Romanticism as Political Critique: Authority, Sympathy, and the Modern State

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Introduction

Scholarship on British Romanticism has consistently emphasized the movement's political character, but the way critics interpret Romantic dissent, authority, and freedom have changed significantly over time. Earlier critical approaches, such as Howard Brogan's *The English Romantics: Revolution, Reaction, and the Generation Gap* (1974), portrayed the movement as one of initial revolutionary enthusiasm that gave way to political disillusionment and retreat. In this view, writers like William Wordsworth and Samuel Taylor Coleridge began as idealists inspired by the French Revolution but ultimately withdrew from radical politics into moral reflection and aesthetic inwardness. More recent scholarship, however, redefines Romanticism as a sustained interrogation of power and ideology rather than a retreat from them. Critics such as Timothy Michael, Alan Rawes, and Kirill Chepurin argue that Romantic writers engaged directly with questions of political reason, tyranny, and freedom, while others, including Jeremy Davies, H. George Hahn, and Porscha Fermanis, extend this engagement to the material contexts of war, empire, and ecology. Across these perspectives, one trend stands out: Romantic writers were not detached dreamers of the imagination but deeply engaged participants in debates about revolution, authority, and social transformation.

Yet even with this expanded view, much of the scholarship remains oriented toward historical reconstruction. Studies have carefully demonstrated how the Romantics responded to their own moment of upheaval, but fewer have asked how these critiques of authority and systemic oppression might speak to contemporary politics, even though the problems Romantics confronted (i.e., state violence, economic precarity, racial injustice, and the erosion of civic trust) remain urgent features of democratic life today. Mapping these continuities clarifies why Romantic political thought is not only historically significant but intellectually necessary for

understanding the pressures facing modern democracy. This review therefore surveys existing work on Romanticism and political dissent, war and nationhood, slavery and race, and systemic crises in economy and ecology, highlighting how recent scholarship opens space for connecting Romantic political thought to twenty-first-century democratic debates. To see how this shift unfolds across scholarship, we can first turn to debates over Romantic political dissent, where changing interpretations of revolution and retreat become especially visible.

Romanticism and Political Dissent

The generational model has been one of the most enduring ways of framing Romantic politics. Howard Brogan's 1974 study depicts the early Romantics as beginning in revolutionary enthusiasm only to settle into conservatism. This account established the notion of Romanticism as a movement marked by political retreat, suggesting that the radical energies of the 1790s dissolved into accommodation with existing power structures. Yet this narrative of decline soon met resistance from scholars who uncovered political complexity where earlier critics saw withdrawal.

In the decades that followed, Romantic scholarship gradually moved away from this narrative of retreat toward a broader understanding of the period's political entanglements. H. George Hahn and Joshua Lambier, for example, emphasize the historical and philosophical conditions that shaped Romantic responses to power, such as war, institutional reform, and moral crisis, rather than treating those responses as evidence of withdrawal. This shift reframed Romanticism as a literature embedded in systemic contexts rather than isolated acts of imagination, paving the way for the more explicitly theoretical approaches of recent decades. As attention moved from historical circumstances to modes of thought, critics began tracing not only

what Romantics believed, but how they questioned the conditions under which belief itself becomes political.

Later studies have pushed beyond this simplified trajectory. Timothy Michael's *British Romanticism and the Critique of Political Reason* (2016) argues that Romantic writers did more than shift positions: they subjected political rationality itself to scrutiny. For Michael, figures such as Wordsworth and Coleridge recognized that rationalist frameworks of reform failed to account for passions, contradictions, and human complexity. Rather than naïve idealists, these poets emerge as critics of the very structures of political thought, questioning whether reason could ever guarantee liberty. This interrogation of political reason, however, did not resolve the contradictions of freedom; rather, it opened new lines of inquiry into how revolution produces its own forms of domination.

Where earlier scholarship often reframed Romantic politics as a movement from radical hope to retreat, more critics have emphasized the persistence of revolutions' contradictions within Romantic thought itself. Rather than depicting freedom as a stable achievement, these studies reveal Romanticism's awareness that liberation can collapse into new forms of domination. Alan Rawes's 2021 study explores this dynamic through Lord Byron, Percy Bysshe Shelley, and Mary Shelley, showing how their engagement with Vittorio Alfieri's dramatizations of tyranny exposes the paradox of revolt reproducing the power it seeks to destroy. In their work, revolution is not a final victory but an ongoing cycle of rebellion and repression. This is a recognition that political freedom must constantly redefine itself as the threat of renewed authority. At the same time, other critics shifted focus from tragedy to possibility, asking whether Romanticism harbored alternative models of freedom beyond institutional politics.

At the same time, recent readings of Romanticism have turned toward the utopian and anarchic possibilities that emerge from this awareness of failure. Kirill Chepurin's 2021 account, for instance, approaches the movement through the concept of 'bliss,' a form of immanent freedom that resists systemic order altogether. His argument reframes Romanticism as an experimental spacer for imagining modes of being and community beyond institutional constraint. Collectively, these studies reveal Romanticism as a literature of restless critique; resisting tyranny not through resolution but through the continual invention of new political imaginaries.

Taken together, these studies illustrate a clear trend in Romantic scholarship. Brogan identifies Romanticism with political retreat, while Michael reframes it as a critique of political reason, Rawes emphasizes its tragic awareness of tyranny's persistence, and Chepurin highlights its anarchic, utopian impulses. The shift is from seeing Romanticism as a failed enthusiasm to understanding it as a sustained interrogation of political authority and dissent. This critical trajectory opens a path for considering how Romantic political thought might resonate with twenty-first-century struggles against systemic oppression and governmental authority. If Romanticism interrogated political authority on philosophical terms, it did so while embedded in the concrete pressures of war and national conflict; pressures that shaped both literary form and political imagination.

Romanticism, War, and Nationhood

The experience of war defined the Romantic imagination more profoundly than any single political event. Rather than serving as background, the Napoleonic conflicts became a structuring condition for Romantic thought; a crucible in which ideas of nationhood, morality,

and collective identity were forged. Romantic writers inherited a Britain perpetually at war, and as Hahn (2017) argues, this reality shaped not only the historical circumstances of literary production but also the imaginative frameworks through which poets conceived of self and society. Romanticism thus emerged in what might be called a ‘wartime culture,’ where poetry became a means of negotiating both patriotic loyalty and moral doubt. Within this wartime culture, poetry became a medium through which history was narrated and national identity was constructed.

Within this atmosphere, the figure of war transformed from a political reality into a symbolic system through which national identity was continuously reimagined. Neil Ramsey’s (2017) analysis of James Montgomery shows how events like Waterloo were elevated from historical battles into cultural myths, which is the foundation of what he terms a ‘poetry of history.’ Romantic writers, in this sense, acted as architects of national memory, translating violence into moral narrative. This process imbued Romantic poetry with historical consciousness, but it also exposed the fragility of unity in a nation built on conquest and loss. Yet the very process of myth-making exposed fractures within Britain, particularly in the contested politics of Union and regional allegiance.

