“Romanticism” – and Byron
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By

Peter Cochran
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ABBREVIATIONS

To economize on space in the notes, the following abbreviations are used for the books referred to. See the Bibliography for further information.

AOB: Byron, The Age of Bronze.
BB: Byron’s Bulldog: The Letters of John Cam Hobhouse to Lord Byron, ed. Peter Graham, Ohio 1984
When a citation from BLJ is headed “Text from”, followed by a manuscript reference, it means that the text is not from BLJ but from the original manuscript. Codes are as follows: <Byron’s erasures>; {Byron’s interlined corrections and second thoughts}; [editorial additions].
BOA: Byron, The Bride of Abydos.
CHP: Byron, Childe Harold’s Pilgrimage.
DJ: Byron, Don Juan.
EBSR: Byron, English Bards and Scotch Reviewers.
HandE: Byron, Heaven and Earth.
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<th>Abbreviations</th>
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<td>SOC:</td>
<td>Byron, <em>The Siege of Corinth</em>.</td>
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<td>TVOJ:</td>
<td>Byron, <em>The Vision of Judgement</em>.</td>
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INTRODUCTION

“ROMANTICISM”: A MARKETABLE COMMODITY

The word “romanticism” can mean anything you feel will improve its marketability:

“Some Romantics, self-professed or not, were politically progressive and others reactionary; some were internationalist and cosmopolitan, others fiercely nationalistic; some of them believed in the Enlightenment project of rational perfectibility, while others opposed it. Some Romantics were religious sceptics, while others converted to Catholicism; some vested their hopes in absolute Truth, while others acknowledged the inevitability of relative, subjective truths. Some subscribed to a poetics of subjectivity, others to a literary ideal of non-subjectivity; some wanted literature and the arts to be organic, others highly self-conscious, self-reflexive, auto-referential, and ironic. Some regarded poetry, some the novel, and others the drama as the supreme genre. All this variety need not worry us, if we reconceptualise European Romanticism as a set of responses, highly differentiated and at times downright contradictory, to a historically specific challenge: the challenge of the ever-accelerating modernization of European society” – Christoph Bode at Nicholas Roe (ed.), Romanticism, An Oxford Guide (OUP 2005), p.127.

You can thus read into the word anything that turns you on:

“… we are probably continuing to create Romanticism in our own image”
– Edward Larrissy, at ibid, p.673.

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1: This essay began as a talk at Queen Mary, University of London, on November 29th 2007. My thanks to Jeremy Davies and the English Research Seminar Committee for inviting me. The Committee read the sections in bold to help the talk along. I am grateful to Shobhana Bhattacharji, Bernard Beatty, John Gardner, Mirka Modrzewska and Jane Stabler for their help.
There is a gap in the English language – a word does not exist which ought to. It would mean, “a word whose validity everyone is scared to question”. It would have the same function in relation to single words that “dogma” has in relation to concepts: “a [BLIP] is a word whose usefulness you only query at the risk of being laughed at – or losing your job – or being shot”.

There are several such words, left titleless because of the failure of the dictionary. An important contemporary one is “terror”, which never means what politicians claim it means. Others which come to mind are “God”, “freedom”, “love”, “tragedy”, “democracy”, “comedy”, and “postmodemism”. These words fail, because rather than enabling us to understand what we are looking at, they throw up a smokescreen of illegitimate definition which obscures from us the reality of what we are looking at, and put us in the power of those who use them. Lord Byron would have called these words “Cant words”; but the phrase is no longer current, and it was in any case acceptable to query “Cant words”. The people who use them now are normally teachers and politicians, who use their supposed power with words to perpetuate our ignorance:

“One word to rule them all,
One word to find them,
One word to bring them all,
And in the darkness bind them”.

Another such word is “Romanticism”, and it’s “Romanticism” which I want to talk about today.

The issue of “Romanticism”

Так он писал темно и вяло
(Что романтизмом мы зовём,
Хоть романтизма тут нимало
Не вижу я, да что нам в том?)
(Pushkin, Evgeny Onegin, VI, 23, 1-4)

He wrote thus—limply and obscurely.
(We say ‘romantically’—although
That’s not romanticism, surely;
And if it is, who wants to know?) –
(tr. James Falen, World’s Classics, 1990)

My argument is not that the body of work called “Romanticism” never existed, but that the word is such a huge envelope that it can mean anything one wants, and so is of no value in describing the body of work:
but that we’re lumbered with it, until we shake off our obsession with marketing, and with market-driven university syllabuses.

Academics, who created the word, and thus the concept, “Romanticism”, are dazzled by it in spite of their own implicit cynicism about it. Few academic accounts of it do not start by admitting the impossibility of defining it; and yet none ever steps back publicly to wonder whether it meant anything in the first place. Conceding the impossibility of ever defining it does not prevent them from trying to define it. It’s a will’o’th’wisp, an ignis fatuus – like the Road Runner in the old cartoons – the bird by whom the Coyote is obsessed to the exclusion of everything else, even though it’s obvious he will never catch it and wouldn’t know what to do with it even if he did.

I’m speaking of the word in a British context. “German romanticism” may be a useful term, and the “classical / romantic” dichotomy meant simpler things in France and Italy (at first), than it did in Britain. In Germany the musical tradition alone might justify the word: though I’m impressed by the fact that Beethoven, on his deathbed, said “There is the truth!” and pointed to a complete set of the works of Handel.

