PROLOGUE: RECENT WHIG INTERPRETATIONS OF ROMANTIC LITERARY HISTORY

INTERLOCUTOR: … do you think this new history is a good thing?
AUTHOR: … It's been the only viable career move the past ten years.

Herbert Lindenberger[1]

Discussing the triumph of René Wellek's 'unified field theory' of Romanticism ('imagination for the view of poetry, nature for the view of the world, and symbol and myth for poetic style'), Jerome McGann makes a rhetorical gesture familiar to readers of his influential *Romantic Ideology*:

> The danger of Wellek's unified field theory has been such that the character of scholarly agreement is in danger of utter trivialization. Nowhere is this more apparent than in the now widespread idea that Romanticism comprises all significant literature produced between Blake and the present – some would say between Gray, or even Milton, and the present.
>
> This will never do. Let me begin to reopen the problem of defining Romanticism …[2]

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At a vital moment of critical renunciation, McGann self-consciously invokes Francis Jeffrey's emphatic and equally provocative renunciation of Wordsworth's *The Excursion*: 'This will never do. It bears no doubt the stamp of the author's heart and fancy: But unfortunately not half so visibly as that of his peculiar system'.[3] Let me begin to reopen the problem of writing Romantic literary history by bringing out the relationship implicit in this quotation from *Romantic Ideology* – the relationship, that is, at once analogical and genealogical, between certain assumptions and strategies characteristic of the *Edinburgh Review* under Jeffrey's editorship on the one hand, and, on the other, the assumptions and strategies of recent historicism.

Wordsworthian Romanticism

From as early as the 1830s there prevailed an interpretation of the literary history of the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries that by the 1970s had become 'second nature' to us. Because it originated (in part at least) earlier, with

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Wordsworth and Coleridge in the late 1790s, the two of them remained not surprisingly central: Wordsworth was its creative centre, Coleridge its theoretician and (in the *Biographia*) its apologist. Many of the ideas and choices of what the late nineteenth century would label the Romantic movement were said to have been anticipated by eighteenth-century commentators, as by so many John the Baptists, and the evolution and establishment of this interpretation – with its characteristic teleology and hierarchy – were assisted by a vast army of critical disciples in the 1830s.

Since that time, confirmation has been found in a number of more or less influential critical motions by illustrious contemporaries (besides Coleridge): Hazlitt's awestruck if querulous exaltation of Wordsworth as 'a pure emanation of the Spirit of the Age', for example; Keats's troubled characterization of 'the wordsworthian or egotistical sublime'; Shelley's manifest anxiety (in Harold Bloom's sense) about Wordsworth, returning obsessively to the Wordsworthian precedent or 'presence' throughout his career.[4] The truth is that the one thing Hazlitt, Shelley and Keats have in common is a profound ambivalence towards Wordsworth and what he represented, but it is an ambivalence that can be seen to register the older poet's uniqueness and centrality. Far from challenging a Wordsworth-centred Romanticism, moreover, the Victorian canonization of Shelley and Keats as part of the *second* generation of what the early twentieth century would settle on as six major Romantic poets served only to confirm the existence and indeed priority of the first generation.

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In the Victorian period and after, the ambivalence towards Wordsworth that had marked the attitudes of many of his contemporaries largely disappeared,[5] allowing an authorized or Tory version of literary history to develop through critical theories otherwise nominally anti-Romantic – through the high culturalism of Matthew Arnold, for example, the Anglo-Catholicism of T. S. Eliot, and the asceticism of F. R. Leavis and the New Criticism – as well as, later, through theories both sympathetic to Romanticism and themselves Romantic, like the archetypal anatomizing of Northrop Frye, the Freudian *agon* of Bloom, and the Hegelian or apocalyptic historicism of M. H. Abrams.[6]

English literary history, in other words, came to fulfil Wordsworth's prophetic determination to create the taste by which he could be enjoyed, and the canon in which he could be valued. Thanks largely to Wordsworth and Coleridge, poetry or imaginative literature, now defined as the sublimation of the immediate and the quotidian, renewed the cultural supremacy it had enjoyed at least until the late seventeenth century. The poetic genius, living vicariously the burden of the human here and now, offered by way of consolation intimations, if not of immortality, exactly, then at least of transcendence of some form or other.

