

## The History of an Aura: Romantic Lyricism and the Millennium that Didn't Come

Poetry and eloquence are both alike the expression or uttering forth of feeling. But if we may be excused the seeming affectation of the antithesis, we should say that eloquence is *heard*, poetry is *overheard*. Eloquence supposes an audience; the peculiarity of poetry appears to us to lie in the poet's utter unconsciousness of a listener. Poetry is feeling confessing itself to itself, in moments of solitude, and bodying itself forth in symbols which are the nearest possible representations of the feeling in the exact shape in which it exists in the poet's mind. Eloquence is feeling pouring itself forth to other minds, courting their sympathy, or endeavoring to influence their belief, or move them to passion or to action.

—John Stuart Mill, “What is Poetry?” (1833)

In 1833, John Stuart Mill described his ideal poet, a portrait that, this book argues, has never been sufficiently revised, a circumstance that testifies to Mill's “eloquence” and to our investment in poets who lack it. Mill's grand gesture of severing poetry from eloquence inaugurates a critical history of divorcing lyricism from rhetorical—and by extension, social—concerns. Eloquence—as a rhetorical strategy—betrays a desire for intervention by moving auditors to feeling, to thought, and sometimes to action. Mill's distinction is immensely important to subsequent definitions of Romantic lyricism, since to divide eloquence from poetry isolates the poet from an audience and from social engagement. Mill, of course, was not alone in insisting that the poet is recognizable by the quality of intense introspection.<sup>1</sup> But his claim has been particularly influential for twentieth-century critics of Romanticism, informing prominent paradigms by Northrop Frye and M. H. Abrams. Important vestiges of these critics' tenacious models have in turn survived dramatic

changes in critical approaches and assumptions: thoroughly critiqued by feminist and Romantic new historicist critics, an emphasis on disinterestedness and transcendence continues to haunt critical accounts of the mode. For despite sharp disagreements about the political and ethical import of the aesthetic solace that the mode is said to provide, critics have generally agreed on a series of equations that define the form: solitary = asocial, sincere = antitheatrical, introspective = disengaged. This chapter addresses the limitations of models based on antithetical characteristics, first, by questioning their implicit claims of a capable subjectivity, and second, by considering the mode's potential for social engagement by situating poems in the specific contexts of their composition, publication, and reception.

I do not claim that there are not reactionary strains in many of the period's lyric poems, nor do I question that Romantic lyricism, with its focus on interiority, may facilitate a withdrawal into the self, away from social scenes. Rather, I contend that these impulses are rarely pure, and, moreover, that they should not be associated with any one poetic mode. I argue instead for a recognition of the range of impulses—emotional, psychological, and political—of which Romantic lyricism is capable, and for a keener critical sense of its strong rhetorical appeal. This view requires a more circumspect understanding of a mode that has traditionally inspired impassioned critical responses, and thus encouraged sharply and polemically defined canonical models. As Mill's definitions make clear, paradigms of Romantic lyricism have always comprised more than formal features, or even a set of common practices: they have encoded a certain view of the period, a version associated with a poetics of privacy, which is now understood to be fundamental to the Romantic ideology. Canonical models of Romantic lyricism have been an important site for contesting approaches to the field. The result has been a certain lack of critical circumspection that has rendered definitions of the mode increasingly inflexible. For Abrams's candid acknowledgment of his own identification with the Romantic poets was followed by the demystifications of a generation of new historical critics who wanted to distinguish themselves from Abrams's generation, and so from the poets themselves. Jerome McGann describes his new historical project as motivated by the conviction that "the scholarship and criticism of Romanticism and its works are dominated by a Romantic Ideology,

by an uncritical absorption in Romanticism's own self-representations."<sup>2</sup> This critique has been salient in disrupting an identificatory strain in Romanticist criticism, but it also imposes a model of counter- or dis-identification that is haunted by a similar impulse to advocacy. In the wake of this successful new historical critique, we can now afford a less polemical approach to the period's poets and poems.

Even as new historicism has critiqued the ideological implications of a poetics of interiority and transcendence codified in Abrams's model, the terms of that critique have ironically reinforced an equation of a poetic mode with these extraformal qualities. The strictness of canonical paradigms has created something of a crisis in the wake of a broadening of the Romantic canon to include women writers and other marginalized figures, such as John Clare. Their greater prominence has made the prescriptive nature of conventional paradigms of the mode seem even more narrowly and polemically defined to reflect a particular view of the field. It is a cliché that Romanticism is concerned with psychological subtlety, yet formal paradigms have not adequately reflected the implications of this critical commonplace. New historicism complicated Abrams's influential model of the "greater Romantic lyric" by revealing political betrayal to be the underside of a desire for transcendence. But our approaches to Romantic lyricism will only be sufficiently complex when they comprehend the full range of responses—political and psychological—possible for a form closely associated with subjectivity. A more circumspect view of Romantic lyricism would acknowledge its capacity for solipsism and sympathetic identification, privatization and historical consciousness.