In fact, early European propagandists of the new buzz-word were promiscuous in its use. To them it was synonymous with “of high quality”. W.F.Schlegel wrote “… erinnern sich dann an Shakespeare, in den ich das eigentliche Zentrum, den Kern der romantischen Fantasie setzen möchte” (“… cast your mind back to Shakespeare, in whom I should like to place the true centre, the kernel of romantic imagination”). His brother A.W.Schlegel made a bigger assertion: “… so ist unser Erachtens das spanische Theater des achtzehnten Jahrhunderts fast durchgehends romantisch; das englische ist es nur in seinem Stifter und grössten Meister, Shakespere, auf vollkommne Weise” (“… in our view, the Spanish theatre is almost wholly romantic until its decline since the beginning of the eighteenth century; whereas the English theatre is romantic to perfection only in its founder and greatest master, Shakespeare”). The less scholarly Stendhal was bolder still: “Sophocle et Euripide furent éminemment romantiques” (Sophocles and Euripides were eminently romantic”); later he threw caution to the winds, and just wrote, in immodest uppercase: “TOUS LES GRANDS ÉCRIVAINS ONT ÉTÉ ROMANTIQUES DE LEURS TEMPS”.2

The poet, novelist and philosopher Novalis, often credited as one of the very earliest romantics (he was published first by the Schlegel

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2: All quotations from Lilian R. Furst (ed.) European Romanticism: Self-Definition (Methuen 1980), pp.8-9, 115-16, 40-41 and 42.
brothers), has a famous passage in which he defines the verb “Romanticize”:


[“The world must be romanticized. In this way its original meaning will be rediscovered. Romanticization is nothing but a qualitative realization of potential. The lower self is identified, in this operation, with a better self. As we are ourselves are such a qualitative series of empowerings. This operation is as yet quite unknown. Insofar as I give a higher meaning to what is commonplace, and a mysterious appearance to what is ordinary, the dignity of the unknown to what is known, a semblance of infinity to what is finite, I romanticize it –]

This seems comprehensible – to “Romanticise” a thing is to transfer it from the mundane to the ideal. Next, however, Novalis is tempted to put the inverse case:

Umgekehrt ist die Operation für das Höhere, Unbekannte, Mystische, Unendliche – dies wird durch diese Verknüpfung logarythmisirt – Es bekommt einen geläufigen Ausdruck. romantische Philosophie. Lingua romana. Wechselerhöhung und Erniedigung.3

[“– the operation for what is elevated, unknown, mystical, infinite, is the reverse – these are turned by this combination into logarithms – They receive a familiar expression. Romantic philosophy. Lingua romana, Alternate elevation and lowering.”]

Thus “Romanticization” performs each of two irreconcilable acts: the elevation of the everyday into an ideal, and the debasement of an ideal into the everyday. With “Romanticization”, anything goes. If you’re charitable, “Romanticism” is an Heraclitian paradox (“the way up is the way down, the way forward is the way back”). If you’re unkind, it’s a blatant self-contradiction. A word which means two opposing things has no useful meaning, and only serves to confuse.

What I’m saying is by no means new. There have been frequent stirrings against the word “Romanticism”’s reign of obscure terror, but they cease as soon as heard. As long ago as 1924, Arthur Lovejoy, the historian of ideas, wrote “The word ‘romantic’ has come to mean so many things that, by itself, it means nothing. It has ceased to perform the function of a verbal sign”. He quotes different authorities as asserting that the first romantics were, among many others, Plato, Homer, and the serpent in the Garden of Eden. His solution to the problem, however, is to add an ‘s’, and to speak of different “Romanticisms” – thereby ensuring the word’s survival. This seems to me over-cautious.

Even though, as David Perkins writes, “…the romantic movement was subjected to deconstructive impulses from the moment it was constructed”, sixty-nine years after Lovejoy it had not gone away. In 1993 Jerome McGann published what he called *The Oxford Book of Romantic Period Verse*. This is just a step away from calling it *The Oxford Book of “Romantic Period” Verse*, which is just a step away from calling it *The Oxford Book of Early Nineteenth-Century Verse*: but again, the idea didn’t catch on – his hint was ignored, and he appears to have lost confidence himself. In 2002 he published a book called *Byron and Romanticism*. Seven years later, we still belong to the British Association for Romantic Studies, on the Internet we still have *Romantic Circles*, and *Romanticism on the Web*, and, on our library shelves, the books *A Companion to Romanticism*, *Romanticism: an Anthology*, *Romanticism: An Oxford Guide*, and the journals *Studies in Romanticism* and *Romanticism*. It’s a market-driven idea, exploited by a greedy, unstoppable industry, helped by student gullibility and English faculty inertia and flank-rubbing.

Even its most ardent advocates – those with most to lose if the concept were acknowledged as invalid – concede, normally near the beginning of the argument, that their house is built on sand. See Roy Porter and Mikuláš Teich:

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... many eminent scholars have argued that the concept of Romanticism, seen as a unity, has degenerated into a Procrustean bed, until the very word means everything and nothing.\textsuperscript{7}

See Marilyn Butler:

Thought is the prisoner of language, and twentieth-century thinking about early nineteenth-century English literature is cramped by a single formidable word: Romantic.\textsuperscript{8}

See also Duncan Wu (writing, I think, ironically):

Given such hectic activity in the publishing world, it is doubly odd that Romanticism has come to seem so compromised as a literary concept.\textsuperscript{9}

Or Seamus Perry:

The difficulty is not just knowing what it [“Romanticism”] really means, but knowing even how to go about deciding what it really means.\textsuperscript{10}

John Beer, in the very first sentence of his Introduction, appears bold:

The questions of Romantic criticism inevitably involve the question of Romanticism itself, a term that has proved notoriously difficult of definition. There are, indeed, those who believe that a concept that has been projected through so many perspectives has become so miasmic in the process that the very term should be dropped from the critical vocabulary.\textsuperscript{11}

... however, he neither names nor quotes anyone who takes a position at once so commonsensical, and yet so fraught with professional risk.

