

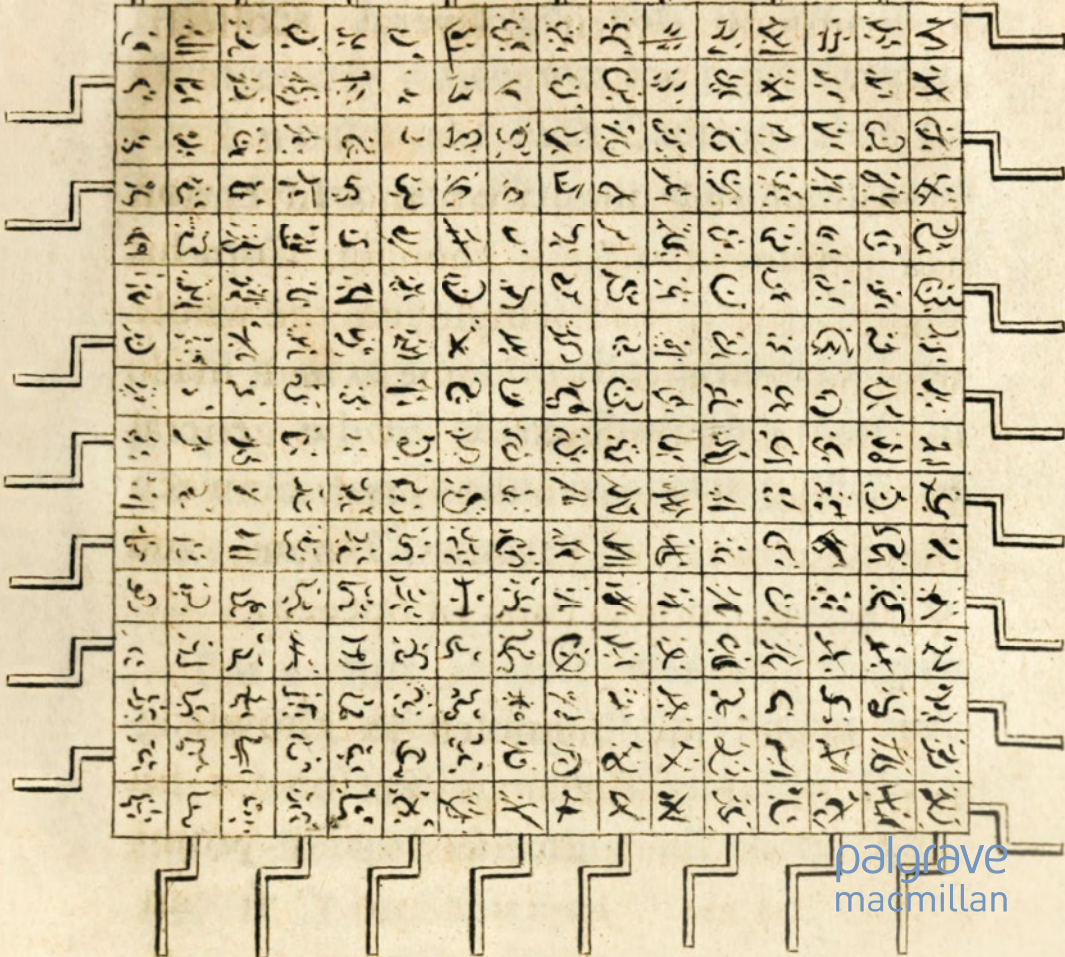


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Romanticism and the Contingent Self

The Challenge of Representation

Michael Falk



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*To be a poet
what it means
to lose the self
to lose the self*

—*Michael Dransfield, 'Byron at Newstead'*

To Jennie
—my Guide, Philosopher and Friend.

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CHAPTER 1

Introduction: Strange Multiplicities

Ich bin nicht, der ich bin ...

I am not who I am ...

—Friedrich Hölderlin, ‘Der Tod des Empedokles’ (1826)¹

Must I be me? The question poses a gritty logical problem. On the one hand, ‘I’ and ‘me’ seem to be two words for the same object. On this view, ‘I’ must be ‘me’ by definition. On the other hand, I am quite aware of my body, my particular life history, my possessions, my friends, my job, my family, and I can easily imagine changing all of them. When I subtract all these things, what is left? When René Descartes considered this situation, he concluded that his ‘I’ was simply a ‘thinking thing’, devoid even of senses, imagination, or any extension in physical space.² On Descartes’ view, there seems to be no real distinction between me and anything else in the universe. I could be a stone, a cricket or Kylie Minogue, if only my ‘I’, my power of abstract thought, were somehow transplanted into them. The only necessary thing about me is my power of abstract reflection. Everything else—my social identity, my body, my senses, even perhaps my own memory—is contingent.

¹Friedrich Hölderlin, *Gedichte*, 1. Auflage (Stuttgart; Tübingen: Cotta, 1826), p. 215.

²René Descartes, *Discourse on Method and Other Writings*, trans. by F.E. Sutcliffe (London: Penguin, 1988), pp. 113, 132.