Defining lyricism has been an inexact science for good reason, since the mode's uses vary tremendously between, and within, different periods and cultures. Critics attempting to define the lyric have often settled for succinctness, by focusing on a quality deemed central, such as brevity or a historical association with music.<sup>3</sup> Yet there has been a greater consensus on Romantic lyricism, because it has so often been defined by extraformal qualities associated with a "spirit of the age." Romantic lyricism has seemed tied to an older version of the period, even as canonical, periodic, and generic boundaries have been expanded and their heuristic uses challenged. Thus W. R. Johnson's valuable 1982 argument about the lyric—he reminds us

that its roots in Greek and Latin poems are rhetorical, and thereby social—pointedly excludes the Romantic lyric: “The poet has removed himself (or has been removed) from a world into a private vision of nature in which he sees himself reflected.” In his view, Romantic lyricism actually heralds “the death of lyric” as an engaged genre.<sup>4</sup> Recent treatments of the lyric in other literary fields presume the mode’s openness to the social world, while the public and performative aspects of Romantic lyricism have received little such attention.<sup>5</sup>

Recently, there have been calls for rethinking a prevailing view of Romantic lyricism.<sup>6</sup> Yet why revise this model when the field’s periodic, generic, and canonical boundaries have also been challenged? First, questioning received models of one of the period’s key modes can help further to obscure canonical distinctions between writers. And there are other reasons for continuing to talk about “Romantic lyricism.” The history of critical definitions of the mode is highly instructive about critical history itself: because Romantic lyricism has been viewed so obdurately as the period’s poetic “norm,” accounts of it have long been charged sites for interpretive debates. Generational continuities and points of contention alike are rendered particularly visible in feminist and new historicist inquiries into the gender and social politics of Romanticism, partly because so many of these critics have self-consciously situated their models in relation to earlier accounts. For example, Frye explicitly incorporates Mill’s description of lyric poetry as “*overheard*” into his portrait of the poet turning his back on an audience, and Abrams acknowledges his use of Mill’s premium on “feeling” in his definition of the “greater Romantic lyric.” In her treatment of Wordsworth’s “Ode: Intimations of Immortality,” Marjorie Levinson discusses her uses of Abrams’s paradigm, elaborating how his focus on subjectivity informs her new historical account of the ideology of the Wordsworthian self. The specifics of these continuities are instructive. Yet the most important lesson of these generational debates is that their product has been, ironically, a remarkable consensus in defining Romantic lyricism’s key impulses.

This prominent tradition of critical self-reflexivity also points, however, toward the means of its own critique. Abrams himself opens the way to reconsidering his immensely influential paradigm by acknowledging its investment with specific biographical and historical

meaning. In a rare and candid autobiographical aside in *Natural Supernaturalism*, he registers an identification with Wordsworth's despair after the French Revolution. Abrams's aside is a frank and generous recognition of how our critical understandings of the mode have been shaped by the pressures of historical incident and personal exigency. He aligns his own experience of acute political disappointment with Wordsworth's, via the mediating figure of W. H. Auden. He cites Auden's "New Year Letter of 1940":

Herschel Baker has rightly said that Wordsworth's *Prelude* recorded 'the spiritual biography of his generation.' Auden, writing in 1940, reminds us that it also anticipated remarkably the spiritual biography of Auden's own generation, and mine:

We hoped; we waited for the day  
 The State would wither clean away,  
 Expecting the Millennium  
 That theory promised us would come,  
 It didn't.

We can hear in Abrams's paradigmatic account of Wordsworth's crisis an echo of similar reckonings made by a postwar generation of critics: "The great Romantic works were not written at the height of revolutionary hope but out of the experience of partial or total disenchantment with the revolutionary promise."<sup>7</sup>

Focusing on Abrams's generation, E. P. Thompson extends Abrams's point to speculate upon a critical generation's identification with the Romantic poets: "The glib comparisons rise up, and they lie beneath the surface when unstated." These parallels include "[t]he French and Russian revolutions; the Coalitions and N.A.T.O.; the Spanish insurrection and Hungary, 1956; Godwinism and Marxism." Thompson concedes that, "[s]crupulously examined, most of these comparisons break down," yet I agree with him that suggestive "parallels remain."<sup>8</sup> In the case of Romantic lyricism, Abrams's and Thompson's metacritical analyses draw attention to how successive generations of critics sought the qualities of disinterestedness and transcendence associated with the mode. They have thereby confirmed the value of the mode's aesthetic consolations for political disappointments. Thus, models of Romantic lyricism have encouraged a particular view

of Wordsworth's turn from political activism: the advent of his mature lyricism is viewed as ratifying the poet's substitution of imaginative for political concerns.

