YOUNG ROMANTICS

THE TANGLED LIVES OF ENGLISH POETRY'S GREATEST GENERATION

Daisy Hay
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DAISY HAY
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Preface

The Protestant cemetery in Rome stands at a distance from the grand sites of the rest of the city, just outside its old fortifications. To reach it on foot you have to trek along a road up past the Baths of Caracalla, through dusty and distinctly unlovely suburbs. I discovered this on the penultimate day of my honeymoon, as I marched my very new husband across Rome in the afternoon heat. We had been married for two weeks, but he already had good reason to think himself long-suffering, since although I had proposed the expedition to the cemetery, I had only a hazy idea about its location and had neglected to consult the scale on the map in our guidebook. While he gallantly agreed to my proposal, my husband was unconvinced about spending the little time we had left in Rome searching for the graves of long dead poets. The poets in question, however, were something of an obsession for me. They were the subjects of the PhD I had almost completed, and the book I was neglecting my PhD to research and write. They had become part of our lives, and their stories part of our story. Visiting their graves therefore seemed – at least to me – a strangely appropriate way to mark the beginning of our marriage.

I had read descriptions of the cemetery many times, and thought I knew what to expect. I knew that it wasn’t really a Protestant cemetery at all, but historically the only spot in the city in which non-Catholics could be interred and that as a result Percy Shelley and John Keats, whose graves we were going to see, were buried alongside some
 illustrious Orthodox Christians, Jews and atheists. I knew that Keats lay in the old burying ground and Shelley, who died two years later, in its western extension. But this did not prepare me for the contrast between the traffic-blocked surrounding streets and the sudden, green calm of the cemetery. I did not expect to feel so moved by this tranquil world of overgrown paths, haphazardly arranged graves and indolent stray cats, who lay sunning themselves at the base of the Pyramid of Cestius.

There was a further surprise in store. I had read that Shelley was buried next to his friend Edward John Trelawny, an adventurer who arrived in Italy during the last year of the poet’s life. I knew that Keats too had a graveside companion, Joseph Severn, who accompanied him to Rome and nursed him through his final illness. But I did not anticipate the emotional impact of seeing Shelley and Keats – both, in their different ways, icons of solitary genius – buried next to their friends, alongside men who were content to stand in their shadows. Even my sceptical husband found himself moved by the shared burial sites. When we returned to England two days later, memories of our visit spurred me onwards to finish my PhD and to complete the biography that had been illicitly germinating alongside my academic work for years.

This is not a biography of a particular person, nor does it tell the story of a tightly coherent group of individuals. Instead, it explores the interlinked lives of a group of writers, all of whom were characterised by their youth, by their idealism, and by a particularly passionate engagement with politics, art, and the romance of intellectual adventure. The stories of these writers have been told many times before, but in a way that downplays the significance of relationships in the shaping of individual lives and a Romantic conception of creativity. This is largely because the work of the most famous of these writers – Shelley, Keats and Byron – frequently depicts both poet and poetic hero as isolated figures. In so doing, it exemplifies many of the qualities which have come to define the British Romantic movement. In different ways, the poetry of all three asserts the supremacy of feelings and the imagination, attaches much significance to an intuition and presents artistic endeavour as self-help. This book looks beyond the image of the poet’s life and presents a striking break with the Romantics of Wordsworth marked a striking break with the eighteenth century. This break had the effect of the Romantic poets remaining largely unread for decades. Coleridge were famous in the poets were startled by the distinct new school of poetic thought they inspiring and troubling for the public. Shelley, Keats and Byron share the influence of their forebears, but in a new outlook and opinion. This was a generational gap between the two: started writing poetry in the 1790s was first published in 1798, whereas Byron was published in 1815.

This was a landscape of reaction of Napoleon’s fall became apparent in Austria, Russia and Prussia – much how to divide up Europe. Across
much significance to an intuitive, visionary conception of nature, and presents artistic endeavour as an inherently solitary activity. This book looks beyond the image of the isolated poet in order to restore relationships to the centre of the Romantic story.