Nicholas Roe is a bit more careful:

In Europe the meaning of ‘Romantic’ has varied from country to country, while the historical period of ‘Romanticism’ is a matter of continuing debate.\textsuperscript{12}

\textsuperscript{10}: Ibid, p.3.
\textsuperscript{11}: John Beer, Questioning Romanticism (Johns Hopkins 1995), p.xi.
The historical fact of ‘Romanticism’ is, obviously, not “a matter of continuing debate” – at least we must assume it isn’t, for Roe doesn’t mention the possibility.

The picture is one of dozens of ineffectual, archangelic academics, beating their wings against the bars of a cage which they acknowledge isn’t there, but from which, still, none can escape. John Clubbe and Ernest J. Lovell jr. set the tone with the opening of their English Romanticism: The Grounds of Belief: they concede the wide skepticism about their subject in their first sentence, and then play at driving on, as if they hadnt already crashed the car:

‘Romanticism is still the most vexing problem in literary history,’ wrote Morse Peckham in 1965, ‘even more irritating than the problem of the Renaissance.’ This book makes no pretense to solving that problem or even answering the question, ‘What is Romanticism?’ But it does examine the beliefs of the six major Romantic poets …

Part of Jerome McGann’s polemical point in naming his anthology was that there is much “non-Romantic” verse written in the “Romantic” period (though as early as 1983 he was calling it “the so-called Romantic Period”). In the introduction to his anthology, he writes

The period also falls out of correspondence with the movement because much of the writing during the period – including some of the best work – is not properly speaking ‘romantic’ … Scott and Coleridge are dominated by their romanticisms, Austen and Crabbe are not. / When we speak of romantic writing, even within its periodic context, we refer to a body of extremely diverse materials. The historic impossibility of defining the term ‘romantic’ reflects this diversity.

Note the hesitancy in his “not properly speaking romantic” – as though there were a precise definition available, an idea which, in his last sentence, McGann denies, even as Lovejoy had. McGann adds the careful modifier “historic” impossibility – as if to distinguish that kind of impossibility from “lexicographical” impossibility. “Austen and Crabbe are not [‘dominated by their romanticisms’]” is a covert way of saying either that Austen and Crabbe aren’t “romantic” at all, or that they share with the “romantics” a few preoccupations – about the subjectivity of

judgement, for instance – which they share with any writers of any period. Austen and Crabbe are too ironical to be Romantic – and as for Byron …

“But surely, Dr Cochran, you’ve heard of Romantic Irony? The slide whereby that which is amusing, or bitter, or presents a disillusioning perspective on Romanticism, is perceived as being, in itself, Romantic?”

Any phrase whereby a thing can be turned into its own antithesis, and remain the same, is to be suspected. If “Romantic Irony” had been labeled “anti-romantic irony” it would have been better; but would have ruptured the envelope. In fact, not everyone agrees. M.H.Abrams excluded Byron from his study *Natural Supernaturalism* …

… because in his greatest work he speaks with an ironic counter-voice and deliberately opens a satirical perspective on the vatic stance of his Romantic contemporaries.16

This complete absence of a consensus says masses. None of these writers make the simple adjustment of saying, “maybe ‘romanticism’ never existed”. But if you do make this easy alteration in your mindset, create a paradigm shift, and stop thinking in terms of “romanticism”, lots of things make sense for the first time.

**Arguments against**

My first point is that no-one thought of a “Romantic School” or “Movement”, least of all of “Romanticism”, at the time. Marilyn Butler writes,

We have come to think of most of the great writers who flourished around 1800 as the Romantics, but the term is anachronistic and the poets concerned would not have used it of themselves.17

See also Nicholas Roe:

None of them [the artists discussed] thought of themselves or their age as ‘Romantic’, and the word ‘Romanticism’ did not become current until the mid-nineteenth century, long after most of them were dead.18

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17: Butler, loc. cit. See also Seamus Perry: “… the Romantics did not know that was what they were” (op.cit., p.4).
Instead, they thought of smaller groupings. The enemies of Keats and Leigh Hunt called them The Cockney School. Many people, enemies or not of Wordsworth, Coleridge and Southey, called them The Lake School. No-one ever thought of a Romantic School. Other groups of writers and artists up and down the centuries have given themselves names: The Tribe of Ben, The Pre-Raphaelites, The Imagists. No such self-identifying group existed in England in the first quarter of the nineteenth century. Macaulay wrote of Byron in these terms:

His lot was cast in the time of a great literary revolution. That poetical dynasty which had dethroned the successors of Shakespeare and Spenser was, in its turn, dethroned by a race who represented themselves as heirs of the ancient line, so long dispossessed by usurpers. The real nature of this revolution has not, we think, been comprehended the great majority of those who concurred in it.¹⁹

… but he named no-one in the “race”, and gave them no title. The idea of an “English Romantic School” was, it seems, invented by a Frenchman, Hippolyte Taine, in 1863 (thirteen years after the death of Wordsworth, longest-lived of all the writers),²⁰ sort-of borrowed in turn by twenty-two years later by an Englishman, W.J. Courthope, future Professor of Poetry at Oxford, in 1885 (thirty-five years after Wordsworth’s death),²¹ and from