The cost of equating Romantic lyricism with a politics of disengagement has been an understanding of the mode's facility for registering diverse and ambivalent political impulses. This price applies particularly to Wordsworth, who has been the key exemplar of Mill's, Abrams's, and Romantic new historicists' models. Because a generation of critics identified strongly with his political disillusionment and focused on Wordsworth's rejection of revolutionary hopes, we have lost sight of the complexity of his relinquishment of radical sympathies in the wake of the Terror and French imperialism. Writing in 1969, Thompson claims: "So obsessed was a recent generation of critics with similar experiences of disenchantment in their own time" that we have focused on Wordsworth's doubts and overlooked his continued "affirmation" of political ideals that may have lasted until the end of the Napoleonic Wars.<sup>9</sup> Although contemporary Romantic criticism is alert to the ideological conflicts, contradictions, and instabilities of any political stance, that poststructuralist and postmodern awareness has, oddly, worked to reify expectations of Romantic lyricism as inherently antimaterialist.

Examining the canonical definitions of Wordsworth, Mill, and Abrams within the contexts of their careers discovers a suggestive congruence: each turned to the work of defining the mode in the wake of disillusionment with political activism. Recovering from very different social crises, each of these critics follows a path from political engagement, to disillusion, to a desire for an aesthetic remedy to sociohistorical trauma. Within these contexts, the poetic form each associates with a pure, aesthetic arena comes to seem less transcendent, and more embedded in particular moments in the lives of influential poets and critics. Abrams's candor provides one answer to why definitions of Romantic lyricism have been so sharply contested: the mode's association with the transcendence of partisan strife, human suffering, and the constraints of particular historical moments have held a strong personal appeal to some of its key critics. Recognizing these biohistorical contexts for canonical definitions of Romantic lyricism does not discredit them, for of course the broader lesson is that all such explanatory models are historically contingent. Yet in

the case of Romantic lyricism, the relations between critical paradigms and their historical contexts are particularly instructive, since there are crucial intersections between the historical exigencies that inform these definitions and the claims these models make about lyric poetry's relations to history.

In the case of Romantic lyricism, this phenomenon extends back to Mill, who influenced Abrams's definitions. Mill reports first reading Wordsworth's poems in the autumn of 1828, after a psychological breakdown and depression. He describes the crisis as a loss of faith in his earlier determination "to be a reformer of the world." By age nineteen, Mill's activities included writing for and editing the *Westminster Review* (established by his father James Mill in order to counter what he deemed the too-complacent Whig politics of the *Edinburgh Review*); organizing and participating in debating societies engaged with social issues; and compiling and editing Jeremy Bentham's monumental *Rationale of Judicial Evidence*. He recalls: "This did very well for several years, during which the general improvement going on in the world and the idea of myself as engaged with others in struggling to promote it, seemed to fill up an interesting and animated existence." He says that in 1826, when he was twenty years old, "I awakened from this as from a dream." In the wake of his collapse he developed a new concern with "the internal culture of the individual." Wordsworth's poems "seemed to be the very culture of the feelings, which I was in quest of":

In them I seemed to draw from a source of inward joy, of sympathetic and imaginative pleasure, which could be shared in by all human beings; which had no connexion with struggle or imperfection, but would be made richer by every improvement in the physical or social condition of mankind. . . I needed to be made to feel that there was real, permanent happiness in tranquil contemplation. Wordsworth taught me this, not only without turning away from, but with a greatly increased interest[,] in the common feelings and common destiny of human beings.<sup>10</sup>

In reading the 1815 *Poems*, Mill discovered a new, less public and less engaged relationship to contemporary sociopolitical events. He



was able to remain aloof from “struggle or imperfection” while retaining a humanitarian interest in the “physical or social condition.” Mill models this new stance on the poet, exemplified by Wordsworth.

The humanist politics that Mill’s Wordsworth embodies drew fire on canonical paradigms of Romantic lyricism from critics disturbed by Mill’s premium on disinterestedness. To glean lessons about his “poetry,” we need not take entirely at face value Mill’s account of his sudden disaffection from radical politics and conversion to a culture of feeling. His retrospective narrative surely simplifies an ambiguous and traumatic transition in his career, and his critics and biographers have speculated variously upon its causes and its psychological content. Yet Mill’s rehearsal of a turn away from activism to a humanist aesthetics directly informs his definition of poetry as comprised of sensory and emotional experience, and as such divorced from the austere Utilitarian politics in which he had participated. Poetry and politics seem antithetical at a moment of personal crisis for Mill, the moment at which he defines poetry as the opposite of an irony he had lived: Utilitarianism with passionate designs on the social world. Poetry, in contrast, derives power from emotion yet may remain disinterested.

