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Romantic poetry and antiquity

In “The Four Ages of Poetry” (1820), Thomas Love Peacock archly complained that contemporary poetry was absurdly derivative of ancient models of inspiration and composition: “While the historian and the philosopher are advancing in, and accelerating, the progress of knowledge, the poet is wallowing in the rubbish of departed ignorance, and raking up the ashes of dead savages to find gewgaws [toys] and rattles for the grown babies of the age.”¹ He castigates Scott, Byron, Southey, Wordsworth, Coleridge, Moore, and Campbell for their cannibalistic and anachronistic efforts, which he sees as no more than patching together “disjointed relics of tradition and fragments of second-hand observation” to produce “a modern-antique compound of frippery and barbarism.”² It was indeed confidently believed that ancient societies, whether British, Greek, or Roman, shared virtues of originality and genius, and that modern poets should mine these seams. Southey’s preparation before writing his epic *Madoc* was to “study three works . . . the Bible, Homer, and Ossian,” and Hazlitt argued that the four prototypes of poetry were, similarly, the Bible, Homer, Ossian, and Dante.³

There is of course nothing new in Peacock’s attack: *The Dunciad Variorum* (1729) and the *Memoirs of Martinus Scriblerus* (1741) set the tone in the eighteenth century for satirizing the enervated taste of antiquarians and connoisseurs, and this mockery was carried through into the engravings of Hogarth and Gillray. But there *is* something new in Peacock’s criticism of the ubiquity of the antique and the arcane. Rather than disappearing before the advance of science and the “march of mind,” ancient esoteric mysteries seemed to have taken up permanent residence in the arts:

A poet in our times . . . lives in the days that are past. His ideas, thoughts, feelings, associations, are all with barbarous manners, obsolete customs, and exploded superstitions. The march of his intellect is like that of a crab, backward. The brighter the light diffused around him by the progress of reason, the thicker is the darkness of antiquated barbarism, in which he buries himself like a mole, to throw up the barren hillocks of his Cimmerian labours.⁴

Had poetry lost its way, becoming opaque or simply irrelevant to the “common readers of poetry,” separated from humanity and the humanities? The clue is in Peacock’s contrast of barbarity with the “civilized community.” His template for this thinking is in the tension between the classical and the Gothic, the civilized and the savage, and the larger question of British identity (here disparagingly referred to as “Cimmerian” – an ancient barbarian race thought to be a proto-Celtic or proto-Germanic tribe). Throughout the discussions and deployments of antiquity during the period there is a rumbling anxiety over national identity: what does it mean to be British?

The contrast between the classical taste and the Romantic or Gothic taste had occupied critics for most of the eighteenth century – and continues to exercise opinions. The pioneering literary antiquarian Thomas Warton, for instance, had adapted his neoclassical training for the analysis and criticism of indigenous British literature, first outlined in *Observations on the “Fairy Queen” of Spenser* (1754) before being profoundly developed into an identifiable canon and recognizable national literary culture in his monumental *History of English Poetry* (published from 1774). Very early in his career Warton drafted possibly the first “Essay on Romantic Poetry” (1745), which asserts that Romantic taste is “entirely different” from the classical because it imitates “the actions of spir[it]s, in describing imaginary Scenes, & making persons of abstracted things,” although it had “more Judgement and less extravagance” than the writings of antiquity, by which Warton meant principally medieval romances.⁵

Eighty years later, Hazlitt was paraphrasing the German writer A. W. Schlegel on the same topic, identifying the classical with universal human associations, and the Gothic with the individual imagination: “A Grecian temple, for instance, is a classical object: it is beautiful in itself, and excites immediate admiration. But the ruins of a Gothic castle have no beauty or symmetry to attract the eye; and yet they excite a more powerful and Romantic interest from the ideas with which they are habitually associated.”⁶ And yet the two styles are often less opposites in the aesthetics of the period than different strands of antiquity twisted together. Percy Shelley’s famous response to Peacock (his *A Defence of Poetry*, written in 1821) indicates as much. In a sense, Shelley confirms Peacock’s criticisms by claiming that culture and hence artistic conception were accumulative and organic. Shelley called for an acknowledgment of and responsiveness to the literature of earlier cultures, arguing that the poetry of chivalric society came into being only after properly incorporating “the poetry and wisdom of antiquity,” which he summed up as Platonism, Christianity, and Celtic mythology – in so doing combining ancient Greece with ancient Britain. “The result,” he concluded, “was a sum of the action and reaction of all the causes included in it.”⁷

In the first decades of the nineteenth century there seemed to be a great deal of history leading up to the present and following advances in a whole range of new fields – from archaeology to comparative religion, from pottery to vulcanology (the study of volcanoes). More history was being discovered all the time. Writers, artists, historians, and critics became sensitized to the inescapable presence of the past in everyday life – whether in the medieval rights-of-way and boundaries of London, or in the enigmatic standing stones and elusive oral folk traditions of the countryside. Moreover, history was happening every day, persistently felt and lived through in explosive international events such as the French Revolution and the ensuing upheaval of the Napoleonic Wars.