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¹⁸: Roe, Romanticism: An Oxford Guide (OUP 2005), p.1. The artists Roe lists include Haydn. Later it’s clear that he’d like to include Mozart (p.4) and Shakespeare (p.6) as “romantics”; but he doesn’t.
²⁰: “Alors parut l’école romantique anglaise, toute semblable à la nôtre par ses doctrines, ses origines et ses alliances, par les vérités qu’elle découvrit, les exagérations qu’elle commit et le scandale qu’elle excita. Ils formaient une secte, «secte de dissidents en poésie,» qui parlaient haut, se tenaient serrés, et révoltaient les cervelles rassises par l’audace et la nouveauté de leurs théories. Pour le fond des choses, on leur trouvait «les principaux antisociaux et la sensibilité maladive de Rousseau, bref un mécontentement stérile et misanthropique contre les institutions présentes de la société …» and so on (Taine. Histoire de la Littérature Anglaise, 2nd edn 1866, Vol IV p.285). Taine includes Southey, Coleridge and Wordsworth, Scott, Shelley, Lamb, Moore … Byron («le plus grand et le plus anglais de ces artistes»: p.335) has a chapter to himself.
²¹: “In this paper [The Revival of Romance: Scott, Byron, and Shelley] I shall endeavour to trace the rise of the new school of Romance in English Literature, its connection with the classical school of the eighteenth century, and the various channels into which it was directed by Scott, Byron, and Shelley” (Courthope, The Liberal Movement in English Literature, John Murray 1885, p.112).
then on took over – at no great speed.22 So much for Nicholas Roe’s “mid-nineteenth century”: “English Romanticism” was a retrospective creation of the late – the very late – Victorians, who, oppressed by the materialism and triviality of their own day, needed a heroic episode in the recent past with which to castigate themselves. Seeing all their coffee-table editions of Byron, Keats, and Shelley lying about, they decided to call them “the Romantics”, and to worship them. To worship an author, after all, the last thing you need to do is read him.

We read Matthew Arnold’s essays on Wordsworth, Byron, Keats and Shelley (written between 1879 and 1888), and never find the words “romantic” or “romanticism”, and never find the poets spoken of as if they form a significant group.

The first writer who used the idea of a “Romantic movement” with total conviction seems to have been Edmund Gosse in Modern English Literature: A Short History, as late as 1895:

The romantic school began, the classic school disappeared, in the autumn of 1798.23

George Saintsbury writes of “the Romantic attitude” and refers to Coleridge as “the high priest of Romanticism”; but does not do so until 1900.24 By the end of the century, the easy idea of “the great English romantic Pléiade”25 was established – but not before then. And the fiction which the late Victorians invented, modern academics thrive on, despite Arthur Lovejoy, and despite doubts so powerful they all feel obliged to express them in their introductions and forewards.

At the time

Few who lived through “the Romantic period” were aware of those now considered the major writers in it. The diary of John Cam Hobhouse gives us a clear idea of this blank. Hobhouse was a very well-read man – he kept up with all the latest literature – but he shows no sign at all of knowing that he’s in the midst of the “Romantic Movement”. Here is a typical reference:

24: Saintsbury, A Short History of English Literature (Macmillan 1900), p.656. His chapter is called The Triumph of Romance.
June 6th 1816: Hallam told us that a plain man who was dining with Sotheby when Coleridge was present and had declaimed long, at last put down his knife and fork and said, somehow or other, “Sir, it is odd one hears of no poets in these times”. Coleridge said, “Pardon me, Sir, I take it we have more poets than has ever been known since the days of Milton – my friend Mr Wordsworth, for example”. He then repeated some rhapsody of Wordsworth’s.26

Now this is Hallam speaking, not Hobhouse; but it’s obvious that Hobhouse shares Hallam’s disbelief in the idea that anyone reads Wordsworth at all, let alone takes him seriously. Hobhouse never reads Wordsworth, and seems an almost equal blank about Coleridge – though he and Byron do read the *Biographia Literaria*, in Venice; and we know that Byron admired at least Coleridge’s poetry.

On January 5th 1819, Hobhouse writes to Byron, about the insults in the Dedication to *Don Juan*:

... Neither Southey, Wordsworth nor Coleridge have any character except with their own crazy proselytes some fifty perhaps in number: so what harm can you do them and what good can you do the world by your criticism?27

There is one indirect reference to Jane Austen in the diary (I know Jane Austen’s only doubtfully “Romantic”: she’s too satirical, uninterested in transcendence, and too preoccupied with money, and property). On October 31st 1814 Hobhouse writes, “Lord and Lady Barrington came late at night. My lord is a fool – my lady a loud talker, but good-natured. She is suspected of having written the two novels *Pride and Prejudice* and *Sense and Sensibility*. She is clever, and plays with a grace at billiards”. A later note in the manuscript adds, “by Miss Austen”. There is just one reference to Blake. On August 1st 1820, we read, “Chantrey [the sculptor] said Blake, who had illustrated Blair’s *Grave*, believed he had often seen Moses”.28 That’s it. There are no references to Keats. On November 4th 1822 Hobhouse finds himself in the protestant cemetery at Rome,29 and seems not to know that anyone called Keats had been buried there the previous year.

About Shelley Hobhouse must have known more than he writes, for he must have sensed – unless Byron was uncharacteristically silent about his

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26: B.L.Add.Mss.47232, diary entry for June 6 1816.
27: *Byron’s Bulldog*, pp. 256-60.
28: B.L.Add.Mss.56541, diary entry for August 1 1820.
29: B.L.Add.Mss.56546, diary entry for November 4 1822.
friendship with Shelley – that Shelley was his rival. Shelley’s “romantic” idealism had inspired a lot of *Childe Harold* III in the way that Hobhouse’s own stunted persona inspired the misanthropy of *Childe Harold* I, II and IV. Hobhouse’s reaction to *Childe Harold* III is characteristic in its tight-lippedness. It goes:

September 1st 1816: Byron has given me before another Canto of *Childe Harold* to read. It is very fine in parts, but I doubt whether I like it so much as his first Cantos – there is an air of mystery and metaphysics about it.30

“Mystery and metaphysics” are, of course, “romantic” preoccupations: so you can argue that here, the nearer Hobhouse gets to a “romantic” text – in this case, *Childe Harold* III – the more his nose curls up in disgust, even though he doesn’t realise that “romantic” is the word he should use to describe it. He may be Byron’s best friend, but “romantic” is not a word in his literary lexicon.