Before turning to feminist and new historical critiques of this familiar model of Romantic lyricism, I want to consider the cost of giving up its persuasive account of the relations between poetics and politics. The persistence of Mill’s precepts—whether in the form of their absorption into later definitions or as the catalyst for counterparadigms—indicates not only how high the critical stakes have been in defining the mode, but also something of the rhetorical power of the mode itself. The mode’s conventional association with a transcendence of historical catastrophe has made it available to a surprising variety of aesthetic and political uses. For instance, Sharon Cameron finds in lyricism’s drive to divorce itself from quotidian temporality a powerful poetic response to the inevitability of mortality.<sup>11</sup> Theodor Adorno launches a very different defense. He confirms that lyricism is the genre of the individual apart from society, but he claims this detachment as the site of political resistance. Adorno praises “[t]he lyric spirit’s idiosyncratic opposition to the superior power of material things,” an opposition that is “a form of reaction to the reification of the world,” and, more particularly, to capitalism’s con-



forming pressures on the individual. He exploits a suggestion implicit in canonical definitions: that the mode is “pure” because untainted by social interaction. Adorno evokes a familiar definition of the “poetic work” as “something opposed to society, something wholly individual,” in order to argue that “the more heavily the situation weighs upon it, the more firmly the work resists it by refusing to submit to anything heteronomous and constituting itself solely in accordance with its own laws.” The poet’s detachment—“*sein Abstand*”—is necessary in order to imagine another world “*in der es anders wäre*” (in which things would be different). Here the utopianism associated with lyricism has an explicitly political valence. Adorno’s notion that the most private language offers the greatest power of resistance enables him to turn Frye’s poet into a man of the people: Baudelaire, Adorno claims, was “truer to the masses toward whom he turned his tragic, arrogant mask than any poor-people’s poetry.”<sup>12</sup>

Adorno’s eloquent defense of the lyric demonstrates the advantage of retaining canonical models: the critic who adopts them gleams some of the auratic power with which the mode itself has been invested. Even critiques of Romantic lyricism have profited from the emphatic tone of canonical definitions: by exposing the ideological content of this talismanic poetics, the critic claims a role in what has been a high-profile agon, from William Wordsworth to the present. The Romantic lyric has long been a desirable critical object, in part, because a significance has attached to the task of treating it, as one of the field’s key terms. Defining the mode once meant, in effect, defining Romanticism, and perhaps under this weight, criticism of the Romantic lyric has frequently displayed an impassioned tenor which is often said to characterize the mode itself. I advocate instead a less “eloquent,” but more variegated account of Romantic lyricism that recognizes its vagaries, its vexed aims, and its mixed impulses.



One of my main questions in this chapter is how to use the critical history I have begun to sketch in order better to understand the period’s vast output of lyric poetry, including its canonical poems.

My first concern is how a consensus—albeit fraught and contentious—developed about Romantic lyricism. I am interested in how the critical history of Romantic lyricism has preserved the mode's aura—the vestiges of certain extraformal qualities that are culturally constructed, yet apparently natural. Walter Benjamin describes the “aura” of the work of art in the age of mechanical reproduction as a quality that adhered to the work of art despite the development of technological processes that could reproduce that work and thus diminish what gave it aesthetic power: a sense of uniqueness, authenticity, and the artist's presence.<sup>13</sup> These qualities have long been associated with Romantic lyricism, and like the work of art before mechanical reproduction, the mode has been associated with a transcendence of immediate contexts. This aura is derived not from any actual belief in transcendence by poets or by critics, but rather from a sense that the lyric poet is aloof from quotidian concerns, a detachment necessary for the understandings, resolutions, and consolations that are the products of reflection and recollection. The history of Romantic lyricism has largely been the history of that aura. The narrowness of this definition long helped to keep the Romantic canon small and also produced a prescriptive and teleological reading of the mode's tropes. Solitariness, introspection, and remembrance seemed to add up to a transcendence of material concerns and local contexts. As a result, poets whose works do not fit this paradigm continue to face the question of whether or not they are “Romantic.”

Since an enormous amount has been written about Romantic lyricism, I want to specify the strains of this critical history relevant to my argument. I am concerned with how the quality of inwardness became paramount, how the mode came to be defined by what might be called a poetics of privacy. One of my main concerns is how definitions of Romantic lyricism resound, either explicitly or implicitly, in broader critical debates about the construction of the Romantic poet and poetry: these models have been central to feminist critiques of the gendered construction of the poet, and to new historical investigations of the ideological impulses of Romanticism.<sup>14</sup> I begin with Mill's 1833 definitions, which persuasively describe an ideal poetry, devoid of precisely the kind of rhetorical impetus that characterizes his own critical prose.

Mill's great rhetorical maneuver is to make the qualities he as-

signs to poetry inherent or, to use Clifford Siskin's term, "essential."<sup>15</sup> According to Mill, that which distinguishes poetry from "what is not poetry" is "felt to be fundamental." It is an irrefutable argument because it is not an argument; emotion delineates the parameters of poetry. Mill's circular logic seeks to establish what it claims is already in place—poetry's detachment from the quotidian. He proposes:

Let us then attempt, in the way of modest inquiry, not to coerce and confine nature within the bounds of an arbitrary definition, but rather to find the boundaries which she herself has set, and erect a barrier round them; not calling mankind to account for having misapplied the word *poetry*, but attempting to clear up to them the conception which they already attach to it, and to bring before their minds as a distinct principle that which, as a vague feeling, has really guided them in their actual employment of the term.