In the Romantic period, this problem of self-identity moved to the centre of literary consciousness. Literary historians have explained this development in various ways, but it is undeniable that Romantic writers produced some of the most challenging reflections on self-identity in European literature. For philosopher Stanley Cavell, Romantic writing is so compelling because of the way it reveals ‘the natural struggle between the representation and the acknowledgement of our subjectivity’.³ Cavell describes what I call the ‘challenge of representation’. For Romantic writers, there was a tension between the ‘I’ and the ‘me’. How could I represent ‘me’, the objective person who inhabits the world, while also acknowledging ‘I’, my power of consciousness or subjectivity? The challenge of representation was not a problem for Descartes. He claimed that the self was a ‘thing’ like any other, that could be described or represented as easily as a chair or species of flower. But by the end of the eighteenth century, other thinkers had undermined Descartes’ confident view. David Hume had argued that the self could not be observed: ‘I never can catch *myself* at any time without a perception, and never can observe any thing but the perception’.⁴ Immanuel Kant agreed: ‘Inner sense ... gives, to be sure, no intuition of the soul itself as an object’.⁵ If the self is not an object, then it cannot be represented. According to thinkers like Hume and Kant, the self is not a particular thing that can be described or portrayed. Instead, the self is ‘that to which our several impressions and ideas are supposed to have a reference’.⁶ The self is *what represents*, not *what is represented*. If I try to represent my ‘self’, I immediately convert it into an object, which is precisely what it isn’t.

There is a flipside to Cavell’s argument. If I cannot represent myself, how can I even acknowledge my own existence? Hume struggles with this problem in his *Treatise of Human Nature* (1739–40). To explain his idea that the self is not an object, he tries a metaphor: ‘The mind is a kind of theatre, where several perceptions successively make their appearance;

³ Stanley Cavell, *The World Viewed: Reflections on the Ontology of Film* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1980), p. 22.

⁴ David Hume, *A Treatise of Human Nature*, 2nd edn (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1978), p. 252.

⁵ Immanuel Kant, *Critique of Pure Reason*, trans. by Paul Guyer and Allen W. Wood (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998), p. 157. Translation slightly modified.

⁶ Hume, p. 251.

pass, re-pass, glide away, and mingle in an infinite variety of postures and situations'.⁷ But this metaphor immediately suggests the idea that the self is an object (a theatre), and Hume is quick to clarify:

The comparison of the theatre must not mislead us. They are the successive perceptions only, that constitute the mind; nor have we the most distant notion of the place, where these scenes are represented, or of the materials, of which it is composed.⁸

The self is a non-theatre, made of nothing, and located nowhere. Hume finds that he cannot simultaneously represent and acknowledge his subjectivity. When he represents the self, he converts it into an object (the theatre). When he acknowledges his subjectivity, he is therefore forced to abandon his representation (the 'comparison of the theatre'). Is it possible to resolve this contradiction, and find an object that adequately represents the self?

According to the most common view of Romanticism, the answer is yes. Romantic writers searched for an adequate symbol, a symbol that would simultaneously represent and acknowledge the self.⁹ Romantic writers believed that such a symbol could be found because they believed that the self was *necessary*. They believed that each of us was defined by a 'stable inner core of selfhood' or certain 'essential qualities of mind'.¹⁰ For Descartes, the only necessary thing about me was my power of thinking. For Hume, nothing was necessary at all. Romantic writers replied by arguing that the self is a dynamic whole, whose identity is only comprehensible

⁷Hume, p. 253. Though Hume uses the word 'mind' in these quotes, it is clear that in this chapter his 'mind' is the same thing as '*myself*'.

⁸Hume, p. 253.

⁹Following Schelling, Halmi argues that such a 'symbol' achieves this apparently impossible feat by representing itself: '... the symbol cannot be interpreted: it is what it means and means what it is, leaving nothing else to be said': Nicholas Halmi, 'Romanticism, the Temporalization of History, and the Historicization of Form', *Modern Language Quarterly: A Journal of Literary History*, 74 (2013), 363–89 (p. 382).

¹⁰Dror Wahrman, *The Making of the Modern Self: Identity and Culture in Eighteenth-Century England* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2006), p. 168; Nancy Armstrong, *Desire and Domestic Fiction: A Political History of the Novel* (Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 1990), p. 11.

after a long course of growth and development.¹¹ In their writings they explored this self, telling stories or writing poems in which the ‘mind of man, ... develops through successive stages of division, conflict, and reconciliation’, until it ‘achieves a full and triumphant awareness of its identity’.¹² The key Romantic themes are ‘psychological development’ and ‘self-discovery’.¹³ Even when a Romantic tale ends badly, with the death or destruction of the protagonist, the ideal is still the same: ‘the quest is always for a completed self’.¹⁴ Some Romantic writers may have believed that this ‘inner, spiritual self’ could ‘transcend the age’s troubling conflicts and ideological shifts’, but modern scholars have tended to argue that the Romantics were unable to escape the grubby political and economic realities of their time.¹⁵

Scholars increasingly doubt this picture of Romanticism. There are countless works of Romantic literature that lack this apparent faith in the self. What if, when I try to acknowledge my subjectivity, I find that there is nothing to acknowledge? What if, when I try to synthesise my experiences, I find that they cannot be reconciled? If I find myself in this situation, forced to acknowledge an absent, self-contradictory or otherwise impossible self, what exactly am I trying to represent? The writers I consider in this study all confront this challenge of representation. Writing his biography of Lord Byron, Thomas Moore tries to add the ‘various points’ of Byron’s personality to paint a ‘complete portrait’ of the poet, but the task is impossible. Byron lacks any one ‘pivot of character’ that could make

¹¹ As Gilles Deleuze puts it, the logically necessary ‘individual’ described by Descartes is replaced by the whole ‘person’, whose self is a synthesis of everything that represents it: ‘Romantic irony determines the one who speaks as the person and no longer as the individual. It grounds itself on the finite synthetic unity of the person and no longer on the analytic identity of the individual. It is defined by the coextensiveness of the I and representation’. Gilles Deleuze, *The Logic of Sense*, trans. by Mark Lester and Charles Stivale (New York: Columbia University Press, 1990), p. 138.