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The Return to History

In the 1980s, this Wordsworthian interpretation of Romanticism, along with other standard interpretations of literary history, was, as we all know, seriously and repeatedly challenged by a collective 'return of history', which was also a return to politics. 'In literary studies today', to quote Herbert Lindenberger,

> history serves not so much as a backdrop or even as an object of enquiry than as a special way of thinking – a way that assumes, for instance, that phenomena long taken to be timeless or grounded in nature are rooted in particular times and places, indeed, that these roots are often ignored or suppressed in the interest of making these phenomena appear to be timeless and natural.[7]

In the wake of the revisionary enterprise begun by McGann in the early 1970s and given a manifesto in his *The Romantic Ideology* in 1983, and in the wake of the revisionary history of Marilyn Butler's *Romantics, Rebels and Reactionaries* (1981), the majority of cultural analyses of mid to late eighteenth- and early nineteenth-century literary history have taken up a position in wilful and explicit contrast to what they see as a 200-year-old tendency to play right into the hands of a Wordsworthian Romanticism by uncritically accepting its rapt privacies and spiritual hierarchies, along with its suppression of the historical and political temporality of the text. 'The notion that the Romantic ideology displaces the historical, social and political tensions of the time into an ideal realm of the imagination, or nature', to quote Peter Kitson, 'has encouraged extensive debate in Romantic studies'.[8]

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Since the early 1980s, various forms of critical historicism have prevailed as various forms of scepticism, or what Lindenberger calls 'suspiciousness': 'suspiciousness toward established authority – whether the authority of the writer, of literary and interpretative traditions, or of society as a whole'.[9] Because of this suspiciousness, the cultural and ideological continuity between the Romantic enterprise and our own – a continuity explicit in the celebration of a Romantic theodicy in Abrams, for example, and in the will to individuation in Bloom – became for many a source of critical embarrassment, indeed a form of false consciousness. The New Historicists, according to Alan Liu, 'recoiled against the complicity of Romantic scholarship with Romantic belief'.[10] This complicity needs to be recognized and overcome, it is said, if Romanticism is to receive the critical attention it deserves.

Or, rather, if Romanticism is to receive the *critique* that it deserves. Where Abrams had sought to recover a high-minded, creative optimism, historicism discovered an often self-defeating evasiveness. This was thanks, in part at least, to deconstruction, in whose rigorous pursuit of linguistic self-sabotage intimations of authorial guilt are the legacy of a Freudian inheritance. Indeed, one type of Romantic New Historicism was deconstruction in period costume, teasing out

the sins of omission and commission in once celebrated Romantic constructions like 'the Self', 'imagination', 'organic form', 'the will to transcendence' and so on. The blindnesses, absences, contradictions and unwitting conspiracies so central to the deconstructive exercise, however, were for the New Historicist specifically historical and political ones – most heinous of all being, of course, 'the denial of history' itself.[11] 'The prison', writes Marjorie Levinson in her introduction to *Rethinking Historicism*, an anthology of essays designed as a manifesto, 'is in pretending to be uncircumstanced'.[12] On the assumption that 'poems are social and historical products and that the critical study of such products must be grounded in a socio-historical analytic', for example, Jerome McGann finds Romantic poetry

> everywhere marked by extreme forms of displacement and poetic conceptualization whereby the actual human issues with which the poetry is concerned are resituated in a variety of idealized localities. A socio-historical method pursued within the Critical tradition helps to expose these dramas of displacement and idealization.[13]