Antiquity in the general sense of “ancientness” therefore became integral to many features of intellectual and cultural life in the period – in politics, poetry, interior design, and even the erotic (the principal definitions of “antiquity” in Johnson’s *Dictionary* [1755–6] are “1. Old times; time past long ago. 2. The people of old times; the ancients. 3. The works of remains of old times”). Antiquity therefore covers classical Greece and Rome (and Egypt), ancient Britain, and the medieval or Gothic. Considering the poetry of antiquity in this way presents a challenge to the proposition that Romantic poets rebelled against the neoclassical straitjacket of eighteenth-century Augustanism in a bid for the imaginative freedom of the Gothic – as if taste evolved “from a reptilian classicism, all cold and dry reason, to a mammalian Romanticism, all warm and wet feeling.”⁸ Critics today are in danger of replicating the split made at the time by commentators such as Hazlitt. Rather, classical taste and Gothic taste were less in competition to become the spirit of the age as complementary movements, both being literally rooted in the past, and in the idea and uses of the past. If Scott’s comments in his *Minstrelsy of the Scottish Border* (1803) suggest an opposition between the Greeks and Romans on the one hand, and the Goths and Celts on the other, and in the next year Joseph Cottle remarked that “whoever in these times founds a machinery on the mythology of the Greeks, will do so at his peril,” Byron had no qualms about combining, for example, Scotland with Homeric Greece in lines such as “And Loch-na-gar with Ida looked o’er Troy” (“The Island,” Canto II, l. 291).⁹ Classical literature was certainly valued differently at the end of the eighteenth century than at the beginning, but still formed part of the story of Britain and provided valuable commentaries on the activities of the so-called Goths and Celts.

“Gothic” has come to cover everything from the florid novels of Ann Radcliffe to the architectural visions of Augustus Welby Pugin, and it is still rapidly mutating today – as is clear from its ongoing popularity as an “alternative” fashion. Mid-eighteenth-century meanings of the term are, however,

fundamental for understanding attitudes toward ancient Britain in the period and for the Romantic reception of ancient societies more generally, and the most appropriate place to begin an account of the Gothic aesthetic is of course in a graveyard. Thomas Gray's "Elegy Written in a Country Church-Yard" (1750) is particularly apt. Gray wrote much in the neoclassical style, and shares many of the same concerns as his contemporary, Pope, such as the death of meaning in the new age of capitalism and mass-print culture, and "universal darkness" covering all. But Gray does not share Pope's *Schadenfreude* at the descent of society into Dulness; rather, he fears this annihilation, and his fear becomes intensified through the lens of medieval history until he is facing utter extinction. Here is the genesis of the figure of the Romantic poet: writers gradually left their place within the witty and urbane circles of Augustan social commentary and became outsiders, haunted by an obsessive historical imagination.¹⁰

In the "Elegy," the poet's anxiety is expressed by the poem moving from the neverland of counterfactual or speculative English history (those "mute, inglorious Miltons" – what never was and what will never be) to an oral rhapsody, and finally to the written word carved on a stone in the country churchyard: "graved on the stone beneath yon aged thorn" (l. 116). The poem is itself an epitaph, and establishes a convention of mortal epigraphy in later Romantic poems, where, as we shall see, fragments of text are discovered and deciphered, either written on gravestones or other pieces of memorial furniture, or actually inscribed into the land in more suggestive ways. It is also a poem that struggles to find its own voice, and its expressly allusive style has been accused of being "an anthology of literary clichés available to every minimally educated reader."¹¹

So already in Gray we have recognizable themes of what was to become characteristic of the Gothic: graves and funerary monuments, memory and loss, mortality and melancholia, all combining in an acute awareness of the transience of human endeavour, of loneliness, of the weight of the past, of antiquity, and of an inability to write. But Gray's most influential mouthpiece for this fear of history, and the strange terror of not-being and never-having-been, was the figure of the bard, who briefly stands proud of history atop Snowdon in one of the most spectacular images of the period – Thomas Jones painted "The Bard" in 1774, and the subject was still popular in 1817, when John Martin produced his iconic depiction. In Gray's poem "The Bard" (1757), the central speaker gives voice to Gray's fear in a wild fugue of inspiration. He is the last of his race, recording the extermination of his people – the Welsh druidic society – by the invading Anglo-Norman king Edward I, while also predicting the eventual extinction of Edward's line and the triumph of the Tudors. His is a lone voice in the devastation: no one will

hear his death-song, but it will nevertheless reverberate, both a prophecy and a curse, through history. The poem finishes with the poet plunging suicidally from his mountaintop into “endless night” (l. 144).

This is the magnification of elegy to the level of apocalypse. Gray recognizes the savagery of English history, hitherto repressed. The need for a national British history posed fundamental questions about how the English, Scottish, Welsh, and Irish could write about the British past and the bloodshed that characterized it and that had made Great Britain. How could these social and cultural extirpations be described? Certainly human torture and sacrifice were already the stuff of poetry and art in many classical and biblical precedents – most obviously in the depiction of the crucifixion and other martyrdoms – but this sort of aesthetic material had yet to be tested in the British Isles. In other words, the Gothic is about much more than domestic horrors and melancholy lamentations: it is a historical theory, and Peter Ackroyd comes closest to it when he describes Gothic literature as “a rancid form of English antiquarianism.”¹²

