary Women* (1976) and Dale Spender's *Mothers of the Novel* (1986) to begin to set the record straight.[16]

What, then, of that seeming gap in the history of the English novel? It is not a gap at all, but rather a portion of the whole which is not adequately accounted for by what precedes or follows it, or by approaches to literary history whose primary emphasis is upon either consistency or continuity. Like Romantic poetry, Romantic prose fiction is characterized by its stubborn

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resistance to easy, convenient classification, as well as by its diversity and profusion. Indeed, as Gary Kelly observes, during the Romantic period the novel became "the most widely disseminated form of writing in society, apart from newspapers and magazines," a position it has held and solidified right up through the present.[17] It is tempting to say that the issue is one of quality, then, rather than of quantity, for quantity there most certainly is. But this, too, is too simple and convenient a formulation; it is also, not surprisingly, incorrect.

J. M. S. Tompkins observed as early as 1932 that the early Romantic period witnessed an unprecedented growth in the production of novels. And while, as she wrote, there are between the works of the mid-eighteenth century and those of Austen and Scott "no names which posterity has consented to call great," there is nevertheless "a large body of fiction which fed the appetite of the reading public, reflected and shaped their imaginations, and sometimes broke out into experiment and creative adventure."[18] Tompkins' assessment, like the novels upon which it is based, reveals a considerable variety of novels joined together, for the most part, by one very singular feature: their relative readability. Anticipating her critics, Tompkins was the first to admit that the works she included under the umbrella of "popular novels" were for the most part inferior in almost every aesthetic way: "these are not good books, whose vitality springs from an inner source, but poor books, on which the colour of life was reflected from their readers, and must now be renewed by imaginative sympathy."[19]

Looking back at many of these works, critics have tended to accept Tompkins' characterization at face value. And yet Tompkins' remark about how these books took on a color of life that "was reflected from their readers" proves in the long view to be shrewd and insightful. For we stand to learn much about this whole subject by paying greater and more careful attention to the nature and size of the contemporary readerships that such novels attracted. New Historicist inquiry has reminded us of our need to understand as best we can from our modern perspective the complex relationships that inhere among any literary text and its relevant historical and cultural contexts. Moreover, as Lovell properly reminds us, "this singling out of female writers and of genres popular with women for special scorn is characteristic of studies of popular forms."[20] The distinction that has been with us at least since the early eighteenth century between "great" works and "popular" ones betrays a cultural elitism that has clouded judgments about cultural activities for centuries. Today, as the twentieth century draws to a close, we lament the precarious position occupied by The Arts in society, with artists and their institutional or governmental support-mechanisms (like the National Endowment for the Arts, for instance) alike under attack from the "general public," we have good reason to rue the academy-driven elitism that still routinely dismisses what is widely popular—regardless of its inherent quality—as beneath serious notice.

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RECOGNIZING THE ROMANTIC NOVEL

NEW HISTORIES OF BRITISH FICTION, 1780–1830

EDITED BY
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LIVERPOOL UNIVERSITY PRESS

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capacity for both thought and action is dependent upon historical circumstances: Fergus McIvor 'possessed a character of uncommon acuteness, fire and ambition, which, as he became acquainted with the state of the country, gradually assumed a mixed and peculiar tone, that could only have been acquired Sixty Years since'.[17] In its attribution of personality-shaping agency to historical epoch, fiction may go beyond poetry to explore the interface between individual interiority and the exterior world.

The Case for Romantic *Fiction*

In *Matilda*, Mary Shelley's dark tale of incestuous love, Matilda's father, returning from a long journey after his wife's death to find a daughter who 'seemed to belong to a higher order of beings' – only then to fall in love with her – describes himself as 'somewhat like one of the seven sleepers, or like Nourjahad, in that sweet imitation of an eastern tale'.[18] It is telling, yet also typical of characters in Romantic-era novels, that Matilda's father feels that his life has moved out of the range, even out of the genre, of the realist novel, and can only be understood through different generic conventions – here, those of myth, or of the oriental tale. For many critics, this has been the hallmark of Romantic fiction: its seeming wanton destruction of the successful narrative paradigms put in place by the eighteenth-century novel. Kiely, for instance, argues that 'although romantic novels do have structural patterns, character types, and situations in common, their primary tendency is to destroy (or, at the very least, undermine) particular narrative conventions. Romantic novels thrive like parasites on structures whose ruin is the source of their life'. The result, he says dramatically, is 'a kind of literary sadism'.[19] Miles reiterates that the 'salient feature of the Romantic novel appears to be its failure to conform to and remain within accustomed boundaries'.[20]