That tension between affirmation and fracture becomes especially visible in Ainsley McIntosh’s reading of Walter Scott’s narrative poetry (2020), where the Napoleonic wars serve as a stage on which the contradictions of British Unionism unfold. Scott’s simultaneous celebration of Scottish regiments and preservation of regional difference dramatizes the complex negotiation between imperial unity and local allegiance. Romantic nationalism, through Scott, reveals itself as both integrative and divisive; a project of imagined coherence always shadowed

by internal distinction. These internal conflicts were further complicated when Romantic writers looked outward to empire, where ideals of liberty collided with expansionist power.

The contradictions of Romantic nationhood extend beyond the British Isles into the imperial sphere, where war and expansion blurred the boundaries between liberty and domination. Robert Southey's *History of Brazil*, as examined by Fermanis (2019), reads as a case study in the moral ambivalence of British imperial identity. Southey critiques Spanish and Portuguese imperial violence but simultaneously upholds Britain as a supposedly exceptional, benign colonial power. In this way, Fermanis demonstrates that Southey's engagement with nationhood and empire is deeply ambivalent: he recognizes tyranny abroad but rationalizes British imperial expansion as a civilizing mission. Such tensions reflect broader Romantic negotiations with authority, in which national identity was forged not only through opposition to external enemies but also through participation in imperial projects. These interventions complicate any simple story of Romantic nationalism by revealing its contested and imperial foundations.

Together, these perspectives highlight the extent to which Romantic literature was entangled with the upheavals of military conflict and the forging of national identity. Hahn situates Romantic writing within the pervasive atmosphere of war, Ramsey shows how events such as Waterloo were elevated into cultural and historical touchstones, McIntosh reveals how questions of Union and Scottish distinctiveness complicated narratives of national unity, and Fermanis emphasizes the uneasy coexistence of anti-imperial critique with British exceptionalism. What emerges from this body of work is a picture of Romanticism as inseparable from the conflicts that shaped its cultural moment, where poetry and history were written under the sign of battle, empire, and contested nationhood. Read in this way, Romantic entanglements

with war and national identity also illuminate present-day debates over nationalism, imperial legacy, and the politics of collective memory. Questions of nationhood were inseparable from questions of human hierarchy, which became most visible in Romanticism's engagement with slavery and racial justice.

Romanticism, Slavery, and Race

Romantic engagements with slavery and empire formed one of the most contested arenas of the period's political imagination. Scholars now debate whether Romantic abolitionism was a moral crusade, a mode of imperial self-justification, or a site of radical Black thought that unsettled both. This field spans moral reformers such as Southey, satirists who weaponized irony, and transatlantic voices who redefined freedom on global terms. Against this backdrop, Southey's *Poems on the Slave Trade* (1797) offers an early attempt to humanize the enslaved and awaken Britain's conscience, yet his reformism also reveals the limits of a sentimental humanitarian stance. Yet abolitionist rhetoric was never ideologically stable; its sentimental appeals often masked deeper contradictions.

Abolitionist discourse in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries drew power from its emotional appeal, but recent critics show that its persuasive force depended just as much on irony and contradiction as on sympathy. Deirdre Coleman (2018) observes that the cultural campaign against slavery often relied on satire and visual caricature to puncture Britain's moral complacency. Rather than merely appealing to pity, these satirical interventions mocked the hypocrisy of a nation that wept for enslaved Africans while profiting from their labor. Their laughter was not lighthearted but corrosive, which acts as an imaginative tactic that forced readers to confront their own complicity. Reading Southey through this lens reveals how even

apparently earnest humanitarian verse partook in a broader discursive experiment that used affect and irony together to expose the instability of British virtue, The sentimental language of reform, which sought to redeem the empire through moral feeling, was itself haunted by the knowledge that sentiment could mask domination. These tensions become sharper when abolitionist is read through transatlantic and Black intellectual traditions that refused to treat sympathy as the foundation of liberty.

That tension becomes still sharper when we consider how Romantic ideals of liberty were reimagined beyond Britain's borders. Julian Whitney (2022) argues that writers like Ottobah Cugoano radically expanded the conceptual field of Romanticism by transforming abolitionist rhetoric into a philosophy of universal emancipation. Cugoano's *Thoughts and Sentiments on the Evil and Wicked Traffic of the Slavery and Commerce of the Human Species* (1787) exposes the hypocrisy of European humanitarianism and grounds freedom not in benevolence but in divine and rational equality. His vision of monogenesis, the unity of humankind, turns Romantic moral feeling outward, demanding that liberty apply to all peoples, not merely to the sympathetic objects of white imagination. In this light, Romanticism appears less as an exclusively European movement of conscience and more as a transatlantic discourse shaped by Black Atlantic critique. Cugoano's voice thus reframes the sentimental tradition Coleman identifies: where satire ridicules hypocrisy from within the empire, radical Black authors dismantle its epistemic foundations altogether. Adding imperial ideology to this framework reveals how humanitarian feeling could reinforce the very systems it sought to reform.

At the same time, the humanitarianism that animated Southey's poetry could also sustain imperial authority. As Fermanis (2019) demonstrates in her reading of Southey's *History of Brazil* (1810), abolitionist language often coexisted with narratives of British exceptionalism that

portrayed empire as moral guardianship. This paradox exposes Romanticism's dependence on the very structures it sought to resist: its authors could condemn tyranny abroad while preserving faith in Britain's civilizing mission. When read alongside Coleman's emphasis on satire's disruptive power and Whitney's account of transatlantic radicalism, Fermanis's insight reveals Romantic abolitionism as a site of competing moral economies. Compassion, irony, and imperial pride circulate together, generating a discourse that oscillates between critique and justification. The resulting picture is not coherence but conflict; and it is precisely this instability that gives Romantic debates on slavery continuing relevance.

Rather than presenting a unified stance, Romantic engagements with slavery and race reveal a field of tensions: satire and sentiment coexisted uneasily, antislavery impulses could slide into imperial exceptionalism, and radical voices like Cugoano's pressed far beyond the cautious reformism of many contemporaries. Reading Coleman, Whitney, and Fermanis together demonstrates not just the variety of approaches to slavery but also the instability of Romanticism's political commitments, which oscillated between dismantling and sustaining structures of domination. This instability, far from diminishing Romantic literature's significance, highlights its urgency: the period's debates over liberty, equality, and human dignity anticipate ongoing struggles with systemic racism and colonial legacies that remain unsettled in the present.

Romanticism, Nature, Economy, and Systemic Crisis

Romanticism's political imagination was not confined to questions of revolution, war, or slavery. Recent critics have increasingly emphasized how environmental and economic upheavals shaped the Romantic mind, arguing that the movement's fascination with nature and

imagination cannot be separated from the material disruptions of its age. What earlier readers took to be private meditations on beauty or transcendence now appear as urgent responses to systemic crises, whether that be ecological, industrial, financial, etc. Within this framework, Romanticism becomes less a retreat from modernity than an attempt to comprehend its transformations: the enclosure of land, the acceleration of capital, and the emergence of global markets that redefined the relation between human life and the natural world.