¹² M. H. Abrams, *Natural Supernaturalism: Tradition and Revolution in Romantic Literature* (New York: Norton, 1971), p. 188.

¹³ Deidre Shauna Lynch, *The Economy of Character: Novels, Market Culture, and the Business of Inner Meaning* (Chicago: Chicago University Press, 1998), p. 13, 17.

¹⁴ Stuart Curran, *Poetic Form and British Romanticism* (Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 1986), p. 148.

¹⁵ Jerome J. McGann, *The Romantic Ideology: A Critical Investigation* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1985), p. 68.

sense of the whole.¹⁶ Charlotte Smith encounters a similar problem in her *Elegiac Sonnets* (1784–1800), in which she attempts to portray ‘heartless pain’ and ‘blank despair’.¹⁷ Can she even be said to ‘feel’ such emotions, when they rob her of the power of feeling? To convey such non-emotions, Smith compares herself to dead or non-existent things, such as exhumed bones rolling in the sea (Sonnet 44), or a portrait of her dead daughter that she is unable to draw (Sonnet 91). For writers such as Moore and Smith, the self is unrepresentable. We cannot collect ourselves into a whole. Nature does not form us into individuals. Experience is disparate. Subjectivity is a paradox. Self-discovery is impossible, because we have no self to discover.

This book explores how Romantic writers sought to represent this *contingent* self, the self that may not exist. These writers devised strange and wonderful symbols for the nonexistence of themselves. Romantic writers have typically been celebrated (or derided) as inventors of the ‘modern self’ of individual freedom and autonomy.¹⁸ This book celebrates a different kind of Romantic writing: the kind which denies we are individuals at all. This book demands that we revalue the difficult, uncertain works from the period that confront the unrepresentability of the self. It denies that novels of contingent selfhood are ‘repetitive and discontinuous’ or simply ‘travest[ies]’.¹⁹ It denies that sonnets of contingent selfhood are merely ‘feminine’ and ‘private’, or ‘not real sonnets at all’.²⁰ It denies that Romantic playwrights slammed ‘the gates of hell’ and made tragedy

¹⁶Thomas Moore, *Letters and Journals of Lord Byron: With Notices of His Life*, ed. by David Hall Radcliffe, Lord Byron and His Times, 2 vols (London: John Murray, 2008), ii, 782 <<https://www.lordbyron.org/contents.php?doc=ThMoore.1830.Contents>>.

¹⁷Sonnet XLIII, l. 8, in Charlotte Smith, *The Poems*, ed. by Stuart Curran (Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 1993).

¹⁸See for instance John O Lyons, *The Invention of the Self: The Hinge of Consciousness in the Eighteenth Century* (Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press, 1978); Charles Taylor, *Sources of the Self: The Making of the Modern Identity* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1989); Wahrman; Lynch, chap. 3; Roy Porter, *Flesh in the Age of Reason* (London: Allen Lane, 2005), chap. 26.

¹⁹Marilyn Butler, *Maria Edgeworth: A Literary Biography* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1972), p. 333; Claire Tomalin, *The Life and Death of Mary Wollstonecraft* (London: Weidenfeld and Nicholson, 1974), p. 236.

²⁰Jennifer Ann Wagner, *A Moment's Monument: Revisionary Poetics and the Nineteenth-Century English Sonnet* (Madison: Fairleigh Dickinson University Press, 1996); J. P. Phelan, *The Nineteenth-Century Sonnet* (Houndmills: Palgrave, 2005).

impossible in the modern age.²¹ It denies that '[t]he theory failed and Moore failed' in Moore's *Life of Byron*.²² On the contrary, in this book I argue that such texts of contingent selfhood are in fact remarkable feats of language, attempting to put in words what should be impossible to verbalise. To explore these feats of language, *Romanticism and the Contingent Self* utilises a range of digital methods. Digital methods allow me to characterise the linguistic surface of the texts I consider. I pay close attention to the writer's craft, observing how Romantic writers arranged words to convey the contingency of the self. These writers were acutely conscious of the inadequacy of language to convey the self. In the same way Hume undermined his own metaphor of the theatre, they undermine the power of their own words. Using the computer, we can gain a more detailed understanding of this complex, self-defeating language.

In the twentieth century, the problem of subjectivity identified by Hume, Kant and the Romantics became a topic of global interest. In Allahabad in the 1930s and 40s, A.C. Mukerji agreed with Kant and Hume that the self 'is a reality which is both undeniable and undefinable'.²³ He criticised Kant's argument that there must be an intelligible object, a thing-in-itself [*Ding an sich*] that corresponds to the subjective 'I'. He argued that the self is purely subjective. The self is 'absolute consciousness', and must not be understood as an object at all. Across the water in Kyoto, Nishida Kitarō replied to Kant and Hume by claiming that the self was actually 'nothing':

At the ground of our selves, thought as the infinite activity of the self growing and developing of itself, there must be that which, being born, is unborn, and moving, unmoving, on the basis of which our unity of consciousness comes into being. We might well call this 'nothing', but it is not nonbeing in mutually exclusive opposition to being but the nothing that includes being.²⁴

²¹ See below, n. 183.