What gives recent historicism most of its polemical charge, in other words, is a suspiciousness that derives, not just from deconstructive linguistics, but also and ultimately from the historical materialism of Marxism and the kind of cultural critique practised by Althusser, Macherey and Jameson that is alert for 'signs of contradictions (historically determined)' in the literary text, 'which appear as unevenly resolved conflicts'.[14] It is a suspiciousness that refuses to defer to the Romantic construction of its own genius – a notion often disqualified for its male gendering or heavily qualified by what we know of the anxieties consequent upon the development of a mass reading public – and is reluctant to accept the work of art as anything other than an object of contemporary cultural production and consumption. Unimpressed by what Lindenberger (after Benjamin) calls 'the aura that has customarily surrounded romantic poetry', the Marxist and non-Marxist historian alike attempt to get behind it to 'the actual historical processes by which this aura has come to glorify particular poets'.[15] The Romantic idea of creative literature is more or less dismissively reduced from a Neoplatonic intimation to a socio-economic product, and for 'the Genius of Poetry' that Keats believed 'must work out its own salvation in a man'[16] are substituted the genii of time and place, production and reception.

With the distrust or refusal of Romantic ideas and values, moreover, has come the exposure of socio-cultural constraints or motives said to have been occluded by Romanticism's investment in transcendental vision and the formal autonomy of art. As well as having no illusions about the Romantic pieties, in other words, recent historicism denounces those pieties as evidence of the poet's complicity with conservative, usually oppressive forces in society. So it is, for

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example, with what Marilyn Butler pointedly calls the largely accidental development of a canon of six major poets:

> Over time the canon seems to have acquired a weird momentum of its own, and to have introduced various restrictive practices into criticism. … a small set of survivors, largely accidentally arrived at, dictate the model many of us seem to work with, of a timeless, desocialized, ahistorical literary community.[17]

It is not only the historicist who protests against the ranking of literary texts according to a set of vulnerable evaluative criteria, of course. 'Criticism has no business to react against things', wrote Northrop Frye in his 'Polemical Introduction' to *Anatomy of Criticism* back in 1957, 'but should show a steady advance toward undiscriminating catholicity'.[18] More recently, however, it has been historicism, in collusion with pragmatism and other scepticisms, that has laboured the point. We are entitled to ask (with Herbert Lindenberger) just how 'the prevailing canon of English romantic writers' came into being,[19] but the canon itself must be approached with caution, indeed distrust. Not only is it accidental in Butler's sense of having little, if anything, to do with literature or aesthetics, it is the anything but accidental construct of a number of socio-cultural institutions serving specific ideological agenda. 'By identifying a "Romantic Ideology" governing Romantic representations of the self and its relation to the world', writes Damian Walford Davies, 'New Historicism has also sought to expose our own ideological enslavement to what McGann described as nostalgic "neo-Romantic reading[s]"'.[20]

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What should have followed the deconstruction of the canon, logically, was a revaluation of the literature of the Romantic period in the direction of Frye's 'undiscriminating catholicity': an indefinite expansion of the object of study, inhibited only by our limited capacity to recuperate and read texts published during the period. The practical outcome, however, given the exigencies of teaching and academic publishing, has been the evolution of a more inclusive canon, one that has involved the more or less systematic recovery (in collaboration with feminism and post-colonial studies) of a variety of texts previously obscured. One of the most significant changes here has been a generic one. Once upon a time, the lyric was seen as central to the Romantic endeavour, an idea entrenched by M. H. Abrams's celebrated identification of a 'greater Romantic lyric',[21] and by the exaltation of Wordsworth's lyricized epic *The Prelude* as the entelechy of the form. Interest in the lyric has since been overtaken by an interest in genres once considered alien to the Romantic temperament – satire, drama, the novel – as well as in genres once denied any literary status at all: political pamphlets, travel writings, letters and journals. And periodical review essays. All these forms are more immediately responsive than the lyric to their historical moment – so

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acutely responsive, indeed, as to make the mediation of the historically informed critic indispensable.