There are three elements to the Gothic imagination: the history of the Germanic tribes, an ensuing political ideology, and the medievalist aesthetic. Historically speaking, the Goths were a tribe who crossed the Danube in the fourth century CE on their way to sack Rome, and were therefore identified as the resistance to the Roman empire: rude Northern freedom-fighters overcoming the classical tyranny of the South. By the sixth century, the word was used to describe the Germanic tribes in general, and was applied to the Angles and Saxons settling in England, and to Hengist and Horsa, who allegedly landed in Kent in the fifth century. Gibbon noted that the sack of Rome presented the opportunity for Britain to separate itself from the Roman Empire, and hence Goths were considered to be constitutive of the nation, as distinguished from the Romano-British.¹³ By similar means, they were also erroneously associated with the later pointed Gothic and English perpendicular architecture of the Middle Ages because of the apparent independence of these styles from classical models prevalent on the Continent.

In other words, the Goths seemed to represent an alternative historical dynamic to the classical movements revived in the Renaissance and Augustan periods. The Goths were considered to be the purest of the northern races, possessing an instinctive love of liberty that was antagonistic to the imperial pretensions of Rome, and later of other forms of despotic rule such as Catholicism. So it is not difficult to see how the Goths appealed to the emerging sense of English identity. Indeed, the English constitution’s apparent progress through granting increased liberties and rights seemed to be in the Gothic spirit – hence episodes from the signing of *Magna Carta* to the “Glorious Revolution” of 1688 were presented as inherently Gothic.

Protestants stood up to Roman Catholics just as Parliamentarians had stood up to the absolutist claims of the monarch, and as the Anglo-Saxons had rebelled against the “Norman Yoke.” It was as if the English constitution that emerged from these antagonisms was a product of the Gothic dynamic: negotiated in a spirit of compromise, balanced between extremes, latitudinarian, progressive, organic, pragmatic, responsive – what by the nineteenth century was known as the “Whig theory of history.”

Yet there were also highly pejorative associations of the Gothic myth. The sack of Rome was a cultural and intellectual disaster that had resulted in the advent of the “Dark Ages,” a term coined in the seventeenth century. The Goths did not replace the Roman system with one of their own – instead they simply laid waste to the civilization and displaced classical learning for a thousand years. Their taste was barbaric, crude, violent, obscure, and dark, and what monuments they did leave before the Middle Ages were inexplicable and eerie, carrying associations of death and destruction.

Neither did the bloodletting end there. The acknowledged liberal development of the English and subsequently the British constitution repressed the disturbing truth that it had come out of centuries of civil bloodshed on a terrible scale. The progress of British political freedoms – the “Whig” theory of history – was steeped in blood: it condoned, for example, the execution of Charles I and the ensuing Civil War; and even the so-called “Bloodless Revolution” of 1688, when William III and Mary II took the throne, saw protracted fighting in Ireland (the Battle of the Boyne was not fought there until 1690). Before the accession of James I and VI in 1603, England had been warring with Scotland for 300 years, and attempts to make the Welsh and the Scottish part of the union had been characterized by clinical state violence (such as the liquidation of Welsh culture dramatized by Gray’s “Bard,” or the Highland clearances of the eighteenth century) and acts of wild and capricious retaliation (such as the massacre at Glencoe).

Repressed guilt and horror therefore lie behind the aestheticization of the Gothic and medieval in the eighteenth century. Although Walpole may have commented that it was a relief for him to turn from politics to write his pioneering Gothic novel, *The Castle of Otranto* (1764), it was of course simply a displacement activity: a way of dealing with the butchery of the British constitution by condensing its violence into dreamlike scenes of medieval romance. Walpole might have been literally living in a fantastic pseudo-medieval mansion at Strawberry Hill (building began in 1748), but it should be remembered that he slept with a copy of the execution order for Charles I over his bedhead. By half-acknowledging the fearful slaughters at the heart of British identity, writers and artists began to explore how the imagination dealt with such fearsome cultural memories – often in the least expected

places. Gothicism crept into gardens, for example, in the shape of uncultivated patches of “natural” wildness, into picturesque views as mock ruins, and into aesthetics in Edmund Burke’s 1757 *An Inquiry into the Sublime and the Beautiful*, published in the same year as Gray’s “Bard.”

Burke’s definition of the sublime was deeply rooted in the Gothic as a suggestive form of spectacle. Sublimity was characterized by terror and power, especially when somehow obscured. Of Milton’s description of Death in *Paradise Lost*, Burke declares, “In this description all is dark, uncertain, confused, terrible, and sublime to the last degree”:

that shape had none
Distinguishable in member, joint, or limb,
Or substance might be called that shadow seemed,
For each seemed either; black it stood as night.
(Book II, ll. 667–70)¹⁴

The incomprehensibility of the passage works a strange alchemy, hinting at something vast, ineffable, and infinite. Hence obscurity in all things became the touchstone of the Gothic – in language, plot, psychology, clothing and materials, architecture, and even the weather: “An immense mountain covered with a shining green turf, is nothing in this respect, to one dark and gloomy; the cloudy sky is more grand than the blue; and night more solemn and sublime than the day.”¹⁵ The sublime signaled the limit of reason, and beyond that there were monsters.¹⁶