Hobhouse’s references to Shelley are just two in number – even on the day when we know Byron scratched out Shelley’s signature in the Alpine hotel visitors’ book (August 30th 1816), Hobhouse is silent about him. On August 27th 1816 he records a walk into Geneva with Scrope Davies, and then just writes, “… went on water – wet and sick – Mr. Shelley”.31 On September 15th 1822, with Byron at Pisa, he writes:

Leigh Hunt was brought out here by Percy Bysshe Shelley. Mr Shelley was lately drowned in going from Leghorn to La Spezia, and Lord Byron considered Leigh Hunt as a legacy left to him. Leigh Hunt induced Lord Byron to agree to set up a journal with him, but I endeavoured to persuade Lord Byron that he had better not engage in any such partnership; and it appears Lord Byron has managed to give up the scheme.32

Again, the presences of Shelley – a “Romantic” if ever there was one – and of Leigh Hunt, his acolyte – are perceived by Hobhouse as contaminants.

“But surely, Dr Cochran, you know that the first recorded use of ‘Romanticism’ is 1823,33 when Keats and Shelley were both dead, and Byron very nearly so? Even then it only described French literature.

30: B.L.Add.Mss.56537, diary entry for September 1 1816.
31: B.L.Add.Mss.56537, diary entry for August 27 1816.
32: B.L.Add.Mss. 56546, diary entry for September 15 1822.
33: The OED gives *The New Monthly Magazine*, 1823, IX 175-2 as the earliest known use of “Romanticism”.
Hobhouse can’t be criticised for not using a word which hadn’t yet been coined.”

“Romanticism” hadn’t been coined, but “romantic” was in use: it was a term meaning either “having to do with tales of chivalry” or “fanciful, improbable, but at the same time delightful” (Duncan Wu’s term is ‘fanciful, light, even inconsequential’); though I’m not certain that’s what it means in Coleridge’s “deep romantic chasm”. Byron uses the word in the first, “chivalric” sense, when he writes

Now my sere Fancy “falls into the yellow Leaf”, and Imagination droops her pinion,
And the sad Truth which hovers o’er my desk
Turns what was once Romantic to burlesque. –

… a passage which slurs over the fact that some of his models, such as Ariosto or Pulci, are “romantic / chivalric” and burlesque, both at once.

It is reading too many “romances” (of the non-burlesque kind) which weakens Don Quixote’s hold on reality.

The writers never used “Romantic” to describe themselves. Maurice Schroeder writes of the French “romantics”, “… the major romantics no more called themselves *romantiques* than the authors of the seventeenth century had called themselves *classiques*”; and the same applies across the Channel. Hazlitt uses the word wittily when he says of Cobbett, “The only time he ever grew romantic was in bringing over the relics of Mr. Thomas Paine with him from America to go a progress with them through the disaffected districts”. Here’s another good example, from the first chapter of *Sense and Sensibility*:

No sooner was his father’s funeral over, than Mrs. John Dashwood, without sending any notice of her intention to her mother-in-law, arrived with her child and their attendants. No one could dispute her right to come; the house was her husband’s from the moment of his father’s decease; but the indelicacy of her conduct was so much the greater, and to a woman in Mrs. Dashwood’s situation, with only common feelings, must have been highly unpleasing; – but in HER mind there was a sense of honor so keen, a generosity so romantic, that any offence of the kind, by whomsoever given or received, was to her a source of immoveable disgust.

35: DJ IV, 3, 5-8.
Both Hazlitt and Austen use “romantic” to mean “unreal” or “quixotic”.

Hobhouse never reads anything that Shelley published – but that brings me to my second point: who did read “Romantic poetry” at the time? Surely such a striking thing as “Romanticism” would have created its own immediate fan club? William St Clair’s *The Reading Nation in the Romantic Period* is useful here. He shows that *Lyrical Ballads* had three editions between 1798 and 1802, selling two thousand copies; but was still seen as a failure (p.161). The first run of Keats’ *Poems* of 1817 (either 750 or a thousand) had not been exhausted by 1824; *Endymion*, published in April 1818, had only sold about eight copies by October 1818; and the *Isabella* volume (containing the odes), in an edition of perhaps a thousand in 1820, was still in 1828 being offered at the original price. Shelley published *Alastor*, *The Revolt of Islam*, *The Cenci*, and *Adonais*, all at his own expense. *Prometheus Unbound*, given a print-run of 500 (“probably”) in 1820, was still available in 1824, two years after his death; of Shelley’s works, only the heavily-pirated *Queen Mab* had a wide circulation. Wordsworth’s *The Excursion*, with a print-run of 500 in 1814, still hadn’t sold out by 1834, and had in the previous decade sold just one copy a year. *The Excursion* was “perhaps the most expensive work of literature ever published in England” (p.201). “Wordsworth,” writes St Clair, “did not number many leech gatherers among his readers” (pp.201-2).

On the other hand, Scott’s first publication, *Minstrelsy of the Scottish Border* (1802), had had five editions by 1812, and had sold over six thousand copies. It alone beats the complete published works of Keats and Shelley without difficulty. And when you add *The Lay of the Last Minstrel* and *Marmion*, the opposition (Byron excepted) sink without a trace.

All the time another poem was outselling all the “Romantics”, apart from Byron and Scott – one which sold a hundred thousand copies between 1800 and 1830 (St. Clair, p.582): but who nowadays reads that obscure eighteenth-century thing, Robert Bloomfield’s *The Farmer’s Boy*? Wherever the readership of the “Romantics” is to be found, it’s not among the reading public of the “Romantic” period.