Major revaluations have also taken place *within* the canon over the last twenty-odd years. We have witnessed the restitution of the historical novels of Walter Scott, for example, and – most significantly, I think – the restitution of Byron the satirist, dramatist and cultural phenomenon or icon. In Byron, many of the new and privileged themes come together. 'Byron loomed as the unevadable locus of the issues', according to Jerome McGann,[22] and McGann's Oxford edition of Byron's poetry remains ideologically central to his enterprise.

Francis Jeffrey's *Edinburgh Review*

This well-documented revision of Romantic literary history has not been allowed to become established without resistance, of course, and Romantic historicism has not been reduced to rehearsing the limited set of accusations and acknowledgements I have outlined here. It is not my intention to arbitrate between the contending parties, however, or to map the changes undergone by major Romanticists over the last twenty years.[23] My intention, rather, here and throughout this volume, is to remark on the extent to which these recent 'civil' wars re-enact what McGann calls 'the civil wars of the romantic movement itself' – between Whig and Tory, for example; Scotland and England; Byron and Wordsworth; critic and poet.[24] Whatever direction criticism of the period has taken or chooses to take from here, there is something to be gained if we stop thinking of the spate of recent historicist readings as belated opposition to an entrenched way of reading the Romantic movement and think of it instead as a way of reading that, in spite of its 'disavowal of any genealogical relation to Romanticism and to Romantic studies', has its roots in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries. As James Chandler reminded us in his comprehensive and detailed examination of Romantic historicism in *England in 1819*, a historicist impulse was no less characteristic of the Romantic period than were its ahistorical, or anti-historical, impulses to isolation and idealism.[25]

As a contribution to the recovery of Romantic historicism, then, I want to offer a reading of recent historicism as an argumentative and characteristically Whig interpretation of literary history – specifically, as a variation of that philosophic Whiggism preserved, modified and propagated by Francis Jeffrey's *Edinburgh Review*. For the outstanding number of literary historicists who over the last twenty-odd years have taken their cue from Jerome McGann and Marilyn Butler and begun in self-conscious and explicit resistance to Wordsworth and to what they see as the wilful imposition of a Wordsworthian Romanticism are doing exactly what Jeffrey did when he began his critical enterprise back in October 1802. Introducing his *Contributions to the Edinburgh Review* in 1844,

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Jeffrey recalled a conviction he had communicated to Walter Scott at the time of Scott's growing discomfort with the political tendency of the early *Edinburgh* – before Scott left the Review to help set up the *Quarterly Review* in opposition. As its editor, Jeffrey protested, he had never promised to eschew political controversy – as Lockhart had claimed in his *Life of Scott*. 'The Review', on the contrary, 'has but two legs to stand on. Literature no doubt is one of them: But its *Right leg* is Politics.'[26] This is where it connects with recent academic commentary upon the Romantic period. Having fulfilled Swift's prophecy and attempted to read 'a Man's Destiny, by peeping in his Breech', the 'Fortune-tellers in Northern America' have since delved further into his breech, only to discover with Jeffrey that his '*Right leg* is politics'.[27] Before anything else, it is the political imperative of recent criticism that establishes its heritage in the philosophic Whiggism of the Romantic period.

Not only did the *Edinburgh Review* have a politics, however, it also had a related historiography, one that it inherited from the conjectural historians of the eighteenth-century Scottish Enlightenment. ('Eighteenth-century Scotland', as we are constantly reminded, 'was in fact obsessed by history'.)[28] The *Edinburgh* had a way, not just of thinking and writing history, but of thinking and writing historically, and often (like recent historicists) about issues not obviously susceptible to historical analysis. Indeed, there are few if any of the generalizations offered by modern cultural historians about the period itself that have not been anticipated by early nineteenth-century commentators. 'Certainly the Romantics frequently viewed and evaluated the literature of their own time in comparison with that of the past', writes David Perkins: 'The hunger to understand the present through history motivated brilliant analyses of present-day culture'.[29] Compare Francis Jeffrey and Marilyn Butler, for example, as they both reflect on the explosion of imaginative literature in the late eighteenth century:

> the revolution in our literature has been accelerated and confirmed by the concurrence of many causes. The agitations of the French revolution, and the discussions as well as the hopes and terrors to which it gave occasion – the genius of Edmund Burke, and some others of his country – the impression of the new literature of Germany, evidently the original of our lake-school of poetry, and of many innovations in our drama – the rise or revival of a general spirit of methodism in the lower orders – and the vast extension of our political and commercial relations, which have not only familiarized all ranks of people with different countries, and great undertakings, but have brought knowledge and enterprise home, not merely to the imagination, but to the actual experience of almost every individual. – All these, and several other circumstances, have so far improved and excited the character of our nation, as to have created an effectual demand for more profound speculation, and more serious emotion than was dealt in by the writers of the former century, and which if it has not yet produced a corresponding

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> supply in all branches, has at least had the effect of decrying the commodities that were previously in vogue, as unsuited to the altered condition of the times.
>
> Francis Jeffrey[30]

> If late eighteenth-century English poets and novelists seem original and surprisingly numerous, it may be because they were in a new situation; but the world of books, publishers, and writers had already changed before 1750. The revolutionary factor was the new audience for imaginative literature. More English people were literate, and they were wealthier than before, giving them the means to own books and the leisure to read them. More books were published and they were better distributed, and better publicised, usually through being reviewed in journals.
>
> Marilyn Butler[31]

Characteristic both of recent and of Scottish Whig historicism is this economic orientation in the discussion of culture, in which literature becomes representative of its audience as reader-consumers. 'In every enquiry concerning the operations of men when united together in society', wrote William Robertson in his *The History of America* of 1777, 'the first object of attention should be their mode of subsistence. Accordingly as that varies, their laws and policy must be different'.[32] Equally characteristic is its responsiveness to what Jeffrey, in a celebration of Mme de Staël's sociology of literature, calls 'those sentiments and impressions which float unquestioned and undefined over many an understanding, and give a colour to the character, and a bias to the conduct, of multitudes, who are not so much as aware of their existence' – or to what we would call *ideology*.[33]

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Jeffrey on John Millar

As J. W. Burrow has observed, the 'notions of historical relativism and the historical determination of politics' – notions that most academic criticism now takes for granted – 'would have seemed commonplace in the Edinburgh of Dugald Stewart and John Millar'.[34] Jeffrey's critical and characteristically ambivalent account of the eighteenth-century political historian Millar in the third volume of the *Edinburgh Review* is, it seems to me, especially revealing of his own national (and nationalistic) intellectual and political origins, and needs to be quoted at length:

> To some of our readers, perhaps, it may afford a clearer conception of [John Millar's] intellectual character, to say, that it corresponded pretty nearly with the abstract idea that the learned of England entertain of a *Scotish* [*sic*] *philosopher*; a personage, that is, with little or no deference to the authority of great names, and not very apt to be startled at conclusions that seem to run counter to received opinions or existing institutions; acute, sagacious, and systematical; irreverent towards classical literature; rather indefatigable in argument, than patient in investigation; vigilant in the observation of facts, but not so strong in their number, as skilful in their application ...

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> He wondered at nothing; and has done more to repress the ignorant admiration of others, than most of his contemporaries. It was the leading principle, indeed, of all his speculations on law, morality, government, language, the arts, sciences, and manners – that there was nothing produced by arbitrary or accidental causes; that no great change, institution, custom, or occurrence, could be ascribed to the character or exertions of an individual, to the temperament of an individual or a nation, to occasional policy, or peculiar wisdom or folly: everything, on the contrary, he held, arose spontaneously from the situation of the society, and was suggested or imposed irresistibly by the opportunities or necessities of their condition. Instead of gazing, therefore, with stupid amazement, on the singular and diversified appearances of human manners and institutions, Mr Miller taught his pupils to refer them all to one simple principle, and to consider them as necessary links in the great chain which connects civilized with barbarous society. By the use of this master principle, he reconciled many of the paradoxes of history and tradition, explained much of what appeared to be unaccountable, and connected events and circumstances that seemed to be incapable of combination. While the antiquary pored with childish curiosity over the confused and fantastic ruins that cover the scenes of the early story, *he* produced the plan and elevation of the original subject, and enabled us to trace the connexions of the scattered fragments, and to determine the primitive form and denomination of all the disfigured masses that lay before us.[35]