Burke was quick to recognize that the British landscape was dotted with sublime monuments – whether ruined abbeys and monasteries (victims of the Reformation) or megaliths (often called ancient cathedrals). Eighteenth-century antiquarians such as William Stukeley had already noticed that the country seemed to be laced with the physical traces of these other, earlier, more mysterious, perhaps even more terrible Britains, and had mapped both Stonehenge (*Stonehenge: A Temple Restor’d to the British Druids*, 1740) and Avebury (*Abury: A Temple of the British Druids*, 1743). These remains were like distant communications from another world, barely legible letters raised against the incessant depredations of time. And according to Roman historians, including Caesar in his memoirs, they had been temples of human sacrifice, whether conducted in terrifying wicker men and reed baskets (the victims were incinerated inside “figures of immense size . . . of twigs”), or on the rough altars at the centre of stone circles.¹⁷

The Gothic became intimately tied to British nationalism as a reminder of united Protestant resistance to Catholic Rome, or, it was believed, of the druidic resistance to imperial Rome. Pre-Roman monuments such as standing stones, rows, circles, and barrows were among the few things that gave

Great Britain and (after 1801) the United Kingdom a sense of shared history and common heritage, to the extent that they were consistently represented as part of a Gothic sense of identity. Thus in paintings and engravings, Stonehenge and other megaliths were, for example, usually shown against a dark sky obscured by clouds. In literature, this newly recognized communality emerged in the antiquarian aesthetic of *Ossian* (James Macpherson's third-century Celtic fragments and epics, first published in 1760) and the ballad revival inspired by Thomas Percy's *Reliques of Ancient English Poetry* (1765, which contained much lowland Scottish material and inspired subsequent collections by John Pinkerton, Joseph Ritson, and most notably Walter Scott and James Hogg). The medievalist ballad and verse romance derived from the models revived by Percy and his followers, and these significantly influenced the emerging historical novel. The pure lineaments of ancient society were discernible in the originality of its expression. As William Duff commented in 1767: "Original poetic genius will in general be displayed in its ultimate vigour in the early periods of society . . . and it will seldom appear in a very great degree in cultivated life."¹⁸ Under the mantle of the Gothic, then, the ancient Britons provided the subject for hundreds of books, articles, letters, and papers written during the century, culminating in Sharon Turner's *History of the Anglo-Saxons* (1799); and, until the publication of Edward Davies's *Celtic Researches* in 1804, little distinction from the Celtic was made. The problem of course was that this original poetic genius was imagined to have been generated and cultivated by savage societies, and the present was formed on such savagery: civilization was raised on blood.

It is worth reiterating how many of the elements of this Gothic aesthetic are present in Gray's "Bard": the sublime, the melancholia, the fascination with the fading past, the savagery, and the political nation-building and "progress" through extermination. Gray's poetry here (and elsewhere) is a confrontation with the past in order to explore the social and cultural taboos of the present, and to answer the question: Where did Britain come from? Much of Gray's later poetry probes this ghastly problem further through the thrilling primitivism of Viking myth. "The Fatal Sisters" (published in 1768) tells of twelve weird sisters or Valkyrie weaving fate from human entrails weighted with decapitated human heads. This poetry is characterized by concrete nouns and active verbs, a collapse of the regular classical form into the irregular ode and freer forms of verse, the dissolution of time so that the past becomes literally omnipresent and haunts the present, and in mystical hints – the poet as a sorcerer, casting spells, as a bard weaving rhymes, as a druid. In this way, the poetry of Gray offers a compelling way of giving voice to an ancient landscape of Britain, whose only memorials were silent

stones, once (it was believed – even hoped) stained with human blood. This is the poetry that makes those rugged monuments speak, that gives a voice to the dead, to ghosts, to nothingness, to what never was. In this, the poetry of antiquity goes far beyond the limits of elegy.

These mysterious ruins, then, like graveyards, served as the focus for meditations – the meditation being a form of restoration through hallucination. Warton’s sonnet “Written at Stonehenge” (published in 1791), for instance, presents a series of meditative possibilities – or obscurities – for the “noblest monument of Albion’s isle” (l. 1). Stonehenge is both an aid to pagan reflection and a tangle of riddles (“We muse on many an antient tale renown’d”, l. 14).¹⁹ In the eyes and mind of an antiquarian poet, the triliths could be any manner of – or all – things: a crossroads in the mystical imagination of the nation, a meeting place for myth, legend, and history, resounding in Warton’s lines with memories of Merlin and Arthur, Hengist and Horsa, the druids, the Vikings, and Brutus, and are even the site of strange prehistoric coronations.

“Written at Stonehenge” can be seen as the prototype for later poetic restorations. The stones were a monument to the antiquity of the nation, evidence of its history, but reduced to suggestive ruins. The potential of ruins lay in their obscurity – their sublimity. The ruins of Tintern Abbey, for example, haunt Wordsworth’s poem of the same name like an uneasy murmur or a shadow on a cloudless day, a presence of “The still, sad music of humanity” (l. 92). The poem is written “a few miles above” Tintern Abbey, and the picturesque ruin is therefore out of sight – it is the memory of a ruin (a Protestant ruin of a Catholic building) that is evoked.