²² Joseph W. Reed, *English Biography in the Early Nineteenth Century, 1801-1838* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1966), p. 124.

²³ Anukul Chandra Mukerji, *The Nature of Self*, 2nd edn (Allahabad: The Indian Press, 1943), p. 270.

²⁴ Kitarō Nishida, *Ontology of Production: Three Essays*, trans. by William Wendell Haver (Durham, N.C.: Duke University Press, 2012), p. 50.

For such post-Romantic thinkers, our existence is not primarily individual. We are immersed in a sea of experience, from which the individual self emerges as a contingent fact (if it emerges at all). This view of the individual has profound ethical and metaphysical ramifications. The Romantic struggle to represent the self is not of merely historical interest. It is not simply a chapter in the history of Western culture or some other parochial narrative. Romantic literature is part of a living, global tradition of thought about the nature of ourselves. When writers such as Moore and Smith confronted the possibility that we are really nothing at all, they wrote strange and beautiful words, which challenge us to find a less self-certain and more humane way of moving through the world.

The rest of this introduction falls into three main parts. In Sect. 1.1, I explore the problem of self and language. How can words construct—or deconstruct—a self? I present Jeremy Bentham’s theory of the ‘fictitious’ self that emerges in discourse, and use his arguments to formulate my own digital methodology for observing the linguistic construction of the self in literary texts. In Sect. 1.2, I survey the current literature on the Romantic self, with the help of a large corpus of JSTOR articles. Having shown that the ‘necessary’ self still dominates scholarly discourse in Romanticism, I present in Sect. 1.3 a new theory of Romantic selfhood. Using *Frankenstein* (1818) as a case study, I distinguish three sets of concepts: subjective ‘I’/objective ‘me’, sensation/passion/will and monstrosity/multiplicity. These concepts provide the basis for categorising and comparing the various contingent selves we will encounter in subsequent chapters.

1.1 FORMS OF SELF AND FORMS OF WRITING

Ah tell where I must seek this compound I?
—Anna Laetitia Barbauld, ‘Life’²⁵

In this single line, Anna Laetitia Barbauld encapsulates the Romantic challenge of representation. What is the relationship between the ‘I’ that poses this question and the ‘compound I’ she asks about? Barbauld poses this question to her own ‘life’, from which she feels strangely alienated as she contemplates her own death. In this morbid mood, the very word ‘I’ loses its meaning. It ceases to be Barbauld’s own singular ‘I’, and becomes a mysterious plural ‘compound’ that she can nowhere find. Barbauld is not

²⁵ Anna Letitia Barbauld, *Selected Poetry and Prose*, ed. by William McCarthy and Elizabeth Kraft (Peterborough, Ontario: Broadview, 2002), p. 174.

the only Romantic writer who tries to capture the self in language, only for language itself to disintegrate. The contingent self is intrinsically unrepresentable. When a Romantic writer tries to represent the contingent self in language, they run up against the limits of the medium. They twist and turn their own words, converting language from a medium of communication into an object for observation. In this way, Romantic writers of the contingent self foreshadow the very computer analysis to which I subject their texts in this book. Romantic writers unstitch words from text rhetorically, revealing how words shape or unshape the self. I unstitch words from text algorithmically, revealing how words shape or unshape the text itself.

This unstitching of language can take place at multiple linguistic levels, and occurs in different ways in different forms of literature. In Chap. 3, I show how Maria Edgeworth and Adeline Opie critique the social currency of words. When characters in their novels try to use words such as ‘attachment’ or ‘character’ to describe themselves, they are caught in a web of social conflict. In Chap. 4, I show how Charlotte Smith and John Clare manipulate the sonnet form to dismantle their own poetic personae. The mere selection of rhyme-scheme or manipulation of syllables can erect or dismantle the lyric ‘I’. In Chap. 5, I show how Charles Harpur and Joanna Baillie de-individualise the dialogue of their plays. In Harpur’s tragedy, language breaks the mind, while in Baillie’s, the mind breaks and language is cast adrift. Finally in Chap. 6, I show how Moore severs the link between language and its writer. After deciding to let Byron speak for himself, using the poet’s letters and journals for two-thirds of the biography’s text, Moore concludes that Byron was a self-falsifier and that none of us can truly know ourselves in any case. In each of these cases, the writer invites the reader to doubt the very words they are reading. If ‘attachment’ is a contested concept, what are we to make of the ‘attachments’ between characters in Edgeworth and Opie’s novels? If language loses its referential character under the influence of passion, how can characters speak meaningfully in Baillie’s passion-plays? I respond to such questions throughout the book, using computer methods to observe precisely where and how these writers use particular words to form the text and evoke some idea of the self.