Romantic attention to the natural world, then, reflects not pastoral escapism but an effort to think through the disruptions of modernity. The Romantic landscape becomes a site where the pressures of enclosure, industrial expansion,and ecological transformation register at both social and psychological levels. Fields and valleys that once appeared timeless now bear the marks of displacement, labor, and loss. The intimacy between nature and self that Romantic poets sought to recover was also an act of resistance against the abstraction of life into economic value. As critics such as Jeremy Davies (2018) have argued, the Romantic imagination does not stand outside political economy; it responds to it by translating economic dispossession into ethical power not from pastoral idealization but from their recognition that industrial capitalism was reshaping both landscape and consciousness. Romantic ecology is thus less an image of harmony than an attempt to understand how the natural world becomes implicated in systems of human inequality.

This preoccupation with instability extends beyond environmental loss to a broader fascination with organic process to systemic change. Romantic writers repeatedly returned to images of growth, decay, and renewal to grasp the fragility of continuity itself. The natural world offered a vocabulary through which to imagine transformation that was both creative and destructive. As Joshua Lambier (2016) notes, Romanticism's 'evolutionary' imagination

perceives vitality and extinction as two sides of the same process. This sense of perpetual flux unsettles the Enlightenment ideal of a stable, rational order; instead, Romanticism depicts existence as contingent and interdependent. Whether contemplating the erosion of natural landscapes or the volatility of human emotion, Romantic writers treat change as the defining condition of life. The Romantic sublime, those moments of awe or terror before nature's power, becomes not only an aesthetic response but also a philosophical recognition of forces that exceed human control.

The same sensitivity to instability that characterizes Romantic natural philosophy also underlies its engagement with the emerging financial systems of the early nineteenth century. The expansion of credit, speculation, and paper money introduced new forms of abstraction that blurred the line between representation and reality. The value of money, like the meaning of a poetic symbol, depended on collective belief and trust. In this parallel, Alexander Dick (2013) and others have located a shared anxiety between economic and literary production: both circulate intangible signs that can lose value when detached from the material world they claim to represent. For Romantic poets, this instability of value became a moral and epistemological crisis. The same imagination that could idealize nature or human virtue also risked becoming a form of speculation; an economy of feeling susceptible to inflation and collapse. Romanticism's exploration of representation, whether in language or finance, thus reflects a deeper concern with the fragility of meaning in a world governed by systems beyond control.

Read together, these studies emphasize Romanticism's deep engagement with systemic crises; environmental, organic, and financial. Far from standing apart from modernity's disruptions, Romantic writers grappled directly with transformations in land, life, and money that destabilized traditional orders. The attention Davies, Lambier, and Dick bring to these contexts

recasts Romanticism as a literature of precarity, one that probes how human freedom and imagination are conditioned by ecological and economic systems. This view not only complicates Romantic ideals of harmony with transcendence but also brings them into sharp dialogue with twenty-first-century concerns about climate change, extinction, and financial volatility.

Gender, Women Writers, and the Politics of Revolution

While much recent scholarship has redefined Romanticism through politics, empire, and environment, the movement's engagement with gender remains equally central to understanding its critiques of authority. The Romantic period witnessed not only revolutions in government, but also revolutions in ideas about human rights, education, and the social order. These function as debates in which women writers were deeply involved. Among them, Mary Wollstonecraft stands as a foundational figure whose responses to Edmund Burke's *Reflections on the Revolution in France* (1790) inaugurated a distinctly feminist form of political romanticism.

Burke's *Reflections* defends aristocratic hierarchy and the sanctity of tradition, portraying the French Revolution as a disastrous rebellion against natural order. Wollstonecraft's *A Vindication of the Rights of Men* (1790) was an immediate rebuttal. She attacks Burke's sentimentalism directly, accusing him of "unmanly sarcasms, and puerile conceits" (36) exposing how his emotional theatrics mask the injustices of hereditary power. She goes further, charging Burke with "wilful misrepresentation and wanton abuse" (36), insisting that political legitimacy cannot rest on inherited privilege but must be built upon rational equality. Her critique links private morality to public justice, arguing that ethical feeling must be grounded in reason, not performative sensibility; this becomes a central principle in later Romantic political thought.

In *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman* (1792), Wollstonecraft extends this argument into the social sphere, insisting that women's subordination is not natural but cultural; the product of limited education and systemic dependence. Her "simple principle" is that if woman "isn't fitted by education to become man's companion, she will stop the progress of knowledge, because truth must be common to all" (2). Denied rational training, women cannot understand why they "ought to be virtuous," nor see how duty is connected to their "real good," leaving both sexes morally stunted (2). She thus reframes female education as a republican necessity: if children are raised to be citizens, "their mother must be a patriot," capable of attending to the "moral and civil interest of mankind," rather than being shut out from such investigations (2). This insistence that women's rational and civic capacities are indispensable to the health of the polity places Wollstonecraft at the heart of the Romantic revolution in ideas, where the pursuit of liberty and the critique of oppression expand beyond formal politics to encompass gender, the family, and the everyday work of forming citizens.

By situating Wollstonecraft within the broader landscape of Romantic dissent, we can see how questions of gender function not as a separate topic, but as integral to the movement's engagement with freedom, reason, and reform. Her dedicatory letter pointedly turns Burke's own language back on him: if it is a "political phenomenon" to see "one half of the human race excluded by the other half from participation of government," she asks, "what does your constitution rest on?" (2). The "abstract rights of man," she argues, must apply equally to women "by a parity of reasoning" (2), and she "throw[s] down [her] gauntlet" to deny that there is "any way for a woman to be virtuous that isn't also a way for a man to be virtuous" (35). Here the rhetoric of revolution is explicitly universalized: tyrants "from the weak king to the weak father" all use the same paternalist claim that subordination is "for [the subject's] happiness," while they

in fact "crush reason" and keep dependents "walled in" and "groping in the dark" (2). In this sense, Wollstonecraft represents a crucial hinge between political Romanticism and feminist critique: by exposing the structural parallels between monarchy and patriarchy, she transforms the language of natural rights into an argument for universal human equality grounded in shared reason rather than inherited privilege. Her challenge also opened the way for later Romantic writers, including P.B. Shelley's radical celebrations of intellectual freedom and Blake's attacks on "mind-forg'd manacles," (Blake *London,* 8) to think about liberation in terms that necessarily include women as rational, moral agents.

The arguments Wollstonecraft advanced found powerful echoes in the work of other Romantic women writers who likewise used poetry to interrogate national identity, morality, and the costs of power. Anna Laetitia Barbauld's *Eighteen Hundred and Eleven* (1812), opens with the relentless, martial soundscape of a Britain consumed by war: "Still the loud death drum, thundering from afar, / O'er the vext nations pours the storm of war" (1-2); before turning to the helpless peasant for whom "the sword, not sickle, reaps the harvest now," (18) and who "but retires to die" (20) before unrestrained violence. In one devastating apostrophe, Barbauld strips away patriotic self-congratulation: "Thou who hast shared the guilt must share the woe" (46). Britain is implicated not as a distant spectator but as an active participant in imperial bloodshed. Later in the poem, her prophetic imagination projects a future in which London's "faded glories rise to view" (158) only as ruins, and foreign pilgrims visit "the mighty city" (159) as a fallen Rome of commerce. The shift of "Genius" (321) away from Europe to "Andes' heights" (324) and "La Plata" (329) frames empire as historically contingent and morally accountable: Barbauld rewrites national greatness as a story of decline produced by moral failure, not as permanent triumph.

