

*IMAGINATION
UNDER PRESSURE*

1789 – 1832

Aesthetics, Politics and Utility

JOHN WHALE



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This ambitious study offers a radical reassessment of one of the most important concepts of the Romantic period – the imagination. In contrast to traditional accounts, John Whale locates the Romantic imagination within the period's lively and often antagonistic polemics on aesthetics and politics. In particular he focuses on the different versions of imagination produced within British writing in response to the cultural crises of the French Revolution and the ideology of utilitarianism. Through detailed analysis of key texts by Burke, Paine, Wollstonecraft, Bentham, Hazlitt, Cobbett and Coleridge, *Imagination Under Pressure* seeks to restore the role of imagination as a more positive force within cultural critique. The book concludes with a chapter on the afterlife of the Coleridgean imagination in the work of John Stuart Mill and I. A. Richards. As a whole it represents a timely and inventive contribution to the ongoing redefinition of Romantic literary and political culture.

JOHN WHALE is Senior Lecturer in English at the University of Leeds. He is the author of *Thomas De Quincey's Reluctant Autobiography* (1984), co-editor with Stephen Copley of *Beyond Romanticism: New Approaches to Texts and Contexts, 1789–1832* (1992), and editor of Edmund Burke's *Reflections on the Revolution in France*, 'Texts in Culture' series (2000).

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IMAGINATION UNDER PRESSURE,
1789–1832

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This series aims to foster the best new work in one of the most challenging fields within English literary studies. From the early 1780s to the early 1830s a formidable array of talented men and women took to literary composition, not just in poetry, which some of them famously transformed, but in many modes of writing. The expansion of publishing created new opportunities for writers, and the political stakes of what they wrote were raised again by what Wordsworth called those 'great national events' that were 'almost daily taking place': the French Revolution, the Napoleonic and American wars, urbanization, industrialization, religious revival, an expanded empire abroad and the reform movement at home. This was an enormous ambition, even when it pretended otherwise. The relations between science, philosophy, religion and literature were reworked in texts such as *Frankenstein* and *Biographia Literaria*; gender relation in *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman* and *Don Juan*; journalism by Cobbett and Hazlitt; poetic form, content and style by the Lake School and the Cockney School. Outside Shakespeare studies, probably no body of writing has produced such a wealth of response or done so much to shape the responses of modern criticism. This indeed is the period that saw the emergence of those notions of 'literature' and of literary history, especially national literary history, on which modern scholarship in English has been founded.

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IMAGINATION UNDER PRESSURE, 1789–1832

Aesthetics, Politics and Utility

JOHN WHALE



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for
John Battle

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Introduction

The aim of this book is to offer a new understanding of the way in which ‘imagination’ functions in key texts of the Romantic period and in particular of the way in which it is involved in two moments of cultural crisis: the British response to the French Revolution and the reaction to utilitarianism. Imagination thus figures in this study as a point of access to larger definitions and arguments about aesthetics and ‘representation’. My contention is that imagination is an integral and still undervalued component of cultural critique, both in this particular historical period and beyond. My chosen texts, with the possible exception of those by Coleridge and Hazlitt, are not the ones usually mustered to write a sympathetic and celebratory history of the creative faculty. Indeed for some of the writers I focus on, ‘imagination’ is predominantly a negative term; while for all of them it is problematic. My concentration on non-fictional prose writers in itself offers a revealingly different generic history of Romantic aesthetics, one which depends upon the necessarily discursive nature of such writing and one which avoids a preemptively celebratory account. It is a choice which I hope will implicitly and explicitly challenge some of our accepted notions of ‘literariness’ through this discursivity of both approach and materials. To see the production of different, often contradictory, notions of imagination in relation to cultural crises will enable us to uncover a sense of ‘imagination’ as an integral figure in cultural critique and as a complex, often creative, response to cultural change. In this respect, I hope that this study will enable us to see the particularity of different imaginations in the period rather than simply to replicate ‘the Romantic Imagination’ and its undeniably powerful history of appropriations. What follows then is offered up as a deliberate resistance, a strategic particularity, to the homogenising power of that intellectual, historical, and still active idea of ‘the Romantic Imagination’ and its associated Romanticism.