And all agree that the primary narrative conventions that the Romantic novel breaks down – or should we say breaks free of? – are those of 'realism'. Since Ian Watt's masterful study, *The Rise of the Novel* (1957), the British novel has been defined in terms of its realism and topicality. Along with literary historians, social theorists such as Benedict Anderson and Jürgen Habermas have celebrated those qualities, and linked them to the genre's ability to reflect a particular socio-cultural situation back to its readers, allowing them to unite into 'imagined communities' (to use Anderson's phrase).[21] For Habermas, 'the psychological novel', exempli-

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fied by *Pamela* (1740), 'fashioned for the first time the kind of realism that allowed anyone to enter into the literary action as a substitute for his own':

> On the one hand, the empathetic reader repeated within himself the private relationships displayed before him in literature.[…] On the other hand, from the outset the familiarity (*Intimitat*) whose vehicle was the written word, the subjectivity that had become fit to print, had in fact become the literature appealing to a wide public of readers.[22]

Thus, in most socio-historical studies of the novel, the genre's success is tied to its 'realism' – the formal qualities that allow it to reflect its own milieu accurately back to hungry readers. Twentieth-century critics come by such criteria honestly: topicality was the quality most often used to hierarchize narrative during the Romantic period as well. Yet more recent critics, pre-eminently Anderson, often take the privileging of realism one step further, linking it to the contemporaneous rise of the nation state. Deidre Lynch and William Warner, for example, referring to Anderson in *Cultural Institutions of the Novel*, argue that the genre's 'wide popularity has allowed [it] to assume a crucial role in the constitution of the nation as an imagined community'.[23] The tendency among literary historians to join 'nation' and 'novel' is so widespread that one critic, Srinivas Aravamudan, has coined the term 'national realism' for the resulting generic definition.[24] Given its frequent divergence from this paradigm, it is not surprising that the Romantic-era novel has fallen outside the mainstream of novel studies.

Nor is it surprising that more subtle kinds of experimentation have been missed. Michael Gamer, for example, has shown how Edgeworth invented and experimented with the 'Romance of Real Life', a merging of romance (typically seen as an anti-realist mode) with the gritty and splendid minutiae of quotidian existence.[25] One of the primary generic innovations of the Romantic novel was this overlapping of fantasy and realism, an especially vexed and complicated issue during this era because it creates a 'mixed' genre that instigated debate (both in its own time and in our own) about whether such works are aesthetically successful. Maria Edgeworth's novels have been at the forefront of this discussion. Mitzi Myers, commenting on this phenomenon, says that Edgeworth created 'stories which refuse to behave like well-bred realistic and rational fictions ought to'.[26] In other words, when Romantic-era novelists gesture realistically to the physical and historical world outside the text, they free themselves from the confinement of any particular set of literary protocols. Consequently, part of the Romantic novel's realism lies, paradoxically, in its ability to move beyond the conventions of realism set by its eighteenth-century counter-

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part, and thus present 'realities' – say, political situations, scientific advances, extreme states – not available in other instances of this genre.[27] In doing so, Romantic authors may have taken their cue from the already flexible genre of the novel, but their innovations certainly helped make realism the flexible genre that it is.

Thus the Romantic-era novel often departs from both topicality and conventional realism in surprising and innovative ways: the foreign, often historically distant, castles of the gothic, with their supernatural events (whether explained or not); the chronologically and geographically 'exotic' settings of the historical novel, the national tale and the oriental tale; and the nascent science fiction of Shelley's *Frankenstein* and *The Last Man*, to name just a few. In many more Romantic-era novels – including *Caleb Williams*, *Maria,* and *Confessions of a Justified Sinner* – the struggle over defining 'reality' (what Godwin called 'things as they are' in the subtitle to *Caleb Williams*) takes centre stage. Indeed, many have read these novels as explorations of madness, another aspect of the 'unreal'.