Wordsworth’s lines on an earlier ruin – Stonehenge – were written about the same time. By the time Wordsworth had incorporated this grim episode in the desolate landscape of Salisbury Plain into the 1805 *Prelude*, it had become an uncanny encounter with a ruin that attempts to frame the past by rebuilding the monument. Wordsworth falls into a reverie and sees the past – sees ancient Britons “With shield and stone ax, stride across the Wold” (Book XII, l. 323) to the place of sacrifice:

It is the sacrificial Altar, fed
With living men – how deep the groans! the voice
Of those in the gigantic wicker thrills
Throughout the region far and near.

(Book XII, ll. 331–4)

There is perhaps a hint of the horror of recent political events – of the Bastille – in this ghastly vision, but, as with the revolution in France, something is learnt too. Wordsworth’s attention shifts to the patterns of stones and

circles, as if anticipating the twentieth-century cult of ley-lines (the supposed mystical alignment of ancient monuments) by making the stone patterns meaningful:

’twas my chance
To have before me on the downy Plain
Lines, circles, mounts, a mystery of shapes.
(Book XII, ll. 338–40)

He is “charmed” by this “antiquarian’s dream,” sees the druids teaching, and hears their music – which was how the ancient Greeks described the druids. Wordsworth has reached beyond the Roman accounts of sacrifice to go further back into time. So, in an unnerving harmony, human sacrifice is twisted together with dulcet wisdom.

At the time when Wordsworth was meditating upon Salisbury Plain, Blake was imagining Stonehenge from his workshop in South Molton Street, near Tyburn, London’s permanent gallows. His earliest influences had been, broadly speaking, Gothic: Macpherson’s *Ossian*, Gray’s reworkings of Norse myth, Percy’s *Reliques* and his later translation of the *Edda*; and he was certainly aware of Stukeley’s antiquarian researches. For Blake, Stonehenge was essentially a site of sacrifice, and therefore a monument of tyranny rather than of liberty. The druids who had been so romanticized by Stukeley (who actually described himself as a druid and took a druidic name) were to Blake authoritarian figures denying the humanity of man. The ancient poetry of the prophetic and inspired bard was therefore a voice in opposition to the authoritarian and hierarchical power of the druids, whose stone temples were so many “dark Satanic mills,” the instruments of Blake’s desolate lord, Urizen, and consequently antagonistic to lapsarian man, symbolized by the figure of Albion. Blake’s epic *Milton* describes how “stony Druid Temples” grew from the ruins of Jerusalem (meaning London/Albion), while his dazzling follow-up *Jerusalem: The Emanation of the Giant Albion* (1804–7) details the building of Stonehenge. Having built “A building of eternal death: whose proportions are eternal despair” (pl. 66), the druids sacrifice their human victims, their own humanity, and the future of the race on the diabolical altar of progress.

Blake took the design of the megalithic temple on the final plate of *Jerusalem* from Stukeley’s illustration of *Abury*’s serpent stones, and in doing so introduced further influences from antiquity. Ovid’s fable of Cadmus and Harmonia – transformed into serpents for killing the dragon of Ares – was described by Stukeley as a possible source for the serpent temple he claimed was built at Avebury, demonstrating how, as Peacock observed, different elements of antiquity could be combined. Indeed, the resources of ancient

Greece in particular proved to be particularly apt for writers and artists of the period. As with the Gothic myth, past epochs may have been savage and barbaric, but they also constituted a golden age of pure thought and expression unsullied by the corruption of society, and ancient Greece (democratic, artistic, philosophic, and athletic) seemed to be exemplary in this respect.

In the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries, Greece was as much an idea – or rather a set of ideas – as it was a place, combining democracy, paganism, and individualism (or libertarianism). The Roman influence had held sway over the earlier part of the century, which in seeking to establish a state role for the arts consciously modeled itself on the court of Emperor Augustus (hence, “Augustan”); and even as late as Gibbon’s *Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire* (1776–88), Greece was dismissed as simply a stage before the Roman Empire.²⁰ But a fascination with the ancient Greeks had begun to emerge with the discovery of Pompeii in 1748, buried when Vesuvius erupted in AD 79, and in the ensuing work of Johann Joachim Winckelmann, in particular his *History of Ancient Art* (1764). Pompeii had been a Greek colony, and Winckelmann chose to study the remains of Greek rather than Roman art there, arguing that Greek sculpture ideally achieved its beauty through the principle of harmony, and that this reflected the pure ideals of the society that had fostered it. As Shelley later put it in a letter to Peacock (January 23–4, 1819): “They lived in harmony with nature, and the interstices of their incomparable columns were portals as it were to admit the spirit of beauty which animates this glorious universe to visit those whom it inspired.”

Greece had been under Turkish control since the fifteenth century and, like Britain, began to appreciate its own culture and history again only in the eighteenth century. Translations from the ancient Greek proliferated in the second half of the century, and Greek statues and vases became coveted by collectors, often obtained while traveling through Europe on the “Grand Tour.” The Dilettanti Club first visited Greece in 1751, and by the time Byron arrived in Greece in 1810 he found it “infested” with English tourists.²¹ Antiquity was in effect another destination on the itinerary, “a vast country separated from our own by a long interval of time,” where connoisseurs sought not picturesque views or high society balls, but rather ancient *objets d’art* in their “attempts to discover unknown lands.”²² Gibbon had presented ancient history as a text, but it now emerged as a much more subtle aesthetic encounter that fed the imagination. There is a suggestive series of correspondences here: the past is a foreign country in chaotic disarray, but may be mapped by tracing the contours of its surviving works of art, and memorializing a nation in museums is, of course, a form of colonialism – a way of imposing imperial order.

