

## ROMANTIC INFLUENCES

*Also by John Beer*

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# Romantic Influences

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Contemporary – Victorian – Modern

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# Preface

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The series of discussions that make up this volume indicate some important lines of influence that ran through British culture during the period from the French Revolution to the early twentieth century, and particularly the emergence of a 'high' Romanticism, responding to the loss of a commanding philosophy and language in the culture. While such influences emerged mainly from the writers of the Romantic period the study is not intended to be comprehensive: I have not, for example, looked in full at the major influence exercised by Wordsworth. The dominant figure here is rather Coleridge, whose presence, while hard to pin down, was nevertheless persistent. Coleridge perceived what was at issue more acutely than any other writer of his time, setting up ripples of disturbance that were experienced not only by some of his contemporaries but by writers approaching him later – sometimes from more than a century away. Nineteenth-century cultural history is not always presented here as an ordered and developing sequence, therefore, but sometimes as a process within which from time to time the intellectual conditions prevailing in the aftermath of the French Revolution were replicated. When this happened perceptive writers would be reinitiated into the significance of certain issues explored by their Romantic predecessors – particularly the earliest ones – and display once again the relevance of their thinking.

One of the questions that runs through the book concerns the nature of influence itself. In our time it has been rescued from the somewhat drab kind of study that concentrated purely on resemblances between individual texts by being seen to raise important issues concerning writers and their predecessors. I am not trying to offer a unified theory about the matter; rather the successive discussions will be seen to exhibit some of the many forms of relationship that can exist between successive writers, ranging from discipleship to the kind of rebellion that must also be seen as a form of influence. An important organizing concept here, which is indebted to one of Harold Bloom's observations, is that Romanticism itself was not simply a revolt against emotional dryness but a kind of malaise, resulting from a loss of spiritual security that was

more like an *influenza*. This is one of the reasons for the prominence of Coleridge, since whether or not he found the right answers he was asking the most pertinent questions. It is an essential part of the book's argument that those who were aware of their contemporary situation as an *influenza* were likely to turn, like him, in the direction of a 'high' Romanticism, involving an interest in metaphysical issues.

A further theme of the volume has to do with the phenomenon of fluency. It is an age-old source of imagery, of course, which comes to writers as readily now as ever it did, but from the Romantic period onwards it had a particularly strong significance as offering a possible means of mediation between the contraries that were giving rise to the malaise of the times. When examined as a whole, the uses of such imagery emerge from the background where they normally lurk and can be seen to have suggested first a possible means of resolving contemporary contradictions, then – by way of the looser imagery of flux – the absence of easy solutions.

A number of the discussions have been given a first airing in lectures over the years and in published pieces: I wish to express particular gratitude to the organizers of the Wordsworth Summer Conference at Grasmere and of the English Institute, and to Vision Press, Oxford University Press and Cambridge University Press for permission to reproduce material from three articles. In no case has an article been reproduced exactly and in full; the closest instance is in Chapter 2. Details of the earlier discussions will be found in the notes to the relevant chapters.

I should also like to thank various friends, including Michael Phillips, Ian Ker, Steve Clark and Teresa Brennan, for their assistance with specific points, and my wife, whose encouragement has been a constant and sustaining influence of the most benevolent kind: a number of specific debts to her writings are acknowledged in the notes. Further gratitude is due to the staffs of the University Library and the English Faculty Library in Cambridge and of my own college library for their excellent service, and to Hazel Dunn and Maureen Ashby for their great help in preparing the typescript.