What is at stake in all this experimentation? The essays included in this volume suggest a number of compelling answers to this question. In this introductory essay, we would also like to propose two ideas. First, what unites Romantic-era fiction is not a fracturing of the genre into multiple, often failed, forms, but instead a drive to investigate the relationship between the 'real' and the 'topical'. In this, again, the fiction resembles the imaginative poetry of the age. It is true that some of the major novelists of the day, including Austen and sometimes Edgeworth (for example, in a novel such as *Belinda*), seem to perfect a realist style. But unlike Miles, who sees such novelists as the forces who destroyed the possibility of the Romantic novel, or 'philosophical romance',[28] we hope that reinserting them back into the milieu of experimentation from which they emerged will highlight both their formal innovations and their ideological engagement. Second, in the heterogeneity of its approaches to the 'real', the Romantic-era novel forces us to understand different kinds of communal imagining. This was an age when the constitution of the nation was being thoroughly *re*-imagined – indeed revolutionized – and consequently the kinds of 'imagined community' proffered by Romantic-era fiction vary widely.

We can see the reverberations of this re-imagining in the Romantic treatment of that microcosmic community of marriage. In *Desire and Domestic Fiction: A Political History of the Novel* (1987), Nancy Armstrong charts the cultural efficacy of the marriage plot in novels from Samuel Richardson to

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Charlotte Brontë. Influentially, Armstrong puts 'domestic fiction' – fiction that focuses on achieved female happiness (and the capacity of women to make others happy) – at the centre of histories of the novel:

> The good marriage concluding fiction of this kind, where characters achieve prosperity without compromising their domestic virtue, could be used to resolve another order of conflict, the conflict between an agrarian gentry and urban industrialists, for one, or between labour and capital, for another. By enclosing such conflict within a domestic sphere, certain novels demonstrated that despite the vast inequities of the age virtually anyone could find gratification within this private framework.[29]

Thus Armstrong proposes that novels use the union between man and woman to 'solve' – or at least contain – the socio-cultural instabilities that roiled eighteenth- and nineteenth-century England. Yet this focus on exposing the ideological ramifications of the 'good marriage', fruitful as it has been, has also tended to push the Romantic-era novel to the margins of novel studies. Of course, some novels of this era do offer marriages that affirm a utopian ideal of personal and political fulfilment – such as the unions of Ivanhoe and Rowena and Emma and Knightley. Yet, in many others, the marriage plot is another generic characteristic of 'the novel' that comes in for blistering criticism during this period. Overall, the novels of this time boast many more unhappy and/or unfruitful marriages than were ever seen in the eighteenth-century novel, and often eschew the convention of a concluding marriage altogether. As Laura Mandell shows in this volume, critics and readers alike have often assumed that a novel that does not end in marriage cannot be a 'good' novel. But if the novel is understood only as succeeding when it ends 'happily' (that is, by supporting bourgeois culture) how do we assess those, like Mary Hays's *Memoirs of Emma Courtney*, that end, to use the word Mandell employs, in a 'queer' way – that is, in a way that encompasses a radical rethinking of love and intimacy?

Even more radically, the Romantic novel often ignores the plotting of heterosexual union altogether, and turns its attention to alternative social bonds, particularly to the vagaries of fraternity and sorority. The most iconic novels of the era – including *Caleb Williams* and *Frankenstein* – unroll a dystopian plot of violent doubling and fraternal or filial pursuit. In this category of stories that revolve around the uneasy bonds between siblings or friends of the same sex, we might place some of Austen's novels, highlighting the fraught sisterhood of *Sense and Sensibility*, and the tangled, even erotic, ties of female friendship in *Emma*. In his essay for this volume, Ian

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Duncan demonstrates that attention to such plotlines reveals a striking similarity between novels as different as *Confessions of a Justified Sinner* and *Redgauntlet*. Just as the surrounding culture explored new kinds of social organization, Duncan argues, these novels examine the 'queerness' of brotherhood and reveal the way that 'ideology, or the imaginary relation of belief, constitutes the new bond'. This interest in non-conjugal social bonds cuts across many of the 'sub-genres' of Romantic fiction – from the Jacobin novel to the gothic to the 'realism' of Austen and Scott. In highlighting this commonality we draw attention to the way the Romantic novel can help us expand our generic definitions.