With this sleight of hand, Mill generates a sense of critical discovery. His statement of purpose defines his own role as uncovering foundations rather than building definitions. The critic has only to locate nature's delineations, a task made simpler because his audience already instinctively senses the "boundaries" that nature has established. "Feeling" confirms what the critic need only translate into terms less "vague." The critic's role is minimal since poetry speaks for itself, and the receptive reader listens. Mill explains that

the word "poetry" *does* import something quite peculiar in its nature, something which may exist in what is called prose as well as in verse, something which does not even require the instrument of words, but can speak through those other audible symbols called musical sounds, and even through the visible ones, which are the language of sculpture, painting, and architecture; all this, as we believe, is and must be felt, though perhaps indistinctly, by all upon whom poetry in any of its shapes produces any impression beyond that of tickling the ear.<sup>16</sup>

Wordsworth's influence is evident in Mill's claim that poetry can exist in prose; it is not a form, but a quality, almost an essence. Mill's

vocabulary renders poetry unique—there is “something quite peculiar,” and inherent, in its “nature.” His ventriloquizing of poetry lends a sense of the mode as having an integrity of its own. Giving poetry this independence is an important step in Mill’s effort to remove it from a delimiting engagement with its social contexts, while retaining its audience. The “peculiar quality” of poetry is that it can be aloof and still “move” readers. Its tangential relationship to everyday existence is crucial to poetry’s power to reach an audience without a compromising desire to influence it to any particular end. In order to negotiate a position for poetry close enough to a quotidian world to be relevant to its concerns and yet untainted by them, poetry must be disinterested. Poetry’s integrity would be diminished by ulterior motives, so Mill must distinguish poetry from another kind of language that also “moves” readers, and that he terms “eloquence.”

Mill’s determination to divorce poetry and eloquence requires characterizing the poet as removed from contemporary social concerns. To claim that a genre is disinterested is less difficult than to claim that poets have no designs on their readers, so Mill must resort almost to caricature to hold his point: “Great poets are often proverbially ignorant of life.” This portrait has proven influential; it echoes in the new historical critique of the poet’s willful ignorance, or repression, of social contexts. The surviving denominator is the poet’s isolation: “All poetry is of the nature of soliloquy.” The poet must have no message to convey, no interest in convincing an audience of anything: “[W]e should say that eloquence is *heard*, poetry is *overheard*.” Mill follows his famous remark with the explanation of the poet’s relationship to an audience: “Eloquence supposes an audience; the peculiarity of poetry appears to us to lie in the poet’s utter unconsciousness of a listener.” This is a difficult distinction to make, and Mill spends a large portion of the essay attempting to secure it. Both the orator and the poet have audiences, but the poet’s mode is confessional—it is private and self-reflexive—since feeling necessarily confesses itself. Poetry “is the natural fruit of solitude and meditation; eloquence, of intercourse with the world.” Yet despite the critical effort needed to distinguish the poet’s and orator’s relations to their audiences, Mill is certain about what he is excluding from poetry: the poet does not use language to influence others’ sympathies, beliefs, passions, or actions. Poetry is nonpartisan.

Still, in Mill's scheme, poetry must remain close enough to daily experience to speak to it. He does not want to sever poetry from a social world, but rather strictly to define poetry's position in that world. The objects of the poet's attention become catalysts for "emotion" rather than figures of interest in themselves:

If a poet is to describe a lion, he will not set about describing him as a naturalist would, nor even as a traveller would, who was intent upon stating the truth, the whole truth, and nothing but the truth. He will describe him by *imagery*, that is, by suggesting the most striking likenesses and contrasts which might occur to a mind contemplating the lion, in the state of awe, wonder, or terror, which the spectacle naturally excites, or is, on the occasion, supposed to excite. Now this is describing the lion professedly, but the state of excitement of the spectator really. The lion may be described falsely or in exaggerated colors, and the poetry be all the better; but if the human emotion be not painted with the most scrupulous truth, the poetry is bad poetry; i.e. is not poetry at all, but a failure.<sup>17</sup>

In short, we learn more about the poet than the lion; in Mill's model, the lion not only recedes into the background, but is also metamorphosed in the process. The lion's ferocity shrinks in the shadow of the poet's responses to it. Similarly, an audience does not disappear in Mill's account; it is simply irrelevant to the "human emotion" that retains center stage. In this manner, poetry reimagines the world according to a standard of pure feeling, a truth that can move readers because it is of their world and yet innocent of desires to change it. Although this argument has been made, in some variation, for almost all of "Literature," nevertheless the Romantic lyric has often been considered exemplary of the aloofness of the aesthetic from the mundane and the partisan.<sup>18</sup>