In common with other young writers whose lives were linked with theirs, Shelley, Keats and Byron were indebted to an earlier trio of Romantic poets, Wordsworth, Coleridge and Blake, whose work marked a striking break with the rational, Augustan poetry of the early eighteenth century. This break had a profound effect on literary culture in the decades following the French Revolution. Unlike Blake, whose work remained largely unread for decades after his death, Wordsworth and Coleridge were famous in their own time. Contemporaries of both poets were startled by the distinctiveness of their work, and by the new school of poetic thought they represented. Their example was both inspiring and troubling for the poets who followed them. The poetry of Shelley, Keats and Byron shared many of the concerns and ideas of their Romantic forebears, but it also demonstrated striking differences in outlook and opinion. This was in part the result of a significant generational gap between the two groups. Wordsworth and Coleridge started writing poetry in the 1790s, and their manifesto, Lyrical Ballads, was first published in 1798, when Byron, Shelley and Keats were aged ten, six and three respectively. Although Wordsworth and Coleridge would outlive the three younger poets and keep writing poetry and prose right through the period in which this book is set, their work was shaped by a different set of preoccupations and historical conditions to those that influenced their younger contemporaries. The first generation of Romantic poets were students of the French Revolution, an event which shaped all the poetry they subsequently wrote. Shelley, Keats and Byron, in contrast, produced their mature work in an intellectual landscape shaped by Napoleon’s defeat at the Battle of Waterloo in 1815.

This was a landscape of reaction and repression. As the inevitability of Napoleon’s fall became apparent, the victorious powers – Britain, Austria, Russia and Prussia – met in Congress at Vienna to decide how to divide up Europe. Across the continent, imperial monarchies
regained control of peoples and territory. Austria took back its Italian
city states, Russia was given Poland, and the Bourbons were restored
to the French throne. For liberals and reformers throughout Europe
this represented the final failure of the French Revolution: a revolution
that had promised so much — representative government, the end of
aristocratic rule — and delivered so little.

In Britain the end of a two-decade long war resulted in unprecedented
problems of mass unemployment, as demobilised soldiers flooded the
labour market. This coincided with the introduction of the Corn Laws,
protectionist measures that kept the price of bread artificially high and
provoked outrage among the growing ranks of urban poor. The result
was a resurgence of a kind of popular political agitation not seen in
Britain since the 1790s. Crowds gathered in huge outdoor meetings
to demand the reform of Parliament and universal manhood suffrage,
and the radical press grew in both size and power. Fear was fuelled
by the activities of a small group of underground agitators who were
committed to achieving revolution by violent means. One group of
plotters attempted to take control of the Tower of London and the
Bank of England; another planned to assassinate the entire cabinet in
one fell stroke. The prospect of a revolution in Britain seemed very real.

Against this backdrop, poetry took on a new significance, as young,
idealistic poets looked for ways to express their views about the plight of
the people. Literary journals were quick to condemn works which ran
counter to their opinions, or to praise poets whose work supported their
viewpoint. Thus, in the hands of the younger generation of Romantic
writers and their readers, poetry was transformed into a political
weapon. Like William Godwin and Mary Wollstonecraft before them,
this new generation turned to their art in order to proclaim both their
independence and the depth of their political resistance.

Lord Liverpool's Tory Government responded to public unrest and
eloquent literary opposition with a series of repressive bills which
placed limits on free speech and movement and which were designed
to stamp out radical publications. Habeas Corpus was periodically
suspended and prosecutions for libel increased dramatically between
1817 and 1822. The Whigs were unable to mount successful challenges
to this barrage of legislation, observers, prepared neither to al
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observers, prepared neither to ally themselves with those calling for
reform, nor with an unpopular administration. Faced with such a weak
parliamentary opposition, a number of liberal journalists stepped into
the political vacuum to hold the government to account in the pages
of the popular press.