Felicia Hemans likewise explores the intersections of war, gender, and domestic virtue, but she does so by dramatizing the emotional and ethical demands placed on children and households. In *Casabianca* (1826), the famous image of “The boy [who] stood on the burning deck, / Whence all but he had fled” (1-2) turns heroic obedience into a scene of unbearable pathos. Hemans emphasizes that he “would not go, / Without his father’s word,” (9-10) even as “the flames rolled on” (9) and his father lies “faint in death below” (11). The poem closes by insisting that “the noblest thing which perished there / Was that young faithful heart,” (38-39) suggesting that the true cost of naval glory is the sacrifice of childlike loyalty on the altar of national war. In *The Homes of England* (1827), by contrast, Hemans idealizes the domestic interiors: “The stately homes of England. / How beautiful they stand!” (9-10); but does so in order to cast them as the moral core of the nation. Hemans’ catalog moves from “stately,” (9) to “merry,” (17) to “blessed,” (25) and finally to “The cottage homes of England” (33) that “by thousands on her plains” (34) shelter the “lowly” (39) who “sleep…as the bird beneath their eaves” (31-32). The concluding prayer that “The free fair homes of England! / Long, long in the hut and hall / May hearts of native proof be rear’d / To guard each hallow’d wall” (33-36) recasts domestic affection as a form of civic guardianship. Women’s voices, memories, and educative roles within these homes become a measure of national conscience: the health of the polity is indexed by what happens around the hearth.

These female voices expand Romanticism’s political reach by demonstrating that debates over freedom and authority are not confined to parliamentary reform or spectacular revolution, but extend into the realms of home, education, and feeling. Wollstonecraft’s demand that women “only bow to the authority of reason” rather than remain “modest slaves of opinion” (*Rights of Women* 35) finds poetic afterlives in Barbauld’s refusal to sentimentalize war and Hemans’s

insistence that domestic virtue can both sustain and judge the nation. Their work complements and complicates the political visions of Southey, Byron, and Shelley, revealing that the struggle for liberty was also a struggle over whose voices count in defining it. By placing Wollstonecraft, Barbauld, and Hemans within the same continuum of Romantic dissent, we can see how questions of gender and morality reshape the broader Romantic project: the ongoing negotiation between reasoning and feeling, justice and power, and the ideal of universal human rights. The revolutionary impulse that animated these women's writings also reverberates throughout the work of Romantic figures such as P. B. Shelley, Lord Byron, and Germaine de Staël, who transformed the language of freedom and reform into broader meditations on power, conscience, and collective change. Their engagement with revolution, while both hopeful and disillusioned, continued this Romantic inquiry into how ideals of liberty can survive the realities of history.

Synthesis

Across these varied strands of scholarship, a picture of Romanticism emerges as deeply enmeshed in the crises of its age. Studies of political dissent reveal writers not only shifting between radicalism and conservatism but also interrogating the very structures of political reason and exposing tragic cycles of tyranny and freedom. Work on war and nationhood emphasizes how military conflict and imperial ambition pervaded Romantic culture, shaping national identity while exposing its fractures and contradictions. Research on slavery and race demonstrates that Romantic literature was implicated in global debates on human rights, where abolitionist impulses coexisted uneasily with imperial exceptionalism, and where radical Black voices demanded liberty on universal terms. Finally, recent ecocritical and economic accounts show

Romanticism grappling with systemic instability, whether in the form of enclosure and industrial capitalism, the precarious processes of organic life, or the abstractions of financial speculation.

What unites these perspectives is their recognition that Romantic writers were not retreating from history but actively engaging with its most urgent conflicts. Romanticism appears less as a literature of transcendence than as a literature of entanglement: with revolution and reaction, with nation and empire, with slavery and abolition, with environment and economy. At the same time, this body of scholarship remains largely oriented toward historical reconstruction, situating Romantic text firmly within the contexts of late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries. What is less developed is an account of how these Romantic critiques of power, authority, and systemic disruption might resonate with present-day democratic struggles.

It is precisely this gap that the current project seeks to address. By building on the insights of recent scholarship while extending their implications forward, the thesis will argue that Romantic interrogations of freedom and oppression have direct relevance for twenty-first-century politics of the United States. Questions raised by Southey, Byron, Shelley, Wollstonecraft, Barbauld, and Hemans about liberty, authority, and systemic injustice continue to reverberate in debates about racial inequality, economic precarity, and climate crisis. The challenge is not only to historicize Romanticism but also to recognize its enduring capacity to illuminate modern political dilemmas.

Thematic Sections

Revolution and Dissent

If Romanticism's engagement with war, empire, and gender exposes the reach of systemic power, its literature of revolution and dissent reveals how writers imagined resistance

itself. Percy Bysshe Shelley, Lord Byron, and Germaine de Staël each transform the political upheavals of their time into imaginative experiments in liberty, collective will, and moral reform. Their works register both the exhilaration and the disillusionment of revolutionary ideals of how freedom's promise continually collides with structures of domination and human fallibility. In confronting tyranny, corruption, and social inertia, these writers turned to literature as a space for testing political possibility: a moral laboratory where new forms of consciousness and community might emerge.

Shelley's poetry epitomizes the Romantic vision of moral revolution through imagination and compassion. *The Masque of Anarchy* (1819), written in the aftermath of the Peterloo Massacre, reimagines protest as non-violent moral awakening. Shelley's opening processional of allegorical figures: Murder with "a mask like Castlereagh" (6) and Fraud in "an ermined gown" (14) with tears that "turned to mill-stones as they fell" (16) expose political authority as fundamentally performative and corrupt. When Anarchy appears "on a white horse, splashed with blood" (30) and bears the inscription "I AM GOD, AND KING, AND LAW!" (36), Shelley collapses state, church, and legal power into a single tyrannical construct. Later, the spectacle of the crowd bowing to Anarchy "with pomp" (57) and declaring "Thou art King, and God and Lord" (70) critiques how obedience becomes internalized through ritual and spectacle. The poem ultimately turns toward visionary resistance: "Rise like lions after slumber / In unvanquishable number" (149-150). The call to "Shake your chains to earth like dew / Which in sleep had fallen on you– / Ye are many–they are few" (151-153) reframes oppression as something that persists only while the people remain unconscious of their collective power. Shelley thus reimagines revolution as a transformation of perception rather than an incitement to violence.

Shelley's political thought extends beyond immediate protest. In *Prometheus Unbound* (1820), he reimagines the Greek myth as a drama of liberation through forgiveness. Prometheus's renunciation of the curse: "It doth repent me…I wish no living thing to suffer pain" (Shelley 1.1-3) enacts the poem's shift from retributive anger to ethical clarity. The culminating vision in Act IV articulates Shelley's mature revolutionary creed: "To forgive wrongs darker than death or night," (4.571) "To defy Power, which seems omnipotent," (4.572) and "To hope till Hope creates / From its own wreck the thing it contemplates" (4.573-574). The final affirmation that this is "alone Life; Joy, Empire and Victory!" (4.578) recasts political victory as moral and imaginative sovereignty. For Shelley, revolution begins with inner transformation; an awakening of sympathy, conscience, and imaginative freedom.