It would be difficult to overestimate the significance of Jeffrey's subtly ambiguous characterization of Millar as corresponding 'pretty nearly with the abstract idea that the learned of England entertain of a *Scotish philosopher*'. (It is worth reminding ourselves, incidentally, that Jeffrey's Tory father had insisted he abstain from Millar's popular and controversial lectures at the University of Glasgow in 1789–90.)[36] The English, it is implied, have got it wrong. Far from correcting his readers, however, and arguing that John Millar was not like that at all, Jeffrey goes on to verify and indeed to endorse the caricature. In a periodical review in which open disagreement is the rule, open disagreement in Jeffrey's account of Millar's beliefs in this article is rare, and what disagreement there is, is a matter rather of emphasis than of ideology.

What gestures at being a disinterested explanation, then, turns out to be a provocation aimed at 'the learned of England', baulking only at mimicking Millar's thick Scottish accent. Where Jeffrey's exhaustive anatomization might appear to distance him from Millar's method and values, moreover, the very act of critically anatomizing the critical analyst betrays his own indebtedness to the master from whom he feigns independence. (Indeed, it has even been suggested 'that the bold lines of thought on which the "Edinburgh Review" was afterwards constructed, were laid down by his [Millar's] masterly hand'.)[37] As we will see, the same caricature of Scottish philosophic Whiggism will be recycled fourteen years later by Coleridge in the *Biographia Literaria* and by the Scottish Tories in *Blackwood's Edinburgh Magazine*, and will be directed at the *Edinburgh* itself, and the same caricature will become the leitmotif of Thomas Carlyle's portrait

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of Jeffrey in his *Reminiscences*: 'To my regret, he seemed bent on, first of all, converting me from what he called my "German mysticism," back merely, as I could perceive, into dead Edinburgh Whiggism, scepticism, and materialism'.[38]

The interest for our purposes lies in the fact that a similar approach characterizes the modern historicist, who like his *Edinburgh* precursors works within a self-consciously critical tradition and adopts a self-consciously critical methodology. With 'little or no deference to the authority of great names', the modern Whig literary historian 'wonder[s] at nothing; and has done more to repress the ignorant admiration of others, than most of his contemporaries'. As it happens, 'Critical' is precisely the epithet Jerome McGann chooses to distinguish his own Marxist or 'Heinean' tradition from the Enlightenment and Romantic traditions respectively:

> the Enlightenment tradition (or French Ideology, whose imputed rationalism is the sign that its historical consciousness is oriented almost exclusively in the present); the Romantic tradition (or German Ideology, characterized originally by a powerful [but false, self-serving] historicism and an orientation toward the past as the locus of the secrets of the historical process); the Critical tradition (or the Marxist view of ideology, which is a visionary meditation on the previous two with an historical consciousness oriented toward change and the future).[39]

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To 'criticize', in the pejorative sense, is the way Coleridge described the relativizing, disputatious and disrespectful analysis encouraged by the Scottish system of education that nurtured the principals of the early nineteenth-century periodical movement – as we shall see in Chapter 5. 'What's the use of virtue? What's the use of wealth? What's a guinea but a damned yellow circle? What's a chamber pot but an infernal hollow sphere?', complained Sydney Smith to Francis Jeffrey, mimicking him: 'The whole effort of your mind is to destroy'.[40] 'Suspiciousness', indeed.