Such computer analysis continues to be controversial in literary studies due to spectre of ‘distant reading’. Many computational literary scholars have claimed that the key advantage of the computer is that it can read many texts, where a human scholar can only read a few. Such scholars,

including Franco Moretti, Matthew Jockers and Ted Underwood, have proposed that ‘distant reading’ or ‘macroanalysis’ can reveal deep trends in literary history which no individual human mind can comprehend.²⁶ ‘A single pair of eyes at ground level can’t grasp the curve of the horizon’, writes Underwood, ‘and arguments limited by a single reader’s memory can’t reveal the largest patterns organizing literary history’.²⁷ The proponents of distant reading have provoked considerable backlash from traditionalist literary scholars, who make the elementary point that computers cannot ‘read’ at all.²⁸ Really the debate is misconstrued on both sides. The question is not how many texts a human or computer can read, nor is the question how ‘crudely’ a computer reads compared to a human.²⁹ A human scholar is an attentive interpreter of text. A computer manipulates strings of characters encoded as bytes in memory. The question is—how can the scholar harness the computer’s string-manipulating power to enrich their perception of the text?³⁰

Modern computational methods are rooted in the insights of structuralism. In the structuralist view, language (*langue*) is a menu of signs and symbols. To produce an utterance (*parole*), a speaker or writer selects and combines signs and symbols from the menu. The crucial structuralist insight is that all levels of language are structured by negation. At the lowest level, individual phonemes define themselves by negating one another. In English, the phonemes /d/ and /t/ have the same place and manner of articulation, but they negate one another’s voicing: /d/ is voiced and /t/ is unvoiced. At the highest level, individual words, literary forms or sociolects distinguish themselves through negation. A haiku is not a sonnet because it does not have fourteen lines and is not in iambic

²⁶Franco Moretti, *Distant Reading* (London and New York: Verso, 2013); Matthew Jockers, *Macroanalysis: Digital Methods and Literary History* (Urbana, Chicago and Springfield: University of Illinois Press, 2013); Ted Underwood, *Distant Horizons: Digital Evidence and Literary Change* (Chicago: Chicago University Press, 2019).

²⁷Underwood, p. x.

²⁸Katie Trumpener, ‘Critical Response I. Paratext and Genre System: A Response to Franco Moretti’, *Critical Inquiry*, 36.1 (2009), 159–71 <<https://doi.org/10.1086/606126>>; Stephen Marche, ‘Literature Is Not Data: Against Digital Humanities’, *Los Angeles Review of Books*, 28 October 2012 <<https://lareviewofbooks.org/article/literature-is-not-data-against-digital-humanities/>> [accessed 3 November 2023].

²⁹Underwood, p. xxi.

³⁰For a thorough explication of this argument, see Stephen Ramsay, *Reading Machines: Towards an Algorithmic Criticism* (Urbana, Chicago and Springfield: University of Illinois Press, 2011), chap. 1.

pentameter. This inner logic of negation makes language independent of its speakers or writers. Language provides a menu of options to the speaker or writer—phonemes, words, syntactic structures, literary forms, discourses. On the one hand, the speaker or writer is compelled to choose from this menu (*langue*). On the other, they have the freedom to recombine elements of language to produce an infinite variety of individual texts or utterances (*parole*). In the twentieth century, French structuralists such as Michel Foucault and Jacques Derrida tended to stress the constraining power of language, while Russian and American structuralists such as Roman Jakobson and Noam Chomsky emphasised its infinite power of recombination.

The structuralist view of language lends itself to computational analysis. The scholar can use the computer to model the menu of options available to the writer, and then observe how they are recombined in particular texts. What is the vocabulary of Romantic fiction, and which words do these or those novelists actually use? What kinds of line-group are possible in the sonnet, and how do these or those sonneteers distribute them in their poems? Even before the widespread adoption of digital computers in literary scholarship, such computational analysis was common. An especially powerful example is Roland Barthes's *S/Z* (1970), in which Barthes breaks down a single story into small chunks, and observes how five 'codes' are recombined to generate its meaning. He memorably describes how meaning depends upon the arrangement of words and letters in the text:

... reading is absorbed in a kind of metonymic skid, each synonym adding to its neighbor some new trait, some new departure: the old man who was first connoted as *fragile* is soon said to be '*of glass*': an image containing signifieds of rigidity, immobility, and dry, cutting frangibility. This expansion is the very movement of meaning³¹

³¹ Roland Barthes, *S/Z*, trans. by Richard Miller (New York: Hill and Wang, 1974), pp. 92–93.

Barthes is describing a phenomenon that computer scientists call the ‘distributional hypothesis’.³² The writer has a finite set of ‘signifiers’ available to them (e.g. fragile, glass). The writer creates meaning by distributing these signifiers through the text. The frequency and ordering of signifiers are ‘the very movement of meaning’. Since signifiers are encoded as strings of characters, a computer can be used to observe their distribution. It can count the word ‘fragile’ and observe that ‘glass’ occurs nearby. Barthes devoted an entire book to the words of a single short story. Using a computer, we can mimic Barthes’s method on a larger scale. We can trace the interconnections of words in larger texts, such as novels, plays or biographies. We can observe the distribution of words in many texts, and see how an individual text differs from others in the corpus.