Byron, by contrast, dramatizes the limits of idealism and the contradictions within revolutionary fervor. In *Childe Harold's Pilgrimage* (1812-1818), Byron's protagonist wanders through the ruins of Europe and concludes: "There is the moral of all human tales: / 'Tis but the same rehearsal of the past, / First Freedom, and then Glory–when that fails, / Wealth, vice, corruption–barbarism at last" (4.108). History here collapses into a single cyclical pattern: liberation breeds ambition, which decays into materialism and corruption before ending in collapse. Byron's vision rejects narratives of steady progress; instead, he emphasizes how revolutionary rhetoric becomes entangled with spectacle. His portrait of Napoleon as "the greatest, nor the worst of men," (4.316) whose spirit was "antithetically mixed," (4.316) shows how the very qualities that fuel revolutionary ascent also precipitate ruin. Byron's heroes are extreme, theatrical, and self-divided, reflecting his conviction that rebellion often reproduces the tyrannies it opposes. His skepticism anticipates modern doubts about revolutions that promise liberation while perpetuating hierarchy.

Germaine de Staël's political writings bridge continental philosophy and Romantic culture, offering a distinctive perspective shaped by exile, gender, and cosmopolitanism. In *Considerations on the Principal Events of the French Revolution* (1818), de Staël argues that defenders of tradition misunderstand history: "it is liberty which is ancient, and despotism which is modern" (28). She warns that "the first symptoms of tyranny cannot be watched too carefully," because a single despot can "enchai[n] the will of a multitude" who "would wish to be free" but "dare not communicate their thoughts freely" (441). For de Staël, liberty depends on psychological and social conditions, such as communication, civic trust, and mutual sympathy, not merely constitutional design. Her heroines in *Delphine* and *Corinne* further illustrate these principles: they show that political freedom relies on the free play of sensibility, judgment, and moral feeling, and that oppression begins when society constrains the expression of virtue and sympathy.

De Staël's contribution to Romantic dissent lies in how she transforms these insights into a broader political vision. Rather than locating freedom in abstract rights alone, she argues that liberty must be tempered by sympathy and sustained through emotional intelligence and civic vigilance. The breakdown she describes of when fear isolates individuals and makes them afraid to "communicate their thoughts" (441) reveals that tyranny operates as a psychological condition before it becomes a political one. In contrast to Shelley's pursuit of moral purity and Byron's exposure of corruption, de Staël locates political renewal in human relationships through conversation, empathy, and the exchange of ideas across nations. Her insistence that "liberty is ancient" (28) reframes freedom as a moral inheritance that must be actively sustained through social bonds and imaginative fellow-feeling. Her conception of Europe as a moral community founded on dialogue and virtue stands in opposition to Napoleon's authoritarian nationalism, and

her fusion of sentiment and intellect anticipates later feminist theory, in which reason and feeling function as mutually sustaining foundations of justice.

Taken together, these writers illustrate the spectrum of Romantic responses to political unrest. Each confronts the collapse of revolutionary idealism yet refuses resignation. Shelley imagines the transformation of power through love; Byron exposes the vanity of rebellion; de Staël searches for moderation through sympathy and education. Their works engage governmental authority not only as a political problem but as a psychological and moral one. The tyranny they resist operates both externally through in-state power, censorship, and empire, and internally, in fear, pride, and complicity. In this sense, their writing participates in a broader Romantic project to redefine freedom as a state of ethical awareness rather than mere autonomy.

The relevance of these Romantic critiques extends far beyond their own historical moment. Shelley's call for awakening, Byron's exposure of hypocrisy, and de Staël's vision of liberal cosmopolitanism all anticipate ongoing struggles within modern democracies. In the twenty-first century, debates over protest, free expression, and systemic injustice echo the same tendons between ideal and institution that these writers explored. Shelley's moral revolution parallels contemporary movements for social and radical justice that seek transformation through empathy rather than violence. Byron's ironic self-awareness mirrors modern skepticism toward performative activism and political spectacle. De Staël's insistence on reasoned dialogue and moral education as the basis for reform anticipates current appeals for civic virtue and transnational cooperation in an age of polarization.

Ultimately, the Romantic literature of revolution and dissent endures because it refuses simplistic answers. Shelley, Byron, and de Staël remind modern readers that freedom must be continually reimagined, and that dissent, to remain meaningful, must be self-critical. Their works

reveal that political authority is not overthrown once and for all but must be negotiated through the constant interplay of imagination, conscience, and community. The Romantic conviction that ethical imagination can challenge oppressive systems remains vital to twenty-first-century democratic life, where the pursuit of liberty still demands both resistance and reflection.

Nature and Institutional Criticism

If Shelley, Byron, and de Staël reimagined political revolution through moral and emotional renewal, William Wordsworth and William Blake redirected that revolutionary impulse inward. Their poetry transforms the struggle against tyranny into a critique of the institutions (that being religious, industrial, and intellectual) that shape human perception itself. For both poets, the true battleground of freedom lies not in governments or armies but within the human mind and spirit. By turning to nature and imagination as counter-institutions, or forces of moral restoration and visionary resistance, Wordsworth and Blake redefine revolution as a spiritual and psychological process rather than a purely political one. In doing so, they relocate the question of authority: the problem is no longer who governs, but how perception itself has been governed; how ideology, habit, and reason colonize the imagination. Romanticism becomes, in their hands, an experiment in de-institutionalizing thought, an attempt to free human consciousness from the mechanical and the merely inherited.

Yet Wordsworth's retreat from overt politics does not signal apathy. His emphasis on natural education implicitly critiques the industrial and bureaucratic systems that alienate individuals from both environment and conscience. In *Michael* (1800), the scene where Michael cuts a sapling "with his own hand" (181) and fashions from it "a perfect shepherd's staff" (183) for Luke figures moral education as a slow, manual craft rooted in the land rather than

institutional authority. Luke is “prematurely called” (187) to his post as a “watchman…at gate or gap” (185-186), learning responsibility in a space “between a hindrance and a help” (189), where his growth is shaped by relationship, labor, and place rather than school, factory, or court. The image of the “old lamp” (124) known as “The Evening Star” (139), a “surviving comrade of uncounted hours (118) whose “constant light” (136) becomes “a public symbol of the life / That thrifty Pair had lived” (130-131), turns domestic routine into an ethical counter-institution, a communal emblem of steadfastness that stands against the anonymous forces of economic change.