'In his politics', Jeffrey goes on to say, 'Mr Millar was a decided whig, and did not perhaps bear any great antipathy to the name of a republican'.[41] Indeed, 'it is astonishing to what extent the historian has been Protestant, progressive, and whig', as Herbert Butterfield pointed out in his famous essay of 1931 on *The Whig Interpretation of History*:

> It might be argued that our general version of the historical story still bears the impress that was given to it by the great patriarchs of history-writing, so many of whom seem to have been whigs and gentlemen when they have not been Americans: and perhaps it is from these that our textbook historians have inherited the top hat and the pontifical manner, and the grace with which they hand out a consolation prize to the man who, 'though a reactionary, was irreproachable in his private life'.[42]

Butterfield distinguishes the systematic distortions of what he calls Whig history from a hypothetical Tory history, but the truth is that history as an explanation

and mode of enquiry – and as a form of cultural and political rationalization and self-justification – has been a Whig (and later Marxist) prerogative. The Tory Romantic did not seek his justification in a linear history of necessary change and development, let alone in 'progress', but in the ahistorical or abiding hierarchies and values of an Anglican ascendancy. And like the Church and the monarchy, literature would preserve the nation from the transient factions and fashions of history and recover or establish a timeless domain resistant to the contamination of a febrile marketplace and an increasingly mass culture. Like religion, then, literature should have no truck with history.

Thus it is not simply that – to quote Butterfield again – 'it has been easy to believe that Clio herself is on the side of the whigs',[43] rather that Clio herself (before she became a Marxist) *was* a Whig. This is in part at least what J. C. D. Clark has in mind when he says that 'it is no paradox that there never has been a "Tory interpretation of history"'.[44] Certainly, 'Whig' is the epithet which (following Butterfield) Clark uses to stigmatize the interpretation of the long eighteenth century that, focusing on 'the growth of schools, circulating libraries, provincial printing; the popularization of science; literary periodicals; book clubs, debating societies, popular articulacy among "the industrious classes"', sees it as a progressive liberation of the oppressed into dignity and autonomy, with 'capitalism at the centre of the picture'.[45] The entrenchment of this radical-liberal interpretation Clark attributes to what he refers to as the 'Penguin Books' historians of the 1960s and 1970s, 'drawn from a society indifferent to religion; hostile alike to society and to social rank; urban; "plural"; and affluent' – a tradition including, amongst others, 'Christopher Hill, E. J. Hobsbawm, J. H. Plumb, Lawrence Stone, E. P. Thompson, Raymond Williams'. Phillip Connell establishes the obvious continuity between this radical-liberal tradition of history stigmatized by Clark, and the historicists of later twentieth-century Romantic criticism:

> A heightened sensitivity to the supposedly anti-bourgeois attitudes pervading nineteenth-century literary culture certainly stimulated a new generation of literary historians and critics to challenge the Romantic identifications of the 'old' New Left [Raymond Williams and others]. The Romantic humanist heritage ... transmitted by the later Coleridge to Carlyle, Disraeli, Arnold and Ruskin was now consistently attacked as the vehicle of a deceptively oppositional form of conservatism, a shift in perspective that would eventually converge with 'New Historicist' and 'cultural materialist' suspicions of Romantic ideology as – at its crudest – a form of reactionary mystification.[46]

All this can be seen as an extension of a Whig tradition extending back through Macaulay and the *Edinburgh* reviewers – Jeffrey certainly, according to John Gibson Lockhart's *Peter's Letters to His Kinfolk*, had a 'thorough scorn of mystification'[47] – to Dugald Stewart and John Millar.

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As we saw when comparing Jeffrey with Butler on the accelerated development of literary culture in the late eighteenth century, historicism's recuperation of, and immersion in, historical realities is often accompanied by a kind of economic realism: a more or less cynical acceptance of the priority (in both senses) of economic exigencies – or what, in *Chartism*, Carlyle famously stigmatized as '*Cash Payment*', 'the universal sole nexus of man to man'.[48] (This renewed respect for economic constraints has to some extent informed the recovery of Byron, whose reputation from the beginning had laboured under the cloud of his success in the marketplace.) Given the origins of both capitalism and Marxism in the political economy and conjectural history of the Scottish Enlightenment, it is perhaps not surprising that modern liberal, left-wing literary historians should share with economic rationalists a belief in the overriding priority of market forces. 'Marxists and market liberals like to see themselves as deadly adversaries', to quote John Gray, 'but they have a remarkably similar view of the world. Both subscribe to a version of determinism in which economic forces are the motor of history, and nationalism and religion are secondary or marginal factors. Both look forward to a universal civilization in which cultural identities of the past have withered away, or else retreated into private life'.[49] In sketching the world entirely as it goes and highlighting the economic motive, both the literary historicist and the economic rationalist are intolerant of the kind of reactionary Toryism that resists the necessary evolution of 'commercial society', and both publicize a contempt for all forms of Romantic mystification.