Mill's definitions have been reified via restatement, albeit often with new emphases. The adoption of his distinctions by other critics provides an ironic demonstration of Mill's own eloquence. Mill's differentiation of poetry and oratory was augmented, although often with different emphases, by influential successors. Like Mill, Matthew

Arnold was interested in defining Wordsworthian lyricism as exemplary of poetic truth. Arnold's "truth" is, however, not that of the poet's emotional responses, but rather that of nature, which he claims seems almost to write itself in Wordsworth's poems. In his preface to his 1879 edition of *The Poems of Wordsworth*, Arnold characterizes his own valued Wordsworth by defending the poet who "has not had a fair chance before the world." Arnold's answer to what he perceives as a history of underappreciation of Wordsworth is to present to the reading public the lyric poet, for "[h]is best work is in his shorter pieces." In the Wordsworth of the shorter lyrics, Arnold finds "poetic truth," which is "as inevitable as Nature herself." Arnold places an emphasis upon the poet's sincerity that would inform Abrams's interest in that quality and in an accompanying characteristic of Romantic lyric poetry, its "expressivity." Arnold proclaims on Wordsworth's behalf, "Nature herself seems, I say, to take the pen out of his hand, and to write for him with her own bare, sheer, penetrating power." He explains that "[t]his arises from two causes: from the profound sincereness with which Wordsworth feels his subject, and also from the profoundly sincere and natural character of his subject itself."<sup>19</sup> Poetry's difference from the orator's eloquence is confirmed to quite different ends in a 1953 lecture delivered by T. S. Eliot and subsequently published as "The Three Voices of Poetry." Eliot, writing not from an admiration of Wordsworth but from a deep suspicion of Romanticism, nevertheless contributes to a familiar portrait of the Romantic poet by separating the "first voice" of poetry, which is "the voice of the poet talking to himself—or to nobody," from the "second," which is "the voice of the poet addressing an audience, whether large or small."<sup>20</sup>

As Mill's tenets were adopted by critics such as Frye and Abrams, they were also tied to formal features of lyricism in general, and to Romantic lyricism in particular. (Although Mill cites Wordsworth in this essay, he uses him as a model for poetry in general.) Frye's definitions of lyricism in his 1957 study, *The Anatomy of Criticism*, are important to a history of Romantic lyricism, primarily because his sketch of the poet is so memorable. There is something almost incongruous about Frye's studied portrait of disinterestedness. His rhetoric surrounding a supposedly antirhetorical form is telling. In a famous instance, Frye augments Mill's portrait of the isolated poet.

Frye defines the lyric as “preeminently the utterance that is overheard,” but he goes further than Mill in theatricalizing the poet’s detachment from listeners: “The lyric is the genre in which the poet, like the ironic writer, turns his back on his audience.”<sup>21</sup> An audience is still present, and the poet aware of it, until the moment of introspection. Frye’s theatrical metaphor might seem to compromise the poet’s disinterestedness, since it attributes a performative aspect to the poet’s role. Yet despite his acknowledgment of the auditor’s role in lyric poetry, Frye insists on the lyric’s aura, which is rendered almost audible in his account: the mode has a kind of “verbal resonance.”<sup>22</sup> While Frye enhances Mill’s already “eloquent” definition, it is Abrams who claims Mill’s precepts as Romantic conventions, and thus produces the field’s most influential paradigm of Romantic lyricism in his 1965 essay, “Structure and Style in the Greater Romantic Lyric.”<sup>23</sup>

Eliot, Abrams, and Frye participate in the 1950s in the elaboration of an understanding of the lyric as nonrhetorical, an account indebted to Mill. These critics do not devise precisely the same set of qualities; they are in fact describing different things—Eliot’s “poetry,” Frye’s “lyric,” and Abrams’s “greater Romantic lyric.” As the precision of this terminology suggests, Abrams defines a poetic form with a relatively small number of examples; even Keats’s odes do not exactly fit its measurements. But the specificity of Abrams’s definition is precisely the quality that secures its importance to subsequent criticism. He gives Romantic lyricism “a local habitation and a name,” tracing its antecedents to the eighteenth-century loco-descriptive poem, William Lisle Bowles’s sonnets, and seventeenth-century devotional poems. Most importantly, Abrams links the more abstract qualities that Mill assigns to poetry to thematic concerns associated with Romanticism. For instance, he associates the lyric’s focus on the poet’s subjectivity with a Romantic attraction to natural solitudes: according to Abrams, the natural scene is central to a genre “in which mind confronts nature and their interplay constitutes the poem.”<sup>24</sup> Although Abrams restricts his definitions to a small number of poems, he so persuasively makes these local cases that other critics have appropriated his terms, and thus the characteristics he enumerates have been extrapolated to Romantic lyricism, more broadly construed.