Although the Romantics were not structuralists, they were aware of the independence of language, and of the way it both constrains and enables human expression. Novalis came closest to the structuralist insight, though he never developed his conjecture into a linguistic theory:

If only people could be made to understand, that it’s the same with speech as it is with mathematical formulae—they create a world for themselves—they play only with themselves, express nothing but their own wonderful nature, and it is precisely for this reason that they are expressive—precisely because they reflect in themselves the relational play [*Verhältnisspiel*] of things.³³

Novalis hits upon the idea that language is independent. When we speak, language expresses itself. He suggests that language has inner relationships which govern speech in the same way that the physical world has natural laws which govern motion. But he does not develop an account of

³² Zellig S. Harris, ‘Distributional Structure’, *WORD*, 10.2–3 (1954), 146–62 <<https://doi.org/10.1080/00437956.1954.11659520>>; Marco Baroni and Alessandro Lenci, ‘Distributional Memory: A General Framework for Corpus-Based Semantics’, *Computational Linguistics*, 36.4 (2010), 673–721 <https://doi.org/10.1162/coli_a_00016>; P. D. Turney and P. Pantel, ‘From Frequency to Meaning: Vector Space Models of Semantics’, *Journal of Artificial Intelligence Research*, 37 (2010), 141–88 <<https://doi.org/10.1613/jair.2934>>.

³³ ‘Wenn man den Leuten nur begreiflich machen könnte, daß es mit der Sprache wie mit den mathematischen Formeln sei—sie machen eine Welt für sich aus—sie spielen nur mit sich selbst, drücken nichts als ihre wunderbare Natur aus, und eben darum sind sie so ausdrucksvoll—eben darum spiegelt sich in ihnen das seltsame Verhältnisspiel der Dinge.’ Novalis, *Novalis Werke*, ed. by Gerhard Schulz, Beck’s Kommentierte Klassiker, 2., neubearbeitete Aufl (München: Beck, 1981), p. 426.

what the inner relationships of language are—he lacks something like the structuralist’s concept of negation. Instead he pursues the poetic idea that the movement of language mirrors the movement of the world. A beautiful conception, but one that is difficult to implement computationally for the purpose of literary scholarship.

Another Romantic theorist who came close to structuralism was Jeremy Bentham. Like Novalis, he argues that language creates its own world. Nearly every entity we refer to, argues Bentham, is ‘fictitious’. The only ‘real’ entities, he argues, are things that we can directly refer to—that is, physical objects that can be perceived by ‘one of the five senses’ and can be prefixed by the word ‘this’ (e.g. ‘this star’, ‘this fellow’).³⁴ Every other word—including, tellingly, the word ‘I’—refers to a fictitious entity. Bentham anticipates structuralism in two key points. First, he argues that language is independent of its speakers. The fictionality of language is an ‘invincible necessity’ of ‘discourse’, which the speaker has no power to thwart.³⁵ Second, he argues that words cannot be understood in isolation.³⁶ A ‘word’ can only be ‘intelligible’ if it is ‘represented as part of some assertion or proposition’.³⁷ Although language is composed of ‘signs’, it is not composed of ‘words’.³⁸ Language is always in the form of propositions, from which we learn to abstract words through a kind of ‘chemico-logical analysis’.³⁹ In this way Bentham asserts that language is relational. Words only have meaning by their relation to other words. Bentham even considers something like the distributional hypothesis, when he suggests that the frequency of certain words in discourse may reflect the psychological state of the speaker.⁴⁰ Of course, like Novalis, Bentham is not actually a structuralist. He does not analyse language as a logical structure governed by negation, but rather as a collection of ‘vernacular language habits’ which betray certain strong tendencies in

³⁴ Jeremy Bentham, *The Works of Jeremy Bentham; Published under the Superintendence of His Executor, John Bowring*, ed. by John Bowring, 1st edn, 11 vols (Edinburgh: W. Tait, 1843), VIII, 327.

³⁵ Bentham, VIII, 327.

³⁶ I am indebted to Peter Otto for this observation.

³⁷ Bentham, VIII, 333.

³⁸ Bentham, VIII, 299.

³⁹ Bentham, VIII, 322.

⁴⁰ Bentham, VIII, 308.

practice.⁴¹ He does not view language as a self-contained system, but rather as a system tightly coupled to human sense-perception and the physical world. On the final analysis, all language refers to ‘real’ (i.e. physical) entities. Every fictitious entity, such as a polity, mind or musical composition, can in principle be boiled down to a collection of real entities somewhere in physical space and time. I may be forced by language to talk as though ‘I’ am an object that exists, but in fact, all ‘I’ really am is a collection of physical fluids and tissues spread out in time and space.

Both Novalis and Bentham raise the possibility that the self is constructed by language. In Novalis’ view, the ‘I’ of the poet may be merely a play of words. In Bentham’s strident argument, the ‘I’ is simply a convenient fiction. Language forces us to speak as though the world is made up of objects, and therefore I am forced to speak about myself as though I am a physical object. I say that thoughts are ‘in’ my mind although it is perfectly obvious that a psychical entity like a thought cannot be ‘in’ anything.⁴² The linguistic construction of self is the key to both the subject-matter and the methods of this book. Romantic writers feared or embraced the idea that the self is constructed in language. I use digital methods to explore how the self is constructed in the language of Romantic texts. The linguistic construction of the self also provides the foundation for my treatment of the challenge of representation. As Bentham observes, language obliges us to talk about the world as though it is made up of individual objects. This necessity drives us to invent fictitious objects to provide convenient points of reference in discourse. What happens when we cannot find an appropriate fictitious object for our discourse? More specifically, what happens when the fictitious object of ‘self’ absents itself or breaks down? This is the challenge of representation.