In *The Old Cumberland Beggar* (1800), Wordsworth extends this critique to poor-law and workhouse reform. The beggar, whose “palsied hand” (16) scatters “crumbs in the showers” (18) that draw “small mountain birds” (19) to feed within “the length of half his staff” (21), is embedded in a web of small reciprocal relations with the natural world. The horseman who stops to “lodge the coin / Within the old Man’s hat” (28-29), the toll-gate woman who “quits her work” (35), and the post-boy who “passes gently by” (42), enact repeated “acts of love” (100) until “habit does the work / Of reason” (100-101); the beggar becomes “a record which together binds / Past deeds and offices of charity” (89-90). Against “Statesmen! ye…so restless in your wisdom” (67-68) who keep “a broom still ready… / To rid the world of nuisances” (69-70), Wordsworth insists that “none…should exist / Divorced from good” (74-77), and prays that no “HOUSE, misnamed of INDUSTRY” (180) should “make him a captive” (181) amid “life-consuming sounds” (182). Institutional improvement, he suggests, would destroy the very moral economy of sympathy the beggar sustains.

The imagination becomes the faculty through which justice is first perceived. In *Lines Written a Few Miles Above Tintern Abbey* (1798), the speaker recalls that in “lonely rooms, and

'mid the din / Of towns and cities" (26-27), he has owed to remembered landscapes "sensations sweet, / Felt in the blood, and felt along the heart… / With tranquil restoration" (28-31), culminating in the moment when, with "an eye made quiet by the power / Of harmony, and the deep power of joy" (48-49), "we see into the life of things" (50). Nature here functions as a counter-institution that re-educates perception, training a mode of ethical attention obscured by "the din" (26) of modern life. The "Lucy" poems distill this pedagogy at an even smaller scale. Lucy "dwelt among the untrodden ways / Beside the springs of Dove" (1-2), "whom there were none to praise / And very few to love" (3-4); she is "a violet by a mossy stone / Half hidden from the eye" (5-6) and "a star, when only one / Is shining in the sky" (7-8). Her "unknown" (9) life and death, which nevertheless make a "difference to me" (12), insist that value is measured not by institutional visibility or productivity but by the imagination's capacity to register quiet, overlooked lives. In these poems, Wordsworth reclaims the authority of the ordinary against the abstractions of power, suggesting that any just social reform must begin with the re-education of perception itself.

This inward turn amounts to a subtle but radical politics. In elevating emotion, memory, and communion with the natural world, Wordsworth undermines the Enlightenment faith in external institutions as arbiters of order. The poet's 'spots of time' and his reverence for humble life enact a democratic sensibility that refuses hierarchy: the poor beggar and the shepherd possess moral authority denied to those who legislate from a distance. The landscape functions as a living archive of human virtue, preserving modes of relation threatened by industrial progress. Wordsworth's vision anticipates modern ecological thought in its insistence that moral health depends upon environmental integrity. His critique of alienation, though couched in rural imagery, translates easily into contemporary terms: the estrangement produced by digital

capitalism and environmental degradation mirrors the dislocation wrought by enclosure. To recover imaginative sympathy is, for Wordsworth, the first step toward reclaiming political agency.

Blake, by contrast, never relinquishes his revolutionary intensity. His works, particularly *The Marriage of Heaven and Hell* (1794), directly attack the institutions that bind imagination: the Church, the State, and the mechanisms of reason itself. On Plate 14, Blake pointedly rejects the authority of institutional religion by claiming that the "ancient tradition that the world will be consumed in fire" (Plate 14) is true only "as I have heard from Hell" (Plate 14). Revelation comes from the site of supposed damnation, not divine law, exposing institutional religion as a system that manufactures fear to maintain power. Blake intensifies this critique when he writes that the cherub guarding the tree of life is "commanded to leave his guard" (Plate 14), after which "the whole creation will be consumed, and appear infinite. and holy, whereas now it appears finite & corrupt" (Plate 14). The apocalyptic transformation he envisions is not material but perceptual: institutions teach humans to see the world as fallen, bounded, and corrupt, while genuine vision reveals it as infinite and sacred.

Blake's alternative to institutional morality is a radical embrace of the senses. "This will come to pass by an improvement of sensual enjoyment" (Plate 14) he asserts, rejecting the asceticism and repression demanded by the Church. In place of the Enlightenment distinction between body and soul (a division that legitimizes moral discipline) he insists that "the notion that man has a body distinct from his soul, is to be expunged" (Plate 14). Blake reads this separation as the ideological foundation of institutional authority: if the soul is ranked above the body, then priests, kings, and philosophers can regulate desire, behavior, and thought in the name of spiritual or rational purity. His own artistic practice becomes the means of undoing this

hierarchy. Through "printing in the infernal method, by corrosives, which in Hell are salutary and medicinal" (Plate 14), Blake aims to "melt apparent surfaces away" (Plate 14), revealing "every thing…as it is, Infinite" (Plate 14). The corrosives that eat through copper plates materialize his poetic mission: a direct assault on the surfaces (moral, perceptual, doctrinal) that institutions erect to constrain human vision.

This culminates in Blake's most forceful claim about psychological oppression: "man has closed himself up, till he sees all things thro' narrow chinks of his cavern" (Plate 14). Echoing Plato's cave, Blake reframes modern tyranny as a condition of consciousness rather than a structure of law. Individuals, shaped by religious guilt, political fear, and philosophical abstraction, internalize systems that limit their ability to perceive truth. The "narrow chinks" are not natural limitations, but institutional ones; habits of seeing forged by external authority and then adopted by the mind itself. Blake's politics of vision therefore confronts tyranny at its root: liberation requires the cleansing of perception, the reopening of the senses, and the restoration of imaginative sight. In this context, his famous maxim "Energy is eternal delight" (Plate 5) becomes a political theology. Energy, for Blake, is the creative and desirable force that institutions suppress; delight is the state of imaginative freedom they fear. In *The Marriage of Heaven and Hell*, form becomes political; imagination emerges not as an escape from oppression but as the means by which true revolution is made possible.

Where Wordsworth turns to nature for moral restoration, Blake finds redemption in creative imagination. His vision is apocalyptic rather than restorative: society must be remade, not repaired. In *London* (1794), he begins by wandering "thro' each charter'd street / Near where the charter'd Thames does flow" (1-2), establishing a city in which even public waterways are regulated and enclosed. Every passerby bears "marks of weakness, marks of woe" (4), the visible

imprint of institutional control. The next stanza expands this field of oppression: Blake hears "in every cry of every Man" (5), in "every Infants cry of fear" (6), and "in every voice" (7) the "mind forg'd manacles" (8). By placing this line within a sequence of cries and bans, Blake shows that psychological bondage is not innate but produced by a fully institutionalized environment.

As the poem proceeds, Blake reveals what these internal manacles enable. The Chimney-sweeper's cry "appalls" (10) the "blackning Church" (10), and the Soldier's "sigh / Runs in blood down Palace walls" (11-12), exposing the Church and monarchy as morally complicit in the violence they oversee. The final stanza intensifies this indictment: moving through the "midnight streets" (13), Blake hears how the "youthful Harlots curse / Blasts the new-born Infants tear / And blights with plagues the Marriage hearse" (14-16). Even birth and marriage, the most sacred of social bonds, are shown to be contaminated by systemic exploitation.