Along with challenging the structure of the marriage plot, the Romantic-era novel questions the structure and value of another conventional narrative form: the bildungsroman, or the story of individual growth and progress. The 'rise of the novel' has always been tied firmly to the 'rise of the individual'. Watt again:

> The novel's serious concern with the daily lives of ordinary people [i.e., its 'formal realism'] seems to depend upon two important general conditions: the society must value every individual highly enough to consider him the proper subject of its serious literature; and there must be enough variety of belief and action among ordinary people for a detailed account of them to be of interest to other ordinary people, the readers of novels.[30]

And indeed, the value of such narratives, what Michael McKeon designates 'histories of the individual',[31] is everywhere proclaimed in canonical eighteenth-century novels. *Pamela*, for instance, concludes with a long list of the 'many applications, of its most material Incidents, to the Minds of the Youth of both Sexes'. Most eighteenth-century novels, like *Pamela*, follow a narrative of progress: from rags to riches; from captivity to freedom; from illegitimacy to legitimacy; from wandering to homecoming. And even those that end unhappily, like *Clarissa*, do not question the value of the story being told, or their own capacity to transmit it. To generalize, for the eighteenth-century novel, stories of individual lives have a pedagogical value for their readers, and the novel, as a genre, has the capacity to transmit that value.

In the Romantic-era novel, however, the confident didacticism of the eighteenth-century novel tends to dissipate under the pressure of a thoroughgoing critique of both the form and the value of individual life stories, as well as an interrogation of the novel's own generic capacity to transmit them. Indeed, novels such as Burney's *The Wanderer* show that the cultural desire for feminine stories, in particular, reveals itself to be something

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more coercive than liberating – 'compulsory narration' as Suzie Asha Park describes it in her essay for this volume. Furthermore, Romantic fiction is persistently drawn to lives that end not in redemption or transcendence, but in ruin and failure. Foregrounding the end over the beginning, Romantic novels tend to start not with their protagonist's birth, but with an announcement of the devastation wrought by his or her life's disaster. Caleb Williams initiates his story by announcing, 'My life for several years has been a theatre of calamity. I have been a mark for the vigilance of tyranny, and I could not escape. My fairest prospects have been blasted'; and Hogg's justified sinner begins his 'private memoirs and confessions' by explaining, 'My life has been a life of trouble and turmoil; of change and vicissitude; of anger and exultation; of sorrow and vengeance'.[32] These retrospective narrations emphasize not the protagonist's progress through life, but the catastrophe that awaits him at the end. Even Austen plays with such a narrative of ruin in *Persuasion*. This narrative strategy critiques not only the form of the eighteenth-century novel but also the ideological structures – salvation, justice – on which that form is based.[33] In this, the Romantic-era novel evinces a thoroughgoing scepticism of Enlightenment ideals.

That critique extends to the possibility that some stories of individuals might be more destructive than they are edifying. The Romantic novel frequently meditates on the idea of a story that – because it is too singular, too scary, or simply too evil – should not be passed on. Such stories have the potential to eviscerate community rather than construct it. This trope is perhaps most recognizable as a gothic 'hook' – the tantalizing lure of transgressive reading. In *Melmoth the Wanderer*, for instance, John Melmoth is 'enjoin[ed]' by his uncle's will

> to search for a manuscript, which I think he will find in the third and lowest left-hand drawer of the mahogany chest standing under that portrait [of Melmoth the Wanderer], – it is among some papers of no value, such as manuscript sermons, and pamphlets on the improvement of Ireland, and such stuff; he will distinguish it by its being tied round with a black tape, and the paper being very mouldy and discouloured. He may read it if he will – I think he had better not. At all events, I adjure him, if there be any power in the adjuration of a dying man, to burn it.[34]

Of course he reads it. In this late, semi-parodic replay of the disintegrating manuscript trope deployed as early as Walpole's *Castle of Otranto*, the instructions seem too precise for him not to disobey. Yet Romantic novelists employed the idea of a story that cannot be told to explore seriously

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aberrant psychological states. Matilda, for example, muses, 'Perhaps a history such as mine had better die with me, but a feeling that I cannot define leads me on and I am too weak in both in body and mind to resist the slightest impulse. While life was strong within me I thought indeed that there was a sacred horror in my tale that rendered it unfit for utterance, and now about to die I pollute its mystic terrors'.[35] Here, Matilda's experience of incestuous love has cast her permanently outside human community, and her story can only be passed on under the aegis of her death.