The challenge of representation has two distinct moments. The first moment is the general problem posed by the distinction between subject and object. If the self is a subject, as Hume and Kant claimed, then can it be represented as an object? The second moment is the specific challenge raised by the contingent self. If the self does not exist, if it lacks unity or coherence, then how could any given object adequately represent it? These two moments of the challenge of representation are tightly entangled,

⁴¹ Bryan Green, ‘Jeremy Bentham’s Social Ontology: Fictionality, Factuality and Language Critique’, *Philosophy of the Social Sciences*, 52.3 (2022), 107–31 (p. 127) <<https://doi.org/10.1177/004839312211080999>>.

⁴² Bentham, viii, 329.

because they both rest on the logic of representation. Gilles Deleuze explains this logic concisely: ‘difference becomes an object of *representation* always in relation to a conceived identity, a judged analogy, an imagined opposition or a perceived similitude’.⁴³ A writer may use a word such as ‘Elizabeth’, ‘she’ or ‘his’ to refer to some object representing a self. In such a case, the self is represented as an object, which is singular and unique (identity), which can be described according to a system of concepts such as body/limb/organ/cell (analogy) or alive/dead (opposition), and which may resemble other selves to varying degrees (similitude). This logic of representation applies at many levels of linguistic structure. It can apply at the word-level to names or pronouns such as ‘her’ or ‘Byron’. It can apply at the discourse-level to speeches or descriptive passages that evoke thoughts or actions. It can apply at plot-level to characters. As Bentham observes, the logic of representation is powerfully encoded in language. It is difficult to talk about anything without talking about objects. It is nonetheless possible to use language in a non-representational way. Deleuze identifies two non-representational modes of discourse: monstrosity and multiplicity.

Monstrosity is a mode of representation that ‘discovers within itself the limits of the organised; tumult, restlessness and passion underneath apparent calm’.⁴⁴ The paradigm of monstrosity is the volcano, which exceeds or destroys itself as part of its very definition. I present examples of such monstrous representation in each of the chapters that follow. In Amelia Opie’s *Adeline Mowbray* (1805), the protagonist transgresses society’s sexual laws, and shatters the distinction between honour and dishonour (Chap. 3). In her *Elegiac Sonnets*, Charlotte Smith explores the burdens of a mind that negates itself, transgressing the boundaries between feeling and numbness, consciousness and unconsciousness (Chap. 4). In *Orra* and *The Dream* (1812), Joanna Baillie subjects her characters to the destructive force of monstrous passion (Chap. 5). In his *Life of Byron* (1830–31), Thomas Moore identifies ‘genius’ as a volcanic force that can derange or destroy a person’s ‘character’ (Chap. 6). Texts like these do indeed represent the self, but push that representation to the limits to reveal the self’s contingency.

⁴³ Gilles Deleuze, *Difference and Repetition*, trans. by Paul Patton (London: Athlone, 1994), p. 138. Emphasis added.

⁴⁴ Deleuze, *Difference and Repetition*, p. 42. He also refers to monstrosity as ‘orgiastic representation’, ‘infinite representation’ and ‘infinitesimal representation’.

Deleuze's second alternative to representation is 'multiplicity'.⁴⁵ Representation divides the world into distinct objects. By contrast, multiplicity divides the world into 'elements' that 'have no prior existence', but exist only as part of the whole. These elements are 'reciprocally determined', causing one another to appear and disappear, and they appear 'in a variety of *terms* and forms'.⁴⁶ The paradigm of multiplicity is the sea, whose waves rise and fall without ever separating from one another. I present examples of multiplicity in each of the following chapters. In Maria Edgeworth's *Vivian* (1812), the protagonist lacks a mind of his own, and dissolves into a multiplicity of words and ideas implanted by society (Chap. 3). In many of John Clare's sonnets, the lyric 'I' flows into the landscape, and is difficult to interpret as an individual (Chap. 4). In Charles Harpur's colonial tragedy, *The Bushrangers* (1853, orig. 1835), the protagonist inhabits multiple worlds, in each of which he is a different person (Chap. 5). In *Byron*, Moore concludes that Lord Byron is 'not one, but many'. For Moore, Byron is both monstrous and multiple, depending on whether his genius or his character is under discussion (Chap. 6). These texts of multiplicity are disorganised. They describe detached experiences that flow from mind to mind, rather than ascribing unique experiences to discrete individuals.

I am not the first to rediscover Deleuze's multiplicity and monstrosity as opposing styles of Romantic literature. Denise Gigante makes a similar claim in *Life: Organic Form and Romanticism* (2009). She distinguishes three forms of Romantic poetry: (1) 'open organic form', or multiplicity; (2) 'living form', or representation; and (3) 'monstrosity'.⁴⁷ I build on Gigante's approach by generalising it. She seeks to explain the analogy between Romantic poetry and Romantic biology. I seek to redefine the Romantic self by observing how Romantic writers use self-referential language across a range of forms and genres. Before offering my own preliminary definition of Romantic selfhood (Sect. 1.3), I consider how the Romantic self has been defined in modern scholarship.

⁴⁵ Deleuze, *Difference and Repetition*, pp. 182–84.