This study offers a challenge to Romanticist views of imagination which celebrate it as an essential and humanist creative faculty. My contention is that imagination is an important reflex of cultural crisis. There is also a paradox at the heart of my argument: even when imagination is shown or seen to fail – as it often is in the chapters which follow – it maintains a necessary and vital presence. Even as the authors I focus on bemoan its incapacity or confidently mock its delusiveness, imagination accrues an uncanny power: a power to return in another beguiling form. The historical failures of imagination charted here are also therefore testimonies to its resistance and to its enduring presence as it resurfaces in the language and strategies of its opponents. Imagination is not only produced by a split or fracture in the culture; it reproduces and disseminates itself across that divide.

Imagination is an overdetermined term and one which can be referred to a bewildering variety of historical examples in the hope of definition.¹ For the historian of the Romantic period within literary studies, the problem is compounded by the obvious fact that this faculty has occupied a central and privileged position in the post-hoc formulation of ‘Romanticism’ which since the Victorian period has served to construct a dominant version of liberal aesthetics and to support an institutionalised version of culture which has consolidated a range of national and imperial identities. Any return to the historical site of imagination in the period 1789–1832 therefore might appear to offer the promise of a release from this overdetermined history, but no such innocence exists. To write a particular history of imagination and its relationship to aesthetics in a selection of key texts and in relation to two very particular crises in representation and cultural value is immediately to invoke (and implicate oneself in) a set of meanings about the term imagination which are at the same time historical and present.

In order to focus my study of the production of different versions of imagination in response to cultural and representational crises I have chosen to divide the book into two sections: the first dealing with responses to the French Revolution, the second dealing with responses to the idea of utility. In part, this is a form of convenience. My hope is that there are as many connections and correspondences as discrete differences between the two sections and the six writers who are studied in detail. In a number of significant ways the writers in the second half of this book revisit and rehearse many of the concerns that had arisen out of the French Revolution. For example, Burke’s depiction of the French revolutionaries resurfaces in the castigation of the philosophers of utility

carried out by Hazlitt and Coleridge. And Cobbett's determined literalism in response to the corruption of 'the system' in the Regency replays with significant differences Paine's assault on aristocratic culture in the 1790s. Splitting the book into two should not be read as a description of a firm historical divide – more a way of re-focusing the debate from another angle. I certainly do not wish to suggest that one event follows another in any simple progressive way, though certain problems of representation are repeated and inherited to take on a different form in the later section. I am also aware that my selection of six writers, Burke, Paine, Wollstonecraft, Hazlitt, Coleridge, and Cobbett, while representing a range of different political, social, and stylistic positions within English culture, does not represent a complete cross-section or representative picture. New historiographical work in the period has already increased our appreciation of the sheer variety within radical culture, for example.²

Retaining a sense of the strategic and multiple nature of 'imaginations' guards us against the temptation to look for a point of origin at which there emerged a clear-cut distinction between the utilitarian and the literary, where the utilitarian is simply mechanistic and the literary is purely noumenal. Indeed, one of my contentions is that the issue of the French Revolution and the question of utility for writers in the period are inextricably linked. It is not a question of addressing a clear-cut binary divide between the utilitarian and the 'imaginative' – another version of the 'two cultures' argument, to use C. P. Snow's mid-twentieth-century formulation. Rather it is a question of seeing the interaction and competition of these terms within specific cultural debates. Since the figure and faculty of imagination is defined so often as a mediatory power, ostensibly healing the breach between categories and dichotomies, it is easy to take the idea of a divided culture for granted and not to see this split itself as a rhetorical feature of many arguments in the field of cultural value. For example, recent studies have shown us that though the organic and the mechanical might feature as polar opposites within the discourse deployed by such writers as Coleridge and De Quincey, this should not lead us to make too easy a separation. Both De Quincey and Coleridge are good examples of writers who retain and value a sense of the mechanical and even of the mechanistic to suit their respective visions of the relationship between language, literature, and society.³