Despite his oft-expressed antagonism to the classical – “Rome & Greece swept Art into their maw & destroyd it” – Blake was actually at the centre of the Greek Revival of the 1790s, which was encouraged with the first publication in 1788 of John Lemprière’s *Bibliotheca classica* (*Classical Dictionary* – later a significant influence on Keats), and in 1790 of John Bell’s *New Pantheon* of Greek and Roman myth.²³ Blake’s patron George Cumberland and fellow artists John Flaxman and Henry Fuseli were instrumental in the Revival – Fuseli had himself translated Winckelmann as early as 1765, and Flaxman had worked with Josiah Wedgwood on his white bas-relief pottery since 1775. Wedgwood produced a copy of the renowned Portland Vase in 1790, and Blake engraved the artifact as one of a series for Erasmus Darwin’s *Botanic Garden* (1791). Blake also later illustrated episodes from Greek myth, such as the Judgment of Paris (1805?), and used the story of Cupid and Psyche from Apuleius for *Vala*; more generally, the male nude as a figure of resistance to tyranny is a characteristic feature of his illuminated books.²⁴ Blake is also likely to have known and read “the English pagan,” Thomas Taylor, who effectively attempted to revive Neoplatonism through his translations of Plotinus and his school, and through his *Orphic Hymns* (1787). And in a similar if less mystical vein, Jacob Bryant, president of the Society of Antiquaries, had turned his attention to comparative religion and was identifying fragments of Christianity in pagan mythology. A cult of new paganism began to grow. This fascination with primitive beliefs led to a reevaluation of sexual taboos in Richard Payne Knight’s scandalous *Account of the Remains of the Worship of Priapus* (1786), which provocatively argued that phallic worship formed the basis of all religions, and before long the Revival had exploded into a salacious Greekomania. This erotic mood was fueled by Emma Hamilton, wife of the connoisseur Sir William Hamilton, who scandalized society by modeling the provocative classical “attitudes” of ancient nude statues; she later embarked upon a notorious affair with Admiral Lord Nelson.

Taylor and Bryant made a profound impact on Blake’s personal mythology, and their influence is also evident in the more fashionable apostasy of Shelley’s *Prometheus Unbound*, as well as in Keats’s *Endymion* (1818), whose “Hymn to Pan” was famously snubbed by the devout Wordsworth as “a Very pretty piece of Paganism.”²⁵ Unlike Shelley, whose Hellenism (or “cult of the South”) was intellectual and textual – he translated a number of ancient Greek works – Keats could not read Greek and even had trouble in pronouncing and scanning Greek names, reminding us that Greek was very much associated with the educated elite. Keats’s Hellenism was more aesthetic than grammatical, inspired by artworks.²⁶ The Elgin marbles, for instance, which had been acquired during 1803–12 and purchased in 1816

for the British Museum at a cost of £35,000, give Keats “a most dizzy pain” when he gazes upon them (“On Seeing the Elgin Marbles,” 1817). They are “Gothicized,” mingling “Grecian grandeur with the rude / Wasting of old time” (ll. 11–13). His language collapses before the frieze, and his sonnet ends in fragments of its own: “– with a billowy main – / A sun – a shadow of a magnitude” (ll. 13–14).

These historical remains were for Keats necessarily only partially legible – objects for contemplation and interpretation; sometimes, like the Gothic relics of Britain, present, sometimes remembered. The metropolitan space of the museum or gallery therefore replaced mountains, lakes, and ruins as a place where the poet could experience these encounters with the “other,” a place where the antique confronts the modern – where inspiration is primed to strike. The “Ode on a Grecian Urn” (1820) is the most notable instance of this museum effect and of a communion with the dead (it is a funerary urn), but the urn is also peculiarly silent. Its perfection cannot be articulated, but only suggested through Keats’s describing the potential meanings of the scenes depicted. Keats’s poem is therefore at a double remove from the object itself, which in any case does not of course physically exist. It is an elaborated memory, and in the absence of its own meaning becomes haunted by more sinister possibilities: “Who are these coming to the sacrifice?” (l. 31).

If in the “Urn” the marble figures are read by Keats in relation to real musicians, revelers, and lovers, in the first “Hyperion” (1820) the Titan Saturn himself is marmorealized. He begins the poem as if in ruins, like the colossal fragments of a great broken statue, reminiscent of Fuseli’s chalk and sepia-wash sketch of “The artist in despair over the magnitude of antique fragments” (1778–80):

Upon the sodden ground
His old right hand lay nerveless, listless, dead,
Unscathed; and his realmless eyes were closed;
While his bow’d head seem’d list’ning to the Earth,
His ancient mother, for some comfort yet.
(ll. 17–21)

But the scene is also Ossianic, and Saturn is explicitly associated with the Gothic when he shakes his “Druid locks” (l. 137).