Thus Wordsworth is not the only figure to have been canonized



and subsequently critiqued in debates about Romantic lyricism; as the primary architect of twentieth-century understandings of the mode, Abrams gained a similar centrality. His model became associated with a particular postwar moment in the academy and thus was invested with another kind of extraformal meaning: the traces of critical debates about the politics of Romantic poetry and literary criticism. Paradigms of Romantic lyricism were reified largely by being contested. Codified by Abrams in his essay on the “greater Romantic lyric,” an understanding of the genre as disinterested has survived the field’s recent debates about the Romantic canon and the Romantic ideology, although in the process the quality has become weighted quite differently. Abrams’s elaboration of the shared features of a handful of poems proved paradigm-making; as the period’s “poetic norm,” the lyric has been associated with solitariness, introspection, and a desire for transcendence—the antithesis of the social and the quotidian.<sup>25</sup> It has also been implicitly gendered masculine. Romantic lyricism became equated with an “ideology of self,” and as such it became the focus of critiques of the gender and social politics of canonical Romanticism.<sup>26</sup> Thus Abrams’s model gained an odd after-life as the object of critique itself, still referred to and contested, yet rendered increasingly inflexible in the process.

Because Abrams’s description of his “variety of the longer Romantic lyric” has been incorporated into subsequent debates about Romantic lyricism’s politics, his opening description sets the scene for this stage in my inquiry:

Some of the poems are called odes, while the others approach the ode in having lyric magnitude and a serious subject, feelingfully meditated. They present a determinate speaker in a particularized, and usually a localized, outdoor setting, whom we overhear as he carries on, in a fluent vernacular which arises easily to a more formal speech, a sustained colloquy, sometimes with himself or with the outer scene, but more frequently with a silent human auditor, present or absent. The speaker begins with a description of the landscape; an aspect or change of aspect in the landscape evokes a varied but integral process of memory, thought, anticipation, and feeling which remains closely interwoven with the outer

scene. In the course of this meditation the lyric speaker achieves an insight, faces up to a tragic loss, comes to a moral decision, or resolves an emotional problem. Often the poem rounds upon itself to end where it began, at the outer scene, but with an altered mood and deepened understanding which is the result of the intervening meditation.<sup>27</sup>

Abrams anchors Mill's quality of detachment by linking it to formal features; it becomes a phase in a structured progression, and central to the work of the "greater Romantic lyric." The landscape prompts the inward turn to meditation, but the external scene is less important than the memories and thoughts evoked, and a hierarchy between poet-subject and natural object is established: "[T]he description is structurally subordinate to the meditation."<sup>28</sup> Abrams is not as concerned as Mill to sever the poet from social interaction (as differentiated by Abrams from overt political action); the poet often sustains a "colloquy" with "a silent human auditor, present or absent." But the remove from "intercourse with the world" that Mill describes is recognizable in Abrams's period of introspection from which the poet emerges "altered." Abrams recasts the detachment from banal concerns, which Mill specifies as "fundamental" to poetry, both as a psychological state and as part of the formal structure of the greater Romantic lyric.

The most influential aspect of Abrams's specialization of the mode has proven to be his psychologizing of it. His effort to codify its apparent formlessness naturalizes the Romantic lyric by basing it on a model of consciousness. The poem ends "when the lyric speaker achieves an insight, faces up to a tragic loss, comes to a moral decision, or resolves an emotional problem." Abrams reinforces Mill's "identification of the lyric with personal, subjective feeling" by establishing what Siskin calls "an ideology of generic essentialism that features the emotive, expressive, and creative lyric."<sup>29</sup> Abrams aligns Romantic lyricism and subjectivity, so that the mode comes to be defined less by formal features than by the formlessness of effusion, the expression of Mill's "feeling."<sup>30</sup> Romantic lyricism is rendered the poetic vehicle for psychological processes: the digressions of recollection and the associative mechanisms of reflection. Eliot provides Abrams with an important precedent by suggesting that "the 'psychic

material' tends to create its own form." The result is the lyric's aura, which is related to its association with individuality; according to Eliot, "the eventual form will be to a greater or less degree the form for that one poem and for no other."<sup>31</sup> By implication, the poem will also be peculiar to the individual consciousness that composes it.