In this fuller context, the force of "mind-forg'd manacles" (8) becomes clear. It is the psychological mechanism that allows every institution in the poem (Church, Palace, family) to perpetuate suffering. Blake's politics of vision therefore confronts tyranny at its mental and perceptual root: liberation requires the cleansing of the senses, a refusal to see the world through categories imposed by authority. His revolutionary subject is the awakened imagination, capable of perceiving holiness where society sees only sin, and of imagining a world beyond the structures that bind it.

Both poets therefore enact what might be called Romanticism's counter-institutional politics: a redefinition of power through perception. For Wordsworth, freedom arises from attentiveness to the natural world; for Blake, from fidelity to the creative impulse itself. Each

resists the mechanization of life, the reduction of imagination to reason, of morality to law, of nature to resource. Their differing temperaments (Wordsworth's meditative humility and Blake's prophetic rage) nonetheless converge on the conviction that liberation must begin within the imagination. The state, the church, and the market can only mirror or distort the health of the inner life. In this sense, both poets redefine revolution as an ethical awakening: not the destruction of governments but the transformation of consciousness.

The relevance of this Romantic critique to twenty-first-century politics is striking. Contemporary forms of institutional control, whether it be bureaucratic technocracy, surveillance capitalism, ecological exploitation, etc., operate through the same abstraction of life that Wordsworth and Blake resisted. The alienation produced by industrial modernity has evolved into the digital estrangement of the present, where nature, labor, and even emotion are mediated by systems of calculation. Romanticism's insistence that imagination and moral feeling are political forces offers a necessary corrective to this condition. Wordsworth's belief in sympathy as social reform prefigures ecological and community-based ethics, while Blake's prophetic vision anticipates radical critiques of ideological conformity. Both poets remind modern readers that systemic change requires imaginative renewal: the capacity to see the world otherwise. Their resistance to institutional authority, grounded in the creativity of perception, continues to challenge cultures that mistake regulation for morality and consumption for freedom.

In this assertion, Blake transforms theology into political philosophy. By equating divine energy with human desire, he overturns the moral hierarchies enforced by both church and state, exposing repression itself as the true blasphemy. 'Energy' becomes a synonym for creative imagination, or the inner source of life that institutional authority seeks to contain. His inversion of heaven and hell dramatizes moral hypocrisy of an age that sanctified obedience while

condemning passion. Reason, for Blake, is not enlightenment but the boundary that limits vision. The revolutionary act, therefore, is not to reject faith or knowledge outright, but to reclaim their original imaginative vitality; to rejoin body and soul, inspiration and action. In collapsing spiritual and political liberation into the same gesture, Blake redefines resistance as a state of perception. To awaken from the "mind-forg'd manacles" (*London*, 1794) is to overthrow the entire architecture of control that sustains empire, church, and industry alike.

Freedom, Individualism, & Social Reform

Building upon Romanticism's critiques of institutional power, this final section turns to the question of how freedom itself was redefined (as both a moral ideal and a social practice) and why those Romantic formulations continue to illuminate the crises of liberty and governance in the modern world. If Wordsworth and Blake turned inward by seeking freedom through moral vision and imaginative renewal, de Staël and the later Blake extend that inward liberation outward again, translating it into social and philosophical reform. The Romantic era's fascination with individual conscience, first conceived as resistance to tyranny, evolves here into a broader politics of human flourishing. Both de Staël and Blake insist that freedom is not merely the absence of restraint but the positive cultivation of reason, creativity, and sympathy within a just society. Their writings converge on a vision of liberty that is moral, intellectual, and collective: one that demands both self-knowledge and institutional transformation. In their work, the private and political intertwine; the freedom of thought and feeling becomes inseparable from the freedom to participate in a moral community. Romanticism, in this late phase, reveals its enduring belief that the reform of institutions begins in the renewal of human character.

For Germaine de Staël, freedom is rooted in the Enlightenment ideal of the rational, self-governing subject but recast through the emotional and moral vocabulary of Romanticism. Her works, especially *De l'Allemagne* (1810) and *Considerations on the Principal Events of the French Revolution* (1818), redefine liberty as an ongoing dialogue between individual conscience and civic responsibility. Having witnessed the collapse of revolutionary idealism into Napoleonic despotism, de Staël sought a middle path between radical rupture and reactionary order. She envisions a liberalism founded not on abstract reason alone but on feeling, imagination, and the moral education of citizens. Freedom, in her view, depends upon the cultivation of the inner life: only those who have learned to think and feel independently can sustain democratic institutions. In *De l'Allemagne*, her account of Luther makes this inwardness visible. When she described miners "in their dark underground tunnels" (294) discussing "freedom of conscience" (294), "the examination of truth" (294), and "that other day, that other light which must penetrate the darkness of ignorance" (294), she presents political awakening as a literal illumination of interior darkness. In this image, enlightenment is not decreed from above but generated from below, among ordinary people whose transformed perception precedes institutional reform. Her humanist liberalism stands as a rebuke to both cynicism and fanaticism, insisting that political stability arises not from coercion but from empathy, reflection, and dialogue. Accordingly, when she contrasts the bishops' and cardinals' "pomp" (295) at the Diet of Worms with Luther and his followers singing "Our God is our fortress" (295) in plain black dress, she elevates "the poetry of the soul" (295) over "outward magnificence" (295), arguing that genuine conviction outstrips spectacle as a political force. This belief is sharpened in her recounting of Attila's encounter with Pope Leo, where "the greatest calm" (300) on the old man's face causes terror to spread across the conqueror's own: Attila's lowered eyes dramatize de

Staël's conviction that interior moral force can humble the machinery of domination. The individual's education in feeling thus becomes a form of civic training, a way of reconciling passion with principle in the pursuit of collective good.

This fusion of emotion and rational liberty makes de Staël one of the first thinkers to articulate a Romantic liberalism: a political ethic grounded in empathy and the imagination's capacity to transcend self-interest. For her, the arts and literature are not ornaments of freedom but its preconditions. They redefine the moral sentiments that hold society together and prevent political reason from hardening into ideology. De Staël's cosmopolitanism, being her belief that ideas must circulate across nations, also anticipates modern pluralism. In *De l'Allemagne*, she repeatedly contrasts forms of power based on display with those grounded in inward conviction. When she writes that "outward magnificence has often been praised as a means of influencing the imagination; but when Christianity reveals itself in its pure and true simplicity, the poetry of the soul triumphs over all others" (295), she identifies genuine moral authority with inner depth rather than institutional spectacle. In emphasizing exchange over domination, she challenges both the nationalism of post-revolutionary France and the imperial self-confidence of Britain. Her liberalism is thus dynamic and relational: liberty grows through communication and understanding, not isolation. In this sense, she extends the Romantic critique of institutions by reimagining them as vehicles of moral progress rather than instruments of power. Her writings suggest that imagination itself can become a mode of governance; a faculty that enables citizens to envision justice beyond their immediate interests. In that sense, de Staël's Romantic liberalism anticipates a modern politics of empathy: one that recognizes diversity not as a threat to cohesion but as the very condition of human freedom.