Chief among these was the editor of The Examiner, Leigh Hunt,
who stands at the centre of the circle of talented men and women this
book explores. Over the course of the 1810s, Hunt’s sphere of influence
expanded, as first Byron and then Keats and Shelley gravitated towards
him and, in the process, brought their own friends and relations into
his orbit. It was Keats who articulated most eloquently the complexity
of the group in which he found himself when he compared its chains
of allegiance to a ‘web . . . of mingled yarn’, an analogy borrowed from
All’s Well That Ends Well. Shakespeare uses the metaphor to explore a
series of delicate moral balances – ‘The web of our life is of mingled
yarn, good and ill together’ – but, in a different context, the image
aptly describes the fragile yet powerful network which drew Shelley,
Keats and Byron towards each other.

Writing about Shelley, Keats and Byron as figures in a web of social
and intellectual allegiance is, at one level, counter-intuitive. Although,
in the words of the literary critic Jeffrey Cox, ‘we no longer necessarily
view the romantic poet as the solitary singer declaiming alone on
the mountain-top or sitting in isolation, pondering a bird’s song’, the
myth of the isolated artist has had profound cultural significance over
the past two centuries. In the Preface to Lyrical Ballads Wordsworth
described poetry as ‘the spontaneous overflow of powerful feelings’ which ‘takes its origin from emotion recollected in tranquillity’ and, in
a single sentence, he pointed to a significant shift in the conception of
the source of poetic inspiration. Shelley later extended and complicated
Wordsworth’s argument in his ‘A Defence of Poetry’, when he suggested
that ‘the mind in creation is as a fading coal which some invisible
influence, like an inconstant wind, awakens to transitory brightness:
this power arises from within, like the colour of a flower which fades and changes as it is developed. No more would the poet be inspired purely by God or his muse (as in Milton, invoking the aid of the Heavenly Muse to aid his 'adventurous song'). Instead inspiration would stem from the soul of the individual.

Such statements about the source of inspiration transformed the way we think about creativity and genius. Creativity was repositioned as something internal and personal, and poetry – despite its political significance – as the product of an individual’s communion with his own mind. The artist became an isolated figure, striving alone to create works of genius. Over the course of the nineteenth century, the lives of Shelley, Keats and Byron were recorded in a series of biographies which took their inspiration from this idea. These were largely respectable, semi-hagiographic accounts of noble lives, lived out without much recourse to friends and family. While the history of biography is far from straightforward, and this model of biographical writing was pioneered earlier, it nevertheless owed much to a Victorian emphasis on individualism that derived in part from the Romantic period. This emphasis, which led to the celebration of an idealised image of the individual as hero of his own life in single-subject, cradle-to-grave biographies, had a lasting effect on the genre.

Single-subject biographies can make for gripping, stimulating reading, and – especially in the hands of the great biographers who reinvigorated the genre in the final decades of the twentieth century – they present vividly contextualised portraits rich in detail, depth and colour. However, as the literary critic John Worthen has noted, while 'we write biographies of individuals as islands . . . we live as part of the main'. Living as part of the main was particularly important for Shelley, Keats and Byron, who, as they became friends with Hunt, became part of a group in which friendship was politically and philosophically significant. It is therefore ironic that their work should have helped to shape a conception of creative genius which downplays the interconnectedness of human existence.

