

Individualism in british romantic literature



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In the current historical reassessment of romanticism, individualism has rightly become a major area of scholarly and critical focus. One important question that has begun to press to the surface of critical discussion in the investigation of romanticism is whether the romantic imagination is essentially masculinist. In the current historical reassessment of romanticism, individualism has rightly become a major area of scholarly and critical focus. The work on human nature has unfolded in at least four directions. A major effort is now under way (led by Stuart Curran) to recover the work of women poets who wrote during the romantic period and who have been forgotten by literary history. Several critics, especially Marlon Ross and Anne Mellor, have begun to identify and investigate a tradition of romantic writing that developed against the canonical (masculinist) literature of the period.

Perhaps the most salutary effect of these critical and scholarly efforts to foreground the fact, place, and function of individualism in the romantic imagination is that they have begun to raise important questions concerning some of romanticism's most closely held assumptions about the nature and character of human experience and to provide a means for critically questioning those assumptions. (Gallop, p. 53) In doing so, moreover, individualistic criticism has brought new intellectual energy to the study of romanticism, focusing certain nuances of romantic expression and meaning and opening up romantic texts and culture to new levels of understanding. Romanticism is characterized most profoundly by its relation to the transition, in Britain, from feudalism to capitalism. This claim has been argued persuasively by Robert Sayre and Michael Lowy, who define and

defend romanticism as utopian desire for precapitalist values; that desire, they argue, while directed to the past, can be used as the basis for a critique of the quantifying and alienating authority of capitalism. For Sayre and Lowy, romanticism constitutes a challenge to, and points a way out of, capitalism's reduction of human life to so many economic units. (Coleridge, p. 79) The individualistic romanticism is best understood as a cultural response to the historical triumph of industrial capitalism in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries is remarkably erudite and persuasive; but it does not adequately consider the complicated ways that British romanticism, even in its most utopian moments, remains deeply entangled within the social and cultural conditions of both feudalism and capitalism.

The attachment of romanticism to feudal and aristocratic subject matter is too fond to be seen only as a rejection of capitalist values; that attachment constitutes as well a historical residue that marks the continuing hold of an aristocratic worldview on at least a portion of the romantic imagination. At the time romanticism emerges, alongside industrial capitalism, feudalism has not yet entirely let go its hold on the cultural imagination, a fact that forces a more careful consideration than Sayre and Lowy have provided of the dialectical warfare between the residual cultural claims of feudalism, the emergent economic-cultural demands of capitalism, and the place of romanticism within this turbulent situation. ...