While de Staël seeks harmony between individual autonomy and social order, William Blake's radical humanism presses that logic to its visionary extreme. Where she imagines liberal reform through education and empathy, Blake imagines redemption through imaginative revolution. His prophetic books, *The Marriage of Heaven and Hell* (1794), *Jerusalem* (1808), and *The Four Zoas* (composed c. 1797-1807), construct a mythic language in which the liberation of the individual mind becomes indistinguishable from the liberation of humankind. Blake's humanism rests on the belief that divinity resides in the human form itself. In *The Marriage of Heaven and Hell*, he asserts that "Man has no Body distinct from his Soul, for that called Body is a portion of Soul discerned by the five Senses" (Plate 4), collapsing the very dualisms (body vs. soul, matter vs. spirit) that underwrite religious and political hierarchy. By dissolving these inherited divisions, Blake symbolically dismantles the structures that separate rulers from subjects and moral law from human desire. His doctrine of vision and forgiveness overturns the punitive logic of church and state, offering instead a community grounded in imaginative freedom. For Blake, every act of imagination becomes an act of resistance; every perception of the infinite a refusal of institutional limitation. His poetic myth refuses to segregate religion, art, and politics, insisting that the same imagination that creates a poem can also remake the world.

For Blake, therefore, the reform of society cannot be achieved through legislation or institutional restructuring alone; it requires a transformation in how human beings perceive themselves and the world. In *The Marriage of Heaven and Hell*, this shift is figured through images of vision and illumination. When Blake writes that "man has closed himself up, till he sees all things thro' narrow chinks of his cavern" (Plate 14), he presents oppression as a constriction of perception; a condition in which institutional religion and rationalist morality

have taught individuals to see the world as “finite & corrupt” (Plate 14) rather than “infinite and holy” (Plate 14). Social liberation therefore begins with the recovery of the imaginative vision. Blake’s humanism is grounded in this inward awakening: his assertion that “all deities reside in the human breast” (Plate 11) collapses the distance between divine and human, granting spiritual dignity to every person and dismantling the hierarchies that justify domination. This inward revolution is inseparable from outward ethical action. In his work *Jerusalem* (1810), the lyric “And did those feet in ancient time” (1) develops the same principle by translating visionary insight into collective struggle. Its opening questions imagine Christ walking upon England’s “mountains green” (2), only to juxtapose that sacred possibility with the reality of “dark Satanic Mills” (8). The poem’s closing imperative of “bring me my Bow of burning gold” (9) and “cease not from Mental Fight” (13) recasts imagination as labor and resistance. In this movement from perception to action, Blake redefines revolution as the ongoing effort to “buil[d] Jerusalem, / In England’s green and pleasant land” (15-16): not a distant paradise, but a renewed society founded on compassion, creative energy, and transformed ways of seeing.

Both de Staël and Blake thus transform the Romantic preoccupation with interior life into a program of social renewal. De Staël’s liberalism constructs the ethical framework for a humane public sphere; Blake’s radical humanism supplies its spiritual and imaginative force. Each envisions freedom as relational: achieved not in solitude but in recognition of shared humanity. The modern relevance of these visions lies in their challenge to contemporary liberalism’s drift toward individualism without empathy and activism without imagination. De Staël’s insistence that liberty depends on moral cultivation anticipates present debates over civic education and the erosion of public discourse, while Blake’s prophetic call to liberate the imagination confronts the dehumanizing effects of economic and technological systems that reduce people to data or labor

units. In the twenty-first century, where political rhetoric often oscillates between cynicism and spectacle, their combined message feels newly urgent. De Staël's cosmopolitan ethics and Blake's visionary egalitarianism remind readers that freedom cannot survive without the imaginative capacity to see oneself in others. Romanticism's insistence on moral feeling as the foundation of justice thus offers an antidote to the mechanization of empathy in the digital age.

In both writers, Romantic freedom resists the mechanization of life, whether by the bureaucratic state, the market, or the algorithms of modern power. Their synthesis of inner and outer reform reminds us that political change is inseparable from moral and imaginative renewal. The Romantic belief that every human being possesses a boundless capacity for perception and sympathy becomes, in their hands, the basis of social transformation in an age of polarization and cynicism. To read de Staël and Blake together is to recover a Romantic politics that is neither naïvely idealist nor purely revolutionary but profoundly humane: a vision of liberty as continual self-education and collective awakening. Their ideas invite twenty-first-century readers to imagine freedom not as possession or privilege but as a shared creative practice; the ongoing work of seeing one another as fully human.

Conclusion

This thesis began from a critical gap identified in recent Romantic scholarship: while critics have richly reconstructed the historical conditions that shaped Romantic engagements with revolution, war, empire, slavery, ecology, and gender, they have paid less attention to how those engagements speak to contemporary democratic crises. Building on that gap, this project has argued that Romanticism's political force does not lie in its historical specificity alone, but in

its capacity to theorize how power operates; externally through institutions and internally through perception, habit, and imagination.

The central claim advanced here is that Romantic writers approached freedom not as a fixed achievement but as a continually endangered practice. Their works diagnose the very problems that still destabilize democratic life today: the seductions of spectacle, the ease with which fear becomes political obedience, the persistence of inherited hierarchies beneath new forms of progress, and the vulnerability of moral feeling in times of crisis. What makes their insights enduring is not that their politics map neatly onto the present, but that they expose the patterns by which authority renews itself; how domination adapts, how resistance falters, and how collective ideals fracture under pressure.

Across the writers examined, freedom emerges as an ethical and imaginative labor rather than a guaranteed right. They insist that political life cannot be separated from the inner conditions that sustain it, being attention, sympathy, courage, and the willingness to imagine alternatives. This thesis has emphasized that connection: the Romantic conviction that the self is not merely affected by political structures but shaped by them, and that any durable form of reform must transform both institutions and the sensibilities that give those institutions legitimacy. Their critiques make visible the forms of compliance that masquerade as stability, the sentimentality that disguises domination, and the institutional rationalities that eclipse human dignity.

Such insights resonate sharply with twenty-first century democratic dilemmas. Contemporary politics likewise confronts forms of fear that isolate individuals, spectacles that replace deliberation, inequalities that hide behind narratives of national virtue, and ecological and economic systems that erode agency. Romantic literature helps illuminate these dilemmas

not by offering solutions but by clarifying the stakes: it shows how imagination becomes political, how moral perception becomes contested, and how freedom depends on sustaining forms of relation that resist commodification and coercion.

If Romanticism is often framed as a literature of inwardness, this thesis has shown that such inwardness is never apolitical. The Romantic imagination becomes a site where the pressures of history are confronted and reworked; a space for testing what kinds of lives, communities, and futures remain possible under conditions of crisis. In turning to the past, we encounter not a set of answers but a repertoire of intellectual resources: modes of critique, ethical orientations, and visions of human capability that remain urgently relevant.

Ultimately, this thesis argues that Romanticism matters now because it refuses resignation. It refuses to accept that domination is inevitable, or that imagination is merely private. It insists that individuals can cultivate forms of attention, empathy, and creative will that unsettle the structures pressing upon them. In an era marked by democratic fatigue and systemic inequity, Romanticism’s deepest contribution may be this insistence: that political renewal begins with the difficult, sustaining work of perceiving differently, feeling responsibly, and imagining more capacious forms of common life.

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