The effect on subsequent Romantic criticism of Abrams's equation of lyricism with subjectivity cannot be overestimated. It has particular relevance for new historicism, because Abrams's psychologizing of the form also renders it explicitly humanist. He states his position straightforwardly: "Romantic writers, though nature poets, were humanists above all, for they dealt with the non-human only insofar as it is the occasion for the activity which defines man: thought, the process of intellection."<sup>32</sup> There is certainly a political impetus to Mill's division of poetry from oration, and therefore from a desire to move auditors to action. But Abrams's association of Romantic lyricism with a particular historical moment invests the paradigm with more specific political meaning: he grounds the "greater Romantic lyric" in the aftermath in England of the French Revolution. The "outer scene" obscured by the poet's meditations in Abrams's model is a landscape, but the poet's loss of contact with his surroundings at the moment of reflection is easily politicized, especially when the essay is paired, as it often is, with another published two years earlier, "English Romanticism: The Spirit of the Age" (1963, in a volume edited by Frye). Although Abrams defends the canonical poets from charges of "escapism," his thesis severs poetry from political action: "The great Romantic poems were written not in the mood of revolutionary exaltation but in the later mood of revolutionary disillusionment or despair." Once again, Wordsworth proves exemplary for definitions of Romantic lyricism: Abrams argues that around 1797, the poet "came to see his destiny to lie in spiritual rather than in overt action and adventure."<sup>33</sup>

Abrams is key to the integration of a generic definition into broader critical debates. In *Natural Supernaturalism*, he incorporates the formal properties of the lyric so thoroughly into his larger paradigm of Romanticism that the "greater Romantic lyric" came to be associated with his version of the field. Challenges to Abrams's account of Romanticism—including feminist discussions of the canon and new historical critiques of the Romantic ideology—have typically

accepted his interpretation of the “greater Romantic lyric” in order to interrogate Romanticism’s gender and social politics. The focus of both debates has been a portrait of the poet as independent of his surroundings, whether a feminized nature or the French Revolution and its aftermath. Romantic lyricism has been equated in these discussions with an emphasis on transcendence and a detachment from local environments. Yet the cost of a strategy of appropriating Abrams’s terms in order to challenge his version of Romanticism has been the necessity of taking him at his word that the primary impulse of Romantic lyricism is a withdrawal from political engagement.



Each critical generation since Abrams has built—directly or indirectly—on his suppositions.<sup>34</sup> Levinson addresses the importance of Abrams to new historical concerns in her landmark essay on the “Intimations Ode.” She begins by reading together his essays on the “greater Romantic lyric” and on the “Spirit of the Age,” arguing that he defines the former as “apolitical”:

The greater lyric—a private meditation born of the speaker’s nonspecific, existential malaise—reaches articulation through his response to a present, particular, and precisely located natural scene. The meditation concludes with the production of a consolation which is valorized by the private and disinterested character of its motivation and development.<sup>35</sup>

Levinson accepts Abrams’s terms so that she may read against the grain of his definitions. She even emphasizes the qualities he “valorizes”—a premium on privacy and disinterestedness—in order to bring out the political content of his paradigm. In Levinson’s account, the Romantic lyric formally embodies the Romantic ideology, “one of whose chief illusions is the triumph of the inner life over the outer world.”<sup>36</sup> In the dialectic between subject and object, the former wins out by lyricism’s processes of internalization. Thus the relationship between poet and environment is not only hierarchical, as in Abrams’s model, it is actually antagonistic. The lyric dissociates the poet from

history by assimilating events in the public realm into private experience; autobiography subsumes the events of history. For the poet, a certain detachment is both cost and profit. According to McGann, whose reading of “Tintern Abbey” exemplifies this critical narrative, “between 1793 and 1798 Wordsworth lost the world merely to gain his own immortal soul.”<sup>37</sup> Alan Liu makes the mechanisms of this process explicitly psychogeneric. In his account of Wordsworth’s career, the poet begins with the historically responsive genres of locodescriptive and georgic poetry and then, in the wake of the French Revolution, breaks these forms in order to absorb social history into lyric autobiography. These new historical critiques continue a critical tradition of attributing abstract qualities to poetic form, a critical practice that effectively circumscribes the reading of individual poems by approaching them with a set of expectations about the implications of specific poetic features.

McGann, Levinson, and Liu are likewise faithful to Abrams’s model in that they, too, psychologize the mode by describing the processes of reflection and recollection as part of lyricism’s ideological machinery. Take, for instance, McGann’s view of the lyric poet’s acts of reflection: he claims that Wordsworth realizes that “his insight into the life of things” means the “loss of the concrete and particular.”<sup>38</sup> In other words, the cost of private insight—the boon in Abrams’s model—is in McGann’s terms blindness to social surroundings. Levinson and Liu, in particular, adhere to Abrams’s conventions in that their treatments of Romantic lyricism are concerned with genre. Both turn the psychogeneric processes he describes into ideological mechanisms for releasing the poet from social commitments. Thus, a new historical vocabulary of repression and denial is deeply indebted to Abrams.

New historical critics of Abrams’s Romanticism have also remained true to him in keeping Wordsworth as a central object of critique. Levinson and Liu acknowledge their engagement with Abrams’s models, and it is plausible that their efforts to historicize his account of Romanticism require at least a partial acceptance of his terms. Yet historicizing Romanticism and its formal models requires broadening critical attention beyond the exemplary figure of Wordsworth. Canonicity is, after all, part of the Romantic ideology. His centrality has been a formidable obstacle to critics who have