“But surely, Dr Cochran, you know that Scott’s *Minstrelsy of the Scottish Border* may, as an anthology of folk poetry, be regarded legitimately as a ‘Romantic’ text? Is not Scott, according to Professor McGann, ‘dominated by his romanticism’? One vital aspect of
‘Romanticism’ is its preoccupation with folk poetry?\textsuperscript{37} And \textit{Marmion} shows ‘Romanticism’s’ fascination with the Middle Ages!”

Already the concept is out of control. It’s beginning to be clear: “romanticism” can mean anything you want it to. Scott the historical novelist is not included in the usual catalogue of “Romantic” writers – his best-selling presence in their midst is an embarrassing coincidence,\textsuperscript{38} and his friendships with Southey, Coleridge, and Byron an interesting side-issue: but his folk-ballad collecting enables him to join the “Romantic” club, whether he would have wanted to or not.

Scott was a Tory – does that qualify him, or disqualify him, as a “Romantic”? This brings me to my third point – how variable can the politics of “Romanticism” get? In France, Scott’s conservativism would have qualified him as a “Romantic”, for French “Romanticists”, led by Chateaubriand, were all conservatives, if not monarchists. In England, Classicism in poetry was conservative, but almost dead (it’s alive, just, in Crabbe, Samuel Rogers, and Byron’s early satires). In France, Classicism was a liberal affiliation.\textsuperscript{39}

In Britain, the alignments are often said to be the opposite – the more extreme a writer’s “romanticism”, the more extreme his radicalism. Duncan Wu even asserts that “Byron always shared the radical aspirations

\footnotetext[37]{See Seamus Perry: “Percy’s \textit{Reliques} were ‘the germ of the great romantic revolution in literature’ says the historian [T.B.] Shaw” (op.cit., p.7). Jerome McGann (\textit{The Romantic Ideology}, pp.79-80), shows \textit{Thomas the Rhymer}, from Scott’s anthology, to have inspired \textit{La Belle Dame Sans Merci}.}

\footnotetext[38]{See Seamus Perry: “When [Henry] Beers defends his definition, it is by asking rhetorically, ‘what Englishman will be satisfied with a definition of \textit{romantic} which excludes Scott?’: the answer to which, in the university departments anyway, must now be ‘almost everyone.’” (op.cit., p.6).}

\footnotetext[39]{Lucien Rubembré, the hero of Balzac’s \textit{Illusions Perdues}, is told: «Mon cher, vous arrivez au milieu d’une bataille acharnée, il faut vous décider promptement. La littérature est partagée d’abord en plusieurs zones; mais les sommités sont divisées en deux camps. Les écrivains royalistes sont romantiques, les libéraux sont classiques. La divergence des opinions littéraires se joint à la divergence des opinions politiques, et il s’en suit une guerre à toutes armes, encre à torrent, bons mots à fer émoulu, calomnies pointues, sobriquets à outrance, entre les gloires naissantes et les gloires déchues. Par une singuliére bizarrerie, les royalistes romantiques demandent la liberté littéraire et la révocation des lois qui donnent des formes convenues à notre littérature, tandis que les libéraux veulent maintenir les unités, l’allure de l’alexandrin et les formes classiques. Les opinions littéraires sont donc en désaccord, dans chaque camp, avec les opinions politiques. Si vous êtes éclectique, vous n’aurez personne pour vous.»}
expressed by Wordsworth and Coleridge in their youth”\textsuperscript{40}, a statement which would have surprised Byron. Shelley was (when he achieved coherence) extremely radical, as we shall see. Much ink has been spilled by Nicholas Roe to prove that Keats was radical – see Roe’s analysis of \textit{To Autumn} as a reaction to the Peterloo massacre (further discussed below)\textsuperscript{41}.

But Southey? Coleridge? And Wordsworth? Here’s one of my favourite Wordsworth prose quotations (it’s from an 1816 letter to John Scott, discussing the Whigs):

Suppose the opposition as a body, or take them in classes, the Grenvilles, the Wellesleys, the Foxites, the Burdettites, and let your imagination carry them in procession through Westminster Hall, and thence let them pass into the adjoining Abbey, and give them credit for feeling the utmost and best that they are capable of feeling in connection with these venerable and sacred places, and say frankly whether you would be at all satisfied with the result. Imagine them to be looking from a green hill over a rich landscape diversified with Spires and Church Towers and hamlets, and all the happy images of English landscape, would their sensations come much nearer to what one would desire; in a word have [they a] becoming reverence of the English character, and do they value as they ought, and even as their opponents do, the constitution of the country, in \textit{Church} and State. In fact, is there a man of the old opposition, I mean a man that puts himself forward, who is capable of looking at the subject of Religion with the eyes which an English politician ought to possess? But I must stop\textsuperscript{42}.

And yet this gross sentimentalist is still one of the leading “Romantics”. Compare this, another, equally legitimate “Romantic” voice:

\begin{verbatim}
I met Murder on the way –
He had a mask like Castlereagh –
Very smooth he looked, yet grim;
Seven blood-hounds followed him:

All were fat; and well they might
Be in admirable plight,
For one by one, and two by two,
He tossed them human hearts to chew
Which from his wide cloak he drew.
\end{verbatim}

\textsuperscript{40} Wu, \textit{Anthology}, p.xxxiv.
Which voice best represents “Romanticism”? The question is foolish. We understand each better if we abandon the word.

“But surely, Dr Cochran, it’s not fair to compare a private letter with a public poem? And people living in a period can rarely see it clearly?”