“Hyperion” was itself subtitled “A Fragment,” and its readers concurred. Byron called it a “fine monument,” De Quincey compared it to a Greek temple adorned with Greek statuary, and Hunt considered it “a fragment – a gigantic one, like a ruin in the desert.”²⁷ Hunt’s comment obviously invites comparison with Shelley’s sonnet “Ozymandias” (1818), which begins:

I met a traveller from an antique land
 Who said – “Two vast and trunkless legs of stone
 Stand in the desert.”

(ll. 1–3)

In other words, this tiny fable on the fall of an Egyptian civilization evokes the megaliths of ancient Britain as well as orientalizing antiquity. But here there is a resolutely textual message: a carved inscription –

“My name is Ozymandias, King of Kings
 Look on my Works, ye Mighty, and despair!”

(ll. 10–11)

For Shelley, in comparison with Keats, the past is all too legible, and, in being so, is here fraught with chilling ironies of identity, being, and posterity. Similarly, in “Alastor,” the “awful ruins of the days of old” (l. 108) are carved with signs that the poet can readily decipher:

He lingered, poring on memorials
 Of the world’s youth . . .
 And gazed, till meaning on his vacant mind
 Flashed like strong inspiration, and he saw
 The thrilling secrets of the birth of time.

(ll. 120–8)

The legibility of antiquity for Shelley made it an appropriate vehicle for veiled political writing – *Cyclops* (written 1819), for example, can be seen as a response to the French Revolution, as can *Prometheus Unbound* (1820), which was in part an attempt to mystify the new orthodoxy of ancient Greece, making it strange again. Due to its prevalence in the education system, Greek culture was very much a pillar of the establishment, but it could just as well serve as a mouthpiece for radical and revolutionary views and, like the Gothic, could express anxieties or voice transgressive ideas. Indeed, ancient Greece had a famously democratic society that had nurtured the arts, aesthetics, philosophy, and even sciences, and could be promoted as the archetype for popular government at home. There were pressing contemporary political implications abroad as well: the philhellenes (lovers of Greece) supported Greek independence from Turkey. When the Greeks rebelled in 1821, this support went far further than the vocal or literary. Byron, a passionate philhellene, created the “Byron Brigade”; he died of fever at Missolonghi in 1824 as he waited impatiently to engage the Turks in the cause of freedom.

The British perspective on ancient Rome also had immediate political implications. Napoleon had taken Augustan trappings for his imperial style

and was compared with the fourth-century Julian the Apostate, the last pagan emperor. The Roman model was again a two-edged sword: splendid and glorious, yet also condemned to decline and fall. Indeed, the process of history appeared to be quite manifestly cyclical in the example of Rome: a rise and fall, anticipating the whole notion of historical “revolution” that so gripped the age. Rome also had spectacularly legible ruins – stupendous remains, such as the Colosseum and the Forum, that worked like enormous versions of antique statues and vases. In the words of Byron’s “Childe Harold” (1812),

To meditate amongst decay, and stand
A ruin amidst ruins; there to track
Fall’n states and buried greatness . . .
(IV, xxv, 218–20)

For the Byronic experience of antiquity, one has to be present. He stressed the need to see these monuments *in situ*, and not in a museum or gallery – even (in Canto II) attacking Elgin’s era-defining acquisitions.

Rome was wedded to the idea of impending catastrophe, but what is also revealing in Byron’s descriptions is his combination of the different elements of antiquity. Here we see most clearly the blending of the Romantic with the classical. The panorama of Rome is one of Gothic sublimity, complete with “Cypress and ivy, weed and wallflower . . . arch crushed, column strown / In fragments, chok’d up vaults,” and midnight owls, and the Colosseum even has “magic in the ruined battlement” (IV, cvii, 955–8; cxxix, 1159). The wreck is a vast *memento mori*, “the moral of all human tales . . . the same rehearsal of the past” (IV, cviii, 1–2). It is simultaneously a monument to the glory of Rome, a memorial to the blood of gladiators, slaves, and martyrs, and an echo of the megaliths. Byron also gave Peacock his central dismissive image, of the treasures of antiquity as “Glory’s gewgaws shining in the van” (IV, cix, 979).

Rome was, then, like ancient Britain, a juxtaposition of the Christian and pagan, of the pure and the savage: a union of the Gothic with the classical. Braiding together the poetries of antiquity made the past new, and also gave it a resounding topical relevance. It enabled the poet to escape anxieties of influence or feelings of belatedness by recognizing that although the inevitable weight of history was massive, its dialogue with the present was forever fluctuating and changing – which made it always somehow original. A sense of the inescapability of British history had permeated its poetry; indeed, the awesome violence of the past now *needed* to be evoked to make the state of the nation comprehensible.