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Against Romanticism

As it happens, the accusation levelled at Wordsworth by the historicists of refusing, denying, deferring or displacing history shares critical criteria and ethical implications, not only with Jeffrey's Whiggism, but also with some of the classic left- and right-wing denunciations of Romanticism, from Goethe's identifying it as a disease through T. E. Hulme on Romanticism as a 'spilt religion', Georg Lukacs on the 'hothouse' of the Romantic ego and T. S. Eliot on Welsh football hooliganism.[50] All of them see Romanticism as self-preoccupied and socially irresponsible. Jeffrey's controversial campaign against the 'self-indulgence and self-admiration' of Wordsworth's genius is the subject of Chapters 3 and 4 of this study, his most sustained criticism occurring in the article on *The Excursion*, in which Wordsworth is accused of having 'sacrificed so many precious gifts at the shrine of those paltry idols which he has set up for himself among his lakes and his mountains'.[51] That Wordsworth should have (in his own words) 'retired to his native mountains, with the hope of being enabled to construct a literary Work that might live' struck the cosmopolitan Jeffrey as perverse and self-defeating.[52]

Just so, the recent historicist attack is a call to Wordsworth and the Wordsworthians – a call no less inspired than Jeffrey's by assumptions about individual and social sanity – to come down from the mountain and out of the counties and regions of the reclusive and sublimated Self. 'The heroic ideal being extracted from Romantic poetry' by traditional criticism, complains Marilyn Butler – the ideal of what Butler calls 'the literate recluse' – 'is far too privileged', 'too professionally interested, to seem truly universal'.[53] Much of Jeffrey's commentary on the arrogance of contemporary poetry and its belief 'in *the dispensing power* of genius and social feeling, in all matters of morality and common sense'[54] anticipates the campaign of both left-wing and conservative criticism to rescue literature from the self-aggrandizing secular idealists and return it to a less privileged position within a much larger network of social practices.

Byron and Jeffrey got off to a bad start, as we shall see in Chapter 6, but both would go on to acknowledge how much they had in common. Sceptical in his thinking – 'I deny nothing, but doubt everything'[55] – a Whig in politics, and willing enough at times to pander to what Jeffrey called 'popular' taste, Byron sounded the same call to Wordsworth and the Lake poets throughout his career as a satirist and polemicist. His exasperation with the sort of elitist ('genial') posturing he found in Wordsworth and Coleridge and with their exclusion of the common reader perfectly anticipates the mood of recent Whig criticism:

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> You, Gentlemen! by dint of long seclusion
> From better company have kept your own
> At Keswick, and through continued fusion
> Of one another's minds at last have grown
> To deem as a most logical conclusion
> That Poesy has wreaths for you alone;
> There is a narrowness in such a notion
> Which makes me wish you'd change your lakes for ocean.
>
> Byron, *Don Juan*[56]

Whichever side one chooses to take in these 'civil wars', however, the triumph of historicism in Romantic studies in the 1980s and 1990s must be seen as a triumph of history's determination to repeat itself. This is no more than Jerome McGann himself asks us to recognize when, at that vitally disputatious point in *The Romantic Ideology*, he invokes Francis Jeffrey's infamous dismissal of Wordsworth's *The Excursion*: 'This will never do. Let me begin to reopen the problem of defining Romanticism.'[57]

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