You’d think so; but The Mask of Anarchy was no more public in Shelley’s lifetime than Wordsworth’s letter to John Scott – it wasn’t published until 1832. The further you draw away from “Romanticism”, and the more documents about it, private and public, that become available, the less coherent and unified it becomes, not the more coherent and unified. And as for seeing your period clearly, consider: in two hundred years time our period will be studied in terms of its drama (if there are any students of drama remaining), as the period of Stoppard and Pinter: whereas we, who live in it, know it’s really the period of Lloyd Webber, and of Boublil and Schönberg. Mountaineers may, as they struggle forwards and up, be fascinated at the idea of what the mountain looks like from the air – but they do know they’re on a mountain. The “Romantics” had no idea they were members of a movement: which isn’t surprising, because they weren’t.

My fourth point is allied to the above question about politics: how different from one another do two writers have to be as poets before it ceases to be possible for them to be considered as belonging to the same movement?

Much contemporary discussion would sidestep such a query, for it is not about the poetry, but about the politics and “ideology” to be derived from the poetry. Whether you can derive ideology from poetry is an interesting point: I believe you can, but only by changing the poetry into prose paraphrase – and then selecting. What kind of ideology may be derived from indifferent poetry doesn’t matter much in a culture such as ours, where all writing, whether it be Madoc in Wales or the Songs of

43: Shelley, The Mask of Anarchy, sts.2-5.
Experience, is decreed to be of equal interest: where what Mrs Moore realizes only in the Marabar Caves has passed into the critical mainstream: “everything exists, nothing has value”. Much modern “critical discussion” of poetry inhabits a different verbal dimension from the poetry itself, and ignores the fact that it’s poetry, as if that’s an inconvenience. As examples, look at two pieces of writing on Keats’ Odes: Nicholas Roe on To Autumn, and Paul Hamilton on Ode to a Grecian Urn. Roe quotes the first four lines of To Autumn, and then writes three pages elaborating a possible political sub-text behind one word in them: “Conspiring”. Hamilton argues that Grecian Urn “reveals that the aesthetic betrays (semiotically and polemically) the political and vice versa”, via an analysis of, again, one word – “overwrought”. Each critic ignores ninety-nine percent of his text.

Whether historicist, new historicist, cultural materialist, feminist, post-feminist, eco-critical, post-colonialist (that most two-faced of approaches – as if colonialism was over), for much twenty-first critical discussion, the fact of poetry is an embarrassment and an irrelevance. Literary criticism has become a handmaid of historical study – and an unwelcome, even an unacknowledged handmaid, at that. How many historians of early nineteenth-century English imperialism and evangelism in India would base their discussion on The Curse of Kehama?

The fact that the documents are poetry is irrelevant to all these approaches. As Jerome McGann writes,

… thematic criticism sidesteps the concrete, human particulars of the originary works, either to reproduce them within currently acceptable ideological terms, or to translate them into currently unacceptable forms of thought. The latter maneuver – so frequent today – generally operates by reducing poetic works to a network of related themes and ideas – a condition of being which no artistic product can tolerate without loss of its soul.

46: McGann’s whole passage runs, “The artistic reproduction of ideology in literary works has this general effect: it historicizes the ideological materials, gives a local habitation and a name to various kinds of abstractions. When ideology thus acquires a human face, it draws the reader’s consciousness to sympathy with the attitudes and forms of thought being advanced. A thematizing criticism may step in at this point either to reproduce, or to extend by transformation, the initially preferred forms of thought. Both Coleridge and Hegel take this approach. Of course, another line of thematic criticism remains possible – one which aims to deconstruct the originary works into pure ideology. In each of these cases,
We have here a “floating free” or “hovering off” approach to criticism. Actually it’s not criticism at all, since most of the text has to be ignored for the argument to sustain itself. This strange way of abstracting from and diminishing the relevance of what the writer under discussion wrote is motivated by a philistinism, an attitude which implies that mere poetry is too trivial to engage a mature person’s concerns: history and metaphysics are more important. Never admit that you enjoy reading poetry – indeed, ask the average academic to try and do so, and it’s clear that they don’t enjoy reading it. This leads to the texts not being read, and discussion being deflected into empty and meaningless concepts like “Romanticism”.

**Byron and “Romanticism”**

If a romantic poet is one who believes, and writes in accordance with the belief, that Imagination is a power of vision which enables man to perceive the sacred truth behind sensory phenomena and therefore the noblest of all the mental faculties, then Byron was, by profession and in practice, one of the least romantic poets who ever lived.\(^{47}\)

Many theoreticians of “Romanticism” peripheralize Byron as much as possible; and there is some reason to do so, for we have to admit that the picture looks neater devoid of him. See Seamus Perry:

‘But now, what about Byron? He’s very well known to be a great Romantic, known across Europe for it; and he doesn’t fit your definition at all.’\(^{48}\)

See also McGann:

however, thematic criticism sidesteps the concrete, human particulars of the originary works, either to reproduce them within currently acceptable ideological terms, or to translate them into currently unacceptable forms of thought. The latter maneuver – so frequent today – generally operates by reducing poetic works to a network of related themes and ideas – a condition of being which no artistic product can tolerate without loss of its soul” – *The Romantic Ideology*, p.11; see also p.13: “Like Trelawney [sic] at the cremation of Shelley, we shall reach for the unconsumed heart of the poem only if we are prepared to suffer a genuine change through its possession. Poetry is not to be had in the easy form of our ideologies”.