This book is about a web of allegiances shift, and nothing real Romantics were, in many respects by their oppositional politics, by their youth. (At the time this the group’s central figures, was T. Godwin, the youngest, was fifteen. But they talked to each other, in divisions of class and gender. They were joined by shared ideals, b They were friends, but they wer sisters. Towards each other they were sympathetic, competitive, kind a communal existence is, in many anything they ever wrote. It also: the most powerful writing in the
This book is about a web of lives, within which friendships fade, allegiances shift, and nothing remains static for very long. The young Romantics were, in many respects, divided, but they were also united by their oppositional politics, by the depth of their convictions, and by their youth. (At the time this story begins Leigh Hunt, the oldest of the group’s central figures, was twenty-eight, and Mary Wollstonecraft Godwin, the youngest, was fifteen.) They did not speak with one voice. But they talked to each other, in a conversation which transcended divisions of class and gender. They loved and hated each other. They were joined by shared ideals, but also by romance, sex and blood. They were friends, but they were also husbands, wives, brothers and sisters. Towards each other they were variously self-sacrificing, jealous, sympathetic, competitive, kind and cruel. The story of their tangled communal existence is, in many ways, as dramatic and as surprising as anything they ever wrote. It also sheds light on the creation of some of the most powerful writing in the English language.
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ares, p.vi.
ares, p.23.
ares, pp.64–5.
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38. AWS Letters, II, 305.
339, I, xii.
339, III, 163.
ary Shelley and Percy Shelley’s Audiences’,
1875. The Letters of Edward John Trelawny,

4: The Incarnate Romance, p.197. St Clair isquote Shelley (following Mary Shelley’s dered rewriting his friend’s poetry so that and read as follows: ‘These are two friends let their memory be/ Now that they have bones be parted/ For their two hearts in life r writes, ‘if many people would find this an f the sentiment accords better with the facts’

Select Bibliography

A comprehensive bibliography of biographical and critical studies of the writers discussed in this book would fill a book of its own, and indeed does so every year, in the shape of the annual Keats-Shelley Journal Bibliography, published by the Keats-Shelley Association of America. The aims of the bibliography provided here are more modest. It provides full details of primary and secondary material cited in the Notes, as well as details of a small number of additional works which have informed my thinking significantly. It also encompasses a highly selective list of works by individual members of the Shelley/Hunt circle. Here, I have focused on authoritative editions, works written in the period covered by this book, or on works which are directly related to that period.

1) Selected works of the Shelley/Hunt circle

Cowden Clarke, Charles, An Address to that Quarterly Reviewer who touched upon Mr Leigh Hunt’s Story of Rimini (London: R. Jennings, 1816).
Cowden Clarke, Charles and Mary, Recollections of Writers (Sussex: Centaur Press, Ltd, 1969; first published 1878).
5) Selected secondary reading


Rajtan, Tilottama, 'Introduction', *Vah* pp.7–8.


Sunstein, Emily, *Mary Shelley* (Cambridge: Johns Hopkins University Press, 198


Motion, Andrew, Keats (London: Faber and Faber, 1997).


Robinson, Charles, Shelley and Byron: The Snake and Eagle Wreathed in Fight (Baltimore, Maryland: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1976).


Anyone currently working on the book owes a substantial debt of gratitude to the critics who have revolutionised the study of Romantic sociability, the Romantics, Rebels and Reactionaries *et al.* I am also indebted to those who have drawn from biographies of Sara Cobb, of Mary Shelley by Emily Moir, and of Leigh Hunt by Nicholas Roe. I have also benefited from studies of Romantic letters, such as Betty T. Bennett’s *Marion Kingston Stocking’s ed. Letters and diaries*, and the *Pforzheimer* volumes, edited by Kenneth Neil Fischer and others. I am most grateful to those who have made substantial use of the findings in *Leigh Hunt’s Autobiography* and the complete edition of Hunt’s correspondence.
Acknowledgements

Anyone currently working on the Romantic writers explored in this book owes a substantial debt of gratitude to the biographers and literary critics who have revolutionised the study of Romantic lives and letters over the past few decades. I would like to acknowledge the inspiration I have drawn from biographies of Shelley by Richard Holmes and James Bieri; of Mary Shelley by Emily Sunstein and Miranda Seymour; and of Leigh Hunt by Nicholas Roe. I have been influenced by several key studies of Romantic sociability, chief among them Marilyn Butler’s Romans, Rebels and Reactionaries, Jack Stillinger’s Multiple Authorship and the Myth of the Solitary Genius, Charles Robinson’s Shelley and Byron: The Snake and Eagle Wreathed in Fight, and Jeffrey Cox’s Poetry and Politics in the Cockney School.

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All mistakes are, of course, my own.

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