And even as it explores these themes, the very structure of many Romantic-era narratives questions the capacity of novels to transmit the 'histories of individuals' across space and time. In Mary Wollstonecraft's posthumously published *Maria, or the Wrongs of Woman*, the heroine, while confined to a madhouse by her brutal husband, writes her life story with the hope that it 'might perhaps instruct her daughter, and shield her from the misery, the tyranny, her mother knew not how to avoid'.[36] Yet the narrative subsequently reveals that Maria's infant daughter has died before her mother even began her autobiography; the narrative's only reader is Maria's lover Darnford, who, the fragmented narrative hints, will be unfaithful. What good are 'instructive' life stories if their readers do not exist? Mary Shelley puts the question in even starker terms in *The Last Man* (1826). Since the world's population has been destroyed by a global plague, the life story of the only man to survive literally has no readers. The chronological gymnastics of the novel's frame – which see it transmitted back in time to readers via the Sybil's cave in Naples – only serve to underline the narratological *mise-en-abyme* of this structure. Moreover, Helen Thompson's essay for this volume suggests that even if such stories were to reach their intended audience the Romantic era had grave doubts about whether they would have any force; novels such as Burney's *Cecilia*, she argues, reveal the failure of Richardson's idealized account of the novel as a medium that could reform culture. Burney instead depicts an 'impolite public sphere' from which reading cannot save the virtuous subject.

Paradoxically, the Romantic-era critique of what has been seen as one of the defining characteristics of the novel – the value, legibility and transmissibility through narrative of 'histories of individuals' – has rendered the Romantic novel less accessible to later critics than it should be. We contend, however, that this critique not only unites the many 'sub-genres' of Romantic-era fiction but also offers important ways to expand our understanding of narrative. Below, we briefly illustrate our arguments for

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the particularly probing and experimental nature of the Romantic-era novel through analyses of two examples of the genre: Charlotte Smith's *The Banished Man* (1794) and Maria Edgeworth's *The Absentee* (1812).

The Benefits of Exile in *The Banished Man*

We can see the degree to which the Romantic-era novel was engaged with rewriting the narrative conventions inherited from previous generations in a work such as Charlotte Smith's *The Banished Man* (1794). This novel of the aftermath of the French Revolution takes up the limits of both the marriage plot and the plot of national identity. Moving back and forth between war-torn Europe and provincial England over the course of its four volumes, *The Banished Man* challenges the exemplary quality of 'stories of individuals' even as it experiments with narrating new forms of 'imagined community.' Smith pointedly explains that the times demand this kind of narrative experiment: when her hero considers his recent past, it seems 'an uneasy and distressing dream […] but with this melancholy difference, that all these events, which a little time before would, if they could have been prophesied, have appeared more improbable than the wildest fiction of a disordered imagination, were now too real'.[37] Moreover, the novel's concerns with human interactions that cross national boundaries disclose the kinds of themes that traversed multiple genres during the Romantic era, and align the novel with other forms of writing from the period.

In order to explore new forms of imagined community, *The Banished Man*, like so many texts of the 1790s, begins by delineating the collapse of traditional social structures. To this end, the novel's first volume is book-ended by critiques of epic tropes of displacement and re-foundation. In its opening scenes, the Royalist hero, D'Alonville, appears at a castle in the war-torn borderland of France and Prussia bearing his dying father on his back: 'This young Frenchman, it seems, is quite a modern Eneas [sic]', an unsympathetic character sneers, underlining the allusion.[38] As the volume closes, D'Alonville, sitting in the midst of a ruined family estate, defers his quest to return to France. '*The world was all before him where to chuse*', he thinks, paraphrasing the closing lines of *Paradise Lost*, 'but no part of it offered to him "*a place of rest*"'.[39] As we discussed earlier, the Romantic-era novel is characterized by its reliance on allusions. This formal characteristic seems to evidence the novel's hyper-awareness of its debt to literary history, its engagement with revising the narrative conventions through which expe-

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