\(^{48}\): Perry, op. cit., p.4.
My interest in Byron was triggered years ago largely because he seemed so different from the other Romantics.49

Clubbe and Lovell refer to

… the difficulty that innumerable literary critics have experienced in their efforts to fit Byron into a general theory of Romanticism”.50

Drummond Bone sums it up with characteristic style:

The Romantic tradition which unites Shelley and Wordsworth, but which excludes Byron, a tradition which was strengthened in the deconstructionist and new historicist phases of critical discourse which parallel (or trail in the wake of) postmodernist fiction, is a tradition, I shall nevertheless venture, which far from eschewing transcendence, redeems it (resurrects it would be appropriate) in a new guise. Bloom, de Man, Hillis Miller, and Hartman are all in their different ways more interested in Shelley and Wordsworth than in Byron. It is indeed as if Byron, dealing indeed with existence as a plane, does not attract those who wish to explain that existence is indeed isomorphically planar.51

His anti-postmodernist distaste for isomorphic planes notwithstanding, Byron, in the myth, legend, or cliche, is to “Romanticism” what John Wayne is to Monument Valley: in the myth, legend, or cliché you can’t have one without the other, and it’s the equivalent of Hollywood-style myths, legends, or clichés is what we’re dealing with. Byron had heard of the “classical / romantic” dichotomy, and was sceptical about it:

P.S. – I perceive that in Germany as well as in Italy there is a great struggle about what they call “Classical and Romantic”, terms which were not subjects of classification in England – at least when I left it four or five years ago. Some of the English scribblers (it is true), abused Pope and Swift, but the reason was that they themselves did not know how to write in either prose or verse – but nobody thought them worth making a sect of. Perhaps there may be something of the sort sprung up lately – but I have not heard much about it, and it would be such bad taste that I should be very sorry to believe it.52

49: The Romantic Ideology, p.137.
50: Clubbe and Lovell, op. cit., p.93.
52: Byron, P.S. to the rejected preface to Marino Faliero.
Schlegel and Madame de Staël have endeavoured also to reduce poetry to two systems, classical and romantic. The effect is only beginning.\footnote{Appendix 3 to the Letter to John Murray Esq.}

In 2009, the effect is still well under way. In fact Byron was aware of some kind of a new movement: but he disapproved of it, even though, or because, he was part of it – and he didn’t use the word “Romantic” to describe it. He didn’t associate it with the continental ideas to which he’s referring in the two previous quotations:

With regard to poetry in general I am convinced the more I think of it – that he and all of us – Scott – Southey – Wordsworth – Moore – Campbell – I – are all in the wrong – one as much as another – that we are upon a wrong revolutionary poetical system – or systems – not worth a damn in itself – & from which none but Rogers and Crabbe are free – and that the present & next generations will finally be of this opinion. – I am the more confirmed in this – by having lately gone over some of our Classics – particularly Pope – whom I tried in this way – I took Moore’s poems & my own & some others – & went over them side by side with Pope’s – and I was really astonished (I ought not to have been so) and mortified – at the ineffable distance in point of sense – harmony – effect – and even Imagination Passion – & Invention – between the little Queen Anne’s Man – & us of the lower Empire – depend upon it [it] is all Horace then, and Claudian now among us – and if I had to begin again – I would model myself accordingly – Crabbe’s the man – but he has got a coarse and impracticable subject & Rogers the Grandfather of living Poetry – is retired upon half-pay, (I don’t mean as a Banker) \footnote{BLJ V 265; letter to Murray, September 5th 1817.}

As Jeffery Vail notes, this is from the same letter in which Byron records his reaction to Moore’s Lalla Rookh.

Had Byron and Wordsworth been told that later generations would write of them as belonging to the same literary movement, they would have stared in disbelief. For they loathed each other. Immediately after the quotation in the letter I just read, Wordsworth writes,

Let me only say one word upon Lord B[yon]. The man is insane; and will probably end his career in a mad-house. I never thought him anything else since his first appearance in public. The verses on his private affairs excite in me less indignation than pity. The latter copy is the Billingsgate of Bedlam. – Your Correspondent A. S. has written, begging his pardon, a

\footnote{Jeffery W. Vail, The Literary Relationship of Lord Byron and Thomas Moore, Johns Hopkins 2001, pp.135-6.}
very foolish Letter upon the Verses that appeared in the Chronicle – I have not seen them, but I have no doubt that what he praises so highly is contemptible as a work of Art, like the Ode to the Emperor Napoleon. – You yourself, appear to me to labour under some delusion as to the merits of Lord Byron’s Poetry, and treat those wretched verses, The farewell, with far too much respect. They are disgusting in sentiment, and in execution contemptible. “Though my many faults defaced me” etc. Can worse doggrel be written than such a stanza? One verse is commendable, “All my madness none can know”, “Sine dementia nullus Phœbus”; but what a difference between the amabilis insania of inspiration, and the fiend-like exasperation of these wretched productions … and so on.

For intensity of disgust, compare what Byron says about Keats:

Mr. Keats whose poetry you enquire after – appears to me what I have already said; – such writing is a sort of mental masturbation – he is always f–gg–g his Imagination. – I don’t mean that he is indecent but viciously soliciting his ideas into a state which is neither poetry nor any thing else but a Bedlam vision produced by raw pork and opium …

… here are Johnny Keats’s p–ss a bed poetry – and three novels by G–d knows whom … No more Keats I entreat – flay him alive – if some of you don’t I must skin him myself[;] there is no bearing the drivelling idiotism of the Mankin.

There is not so much corresponding abuse of Wordsworth in Byron’s letters (though he does write at one time of “Turdsworth the grand metaquizzical poet”), unless you believe my theory, which is that every time Byron refers to the talentless “Southey”, he implies the talented “Wordsworth”. However, there are as many overt sneers at Wordsworth in Don Juan as there are at Southey. Here is a section from The Excursion to which Byron alludes in Don Juan (he is The Wanderer):

And thus before his eighteenth year was told,
Accumulated feelings pressed his heart
With still increasing weight; he was o’erpowered
By Nature; by the turbulence subdued
Of his own mind; by mystery and hope,
And the first virgin passion of a soul
Communing with the glorious universe.

56: BLJ VII 225.
57: BLJ VII 200.
58: BLJ VIII 66; see also VIII 68.