Despite the claims made by a range of American critics for the continuities between 'Romantic literature' and the discourse of contem-

porary criticism,⁴ other cultural historians, including Richard Kearney, have claimed more generally that our condition of postmodernity seems to find imagination an anathema; it is a faculty which represents an outmoded and belated belief in originality.⁵ For over twenty years critics such as M. H. Abrams, Harold Bloom, and Geoffrey Hartman dominated the literary critical scene with powerful studies which could speak positively – if anxiously and agonistically – of ‘imagination’ and ‘vision’. In Romantic studies it has now become almost unfashionable to refer to the term. In the introduction to his 1991 study *Romantic Ecology: Wordsworth and the Environmental Tradition*, for example, Jonathan Bate claims that ‘the buzzwords among Romanticists are now “history” and “politics” – terms like “vision” and “imagination”, so central to the previous generation of critics, are now treated with scepticism and often with outright hostility’.⁶ In order to avoid what he sees as the false idealism of ‘Wordsworthianism’, Alan Liu, in his important study of Wordsworth and history, self-consciously provides ‘a litany of broken promises’ which culminates with: ‘Therefore, there is no Imagination.’⁷

This recent engagement with forms of historicism does not represent the whole story, for the demise of the imagination has also coincided with what may be termed the rise of the sublime. Over the last twenty years the latter has, in comparison, proved to be an almost inexhaustible source of critical and historical investigations and even of modern poetics – especially when read in conjunction with contemporary forms of psychoanalysis or as an integral part of an on-going post-Kantian problem of self-representation.⁸ The sublime is also, of course, at one with the condition of postmodernity, due largely to the work of Jean-François Lyotard.

This demise in the fortunes of ‘imagination’ within critical debate has coincided with the recent renewal of interest in questions and practices of competing forms of historicism, what has glibly been termed ‘the return to history’. As early as 1981, Marilyn Butler’s *Romantics, Rebels, and Reactionaries: English Literature and Its Background, 1760–1830* encouraged, at least in Britain, a new historical perception of the period which questioned the assumptions of ‘Romanticism’ and along with them the touchstone faculty of imagination. In order to challenge the existence of a single intellectual movement by foregrounding the complex of different cultural responses within the period, her study focused attention away from what she refers to as the ‘inwardness’, ‘internalized imaginative worlds’ and ‘Mind’⁹ informing the poetics of the canonical male Romantic poets.

In this new wave of historicist critiques of Romanticism the idealizing or transcendent 'Imagination' has often figured as an instrument of false consciousness, that which has attempted to occlude history and politics with the delusions of individualism. As a result, it can be legitimately attacked from both sides: it is castigated for disconnecting aesthetics from *realpolitik*, renouncing its civic responsibilities, and then for empowering itself as a form of private consciousness. Its power can be seen to reside either in its renunciation or in its evasion of power.¹⁰ In this form of the aesthetic exerting but denying power, it came to characterise what Jerome McGann in 1986 famously, and by now infamously, christened 'the romantic ideology'.

Some of the most impressive studies of Romantic aesthetics and imagination in recent years have taken the form of a demystifying materialism, at their best offering a 'cultural materialist' account of the production of would-be transcendent and metaphysical versions of the aesthetic. In line with this demand for 'history' and 'politics' the tendency has been to expose the material ground upon which the aesthetic rests and for imagination to give way to writing as an occupation or a form of socio-economic exchange.¹¹ 'Literature' has been shown to be the tool of ideology as a specific and focused form of state apparatus working through a process of internalisation. In this respect, Terry Eagleton's *The Ideology of the Aesthetic* represents