⁴⁶ Deleuze, *Difference and Repetition*, p. 183. What Deleuze has in mind is Bergson's concept of a 'qualitative' as opposed to a 'quantitative' multiplicity: Henri Bergson, *Essai Sur Les Données Immédiates de La Conscience*, 6th edn (Paris: Alcan, 1908), pp. 92–98; Gilles Deleuze, *Le bergsonisme*, 2. ed (Paris: Presses Univ. de France, 1998), chap. 2.

⁴⁷ Denise Gigante, *Life: Organic Form and Romanticism* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 2009), pp. 23, 46–47.

1.2 ROMANTICISM AND THE NECESSARY SELF

Romanticism is a difficult concept. Some influential scholars, such as Arthur Lovejoy and Marilyn Butler, have argued that there is no ‘Romanticism’ at all.⁴⁸ The literature of the Romantic period, they argue, is simply too diverse to bolt together under a single heading. Nonetheless, Romantic literature continues to be a discrete area of study, with its own scholarly journals, professional associations and space in school and university curricula. And whenever it *is* defined, in the English-speaking world at least, it has usually been defined in the same way. Romanticism was a new kind of literature that represented the world subjectively, ‘from the inside out’.⁴⁹ It was a literature of self-expression, in which the writer sought to unleash the inner forces of their personality. This literature was built on a new philosophy of the self. For the Romantics, the self was ‘a mind that grows’.⁵⁰ Each of us is born with the innate ability to grow and develop and reach out to touch the world. To portray this form of self in their works, the Romantics developed a new literary form: they ‘found in a symbolic and internalized romance plot a vehicle for exploring one’s self and its relationship to others and to nature’.⁵¹ Romantic novels, plays, poems and prose depict human beings on a quest for self-realisation. In this way, Romantic literature is defined by a particular literary form (the inner quest), which is designed to express a certain idea of the self (the self as a mind that grows).

According to this traditional definition, the Romantic self is a *necessary* self. It is necessary because it is innate. Once I am born, I am necessarily a ‘mind that grows’. There may seem to be an element of contingency in this notion of the self. If my education, birthplace, friends or experiences

⁴⁸ Arthur O. Lovejoy, ‘On the Discrimination of Romanticisms’, *PMLA*, 39.2 (1924), 229–53 <<https://doi.org/10.2307/457184>>; Marilyn Butler, ‘Repossessing the Past: The Case for an Open Literary History’, in *Rethinking Historicism: Critical Readings in Romantic History*, ed. by Marjorie Levinson (Oxford: Blackwell, 1989), pp. 64–84.

⁴⁹ Tim Blanning, *The Romantic Revolution* (London: Phoenix, 2011), p. 21.

⁵⁰ Clifford Siskin, *The Historicity of Romantic Discourse* (Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 1988), p. 3. See also Clifford Siskin and William Warner, ‘If This Is Enlightenment Then What Is Romanticism?’, *European Romantic Review*, 22.3 (2011), 281–91 <<https://doi.org/10.1080/10509585.2011.564447>>.

⁵¹ Michael Ferber, *Romanticism: A Very Short Introduction* (Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 2010), p. 10. See also Harold Bloom, ‘The Internalization of Quest-Romance’, in *Romanticism and Consciousness*, ed. by Harold Bloom (New York: Norton, 1970), pp. 3–24.

change, surely I will grow into a different person? But this element of contingency is constrained. Consider the Romantic philosopher Robert Owen. Human nature, he argues, ‘is without exception universally plastic’.⁵² But this plasticity follows necessary laws:

For that Power which governs and pervades the universe has evidently so formed man, that he must progressively pass from a state of ignorance to intelligence, the limits of which it is not for man himself to define; and in that progress to discover, that his individual happiness can be increased and extended only in proportion as he actively endeavours to increase and extend the happiness of all around him.⁵³

The laws of human growth are ‘not for man himself to define’. They are necessary. Each of us ‘progresses’ through the same series of ‘states’, as we grow from a lower to a higher state of consciousness. Self-development expresses the inner necessity of the human mind.

Examples such as this demonstrate why the traditional definition of Romanticism has been so persuasive. There are indeed many prominent writers from the period who espouse some version of the necessary self. In *The Prelude*, William Wordsworth argued that the human mind is necessarily in tune with its environment:

... [the] mind,
Even as the agent of the one great mind,
Creates, creator and receiver both,
Working but in alliance with the works
Which it beholds.⁵⁴

The mind is an echo of the mind of God, or Nature, and only works ‘in alliance’ with the world it inhabits. The mind is not contingent on external factors, because it is ‘creator’ as well as ‘receiver’. It *necessitates* itself. Jane Austen presents a comparable view of human destiny in *Emma* (1816).

⁵² Robert Owen, *A New View of Society: Or, Essays on the Principle of the Formation of the Human Character*, 2nd edn (London: Longman et al, 1816), p. 146.

⁵³ Owen, p. 23.

⁵⁴ 1799 version, First Part, ll. 301-05, in William Wordsworth, *The Prelude: The Four Texts (1798, 1799, 1805, 1850)*, ed. by Johnathan Wordsworth (London: Penguin, 1996), p. 29. The same passage appears in the 1805 version (Book II, ll. 271-75); in the 1850 version Wordsworth says the human mind is merely ‘like an agent of the one great Mind’ (Book II, l. 257): Wordsworth, pp. 88-89.