NOTES

- 1 Peacock's *Four Ages of Poetry*, Shelley's *Defence of Poetry*, Browning's *Essay on Shelley*, ed. H. F. B. Brett-Smith (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1921), p. 15.
- 2 *Ibid.*, p. 16.
- 3 Southey to Grovesnor Bedford, May 27, 1795, in *The Life and Correspondence of Robert Southey*, ed. Charles Cuthbert Southey, 6 vols. (London: Longman, Brown, Green, & Longman, 1849–50), vol. 1, p. 238; William Hazlitt, "On Poetry in General," in *The Complete Works of William Hazlitt*, ed. P. P. Howe, 21 vols. (London: J. M. Dent, 1930–4), vol. v, p. 18.
- 4 Peacock, *Four Ages*, p. 16.
- 5 David Fairer, "Organizing Verse: Burke's *Reflections* and Eighteenth-Century Poetry," in *Early Romantics: Perspectives in British Poetry from Pope to Wordsworth*, ed. Thomas Woodman (London: Macmillan, 1998), p. 10.
- 6 William Hazlitt, "Schlegel on the Drama," in *The Complete Works of William Hazlitt*, ed. Howe, vol. xvi, p. 61.
- 7 Percy Bysshe Shelley, *A Defence of Poetry*, in *Shelley's Poetry and Prose: Authoritative Texts, Criticism*, ed. Donald H. Reiman and Neil Fraistat (New York: Norton, 2002), p. 525.
- 8 Northrop Frye, "Towards Defining an Age of Sensibility," *English Literary History* 23 (1956), pp. 144–52, at p. 144 (reprinted in *Collected Works of Northrop Frye*, vol. xvii: *Northrop Frye's Writings on the Eighteenth and Nineteenth Centuries*, ed. Imre Salusinszky [Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1995]).
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- 10 *Thomas Gray and William Collins: Poetical Works*, ed. Roger Lonsdale (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1977), pp. 115–16.
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- 12 Peter Ackroyd, *Albion: The Origins of the English Imagination* (London: Chatto & Windus, 2002), p. 374.
- 13 Edward Gibbon, *The History of the Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire*, ed. Betty Radice, 8 vols. (London: Folio, 1985), vol. iv, p. 135 (ch. 31).
- 14 Edmund Burke, *A Philosophical Enquiry into the Origin of our Ideas of the Sublime and Beautiful*, ed. Adam Phillips (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1990), p. 55.
- 15 *Ibid.*, p. 75.
- 16 Francisco Goya, "The Sleep of Reason Produces Monsters," *Los Caprichos*, pl. 43.
- 17 A. L. Owen, *The Famous Druids: A Survey of Three Centuries of English Literature on the Druids* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1962), p. 20.
- 18 William Duff, *An Essay on Original Genius* (London: Edward & Charles Dilly, 1767), p. 260.
- 19 Thomas Warton, *Poems on Various Subjects* (London: G. G. J. and J. Robinson, 1791), p. 108: Sonnet IV.
- 20 Gibbon, *Decline and Fall*, vol. 1, p. 61 (ch. 2).
- 21 Robin Jarvis, *The Romantic Period; The Intellectual and Cultural Context of English Literature, 1789–1830* (Harlow: Longman, 2004), p. 157.

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- 22 “Baron d’Hancarville,” in *Antiquités Etrusques, Grecques et Romaines* (Naples, 1767–76), vol. III, p. 3: quoted in Ian Jenkins and Kim Sloan, *Vases and Volcanoes: Sir William Hamilton and His Collection* (London: British Museum, 1996), p. 40.
- 23 William Blake, “On Virgil,” in *The Complete Poetry and Prose of William Blake*, ed. David V. Erdman, rev. edn. (New York: Doubleday, 1988), p. 269.
- 24 Kathleen Raine, *Blake and Antiquity* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1977), pp. 69–98.
- 25 *The Keats Circle: Letters and Papers, 1816–1878*, ed. Hyder Edward Rollins, 2 vols. (Cambridge, MA, 1948), vol. I, p. 144.
- 26 Jennifer Wallace, *Shelley and Greece: Rethinking Romantic Hellenism* (Basingstoke: Palgrave, 2001), pp. 3, 161–2.
- 27 Martin Aske, *Keats and Hellenism: An Essay* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1985), pp. 89, 84–6.

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Poems about Antiquity at the world's largest poetry site. Ranked poetry on Antiquity, by famous & modern poets. Learn how to write a poem about Antiquity and share it! Poems / Antiquity Poems - The best poetry on the web. Newest. Frances Browne Follow. The God of the World. The gray of the desert's dawn Had tinged that mighty mound That stands as the tomb of Babylon On her ancient river's bound For the land hath kept no trace beside Of the old Chaldean's power and pride. Upon that lonely height, To mark the morning climb The skies of his native solitude, The Genius of the Desert stood, And saw the conqueror Time Approach on pinions swift and dim, But ever welcome was he to him. Romantic poetry is the poetry of the Romantic era, an artistic, literary, musical and intellectual movement that originated in Europe towards the end of the 18th century. It involved a reaction against prevailing Enlightenment ideas of the 18th century, and lasted approximately from 1800 to 1850. In early-19th-century England, the poet William Wordsworth defined his and Samuel Taylor Coleridge's innovative poetry in his Preface to Lyrical Ballads (1798) The most romantic poetry of all time. For some Valentine's Day inspiration. By Arielle Tchirout. Shakespeare was a big fan of the original form of romantic poetry - the classic sonnet - which always included 14 lines, with each line written in iambic pentameter (a steady, bouncy rhythm of 10 syllables). He has countless famous sonnets, but this one, published in 1609, is a beauty we've memorised by heart. Best part: Shall I compare thee to a summer's day? Thou art more lovely and more temperate. 2. She Walks in Beauty by Lord Byron. Written in 1814, this is one of Lord Byron's most famous works. It is said that the poem was written about his cousin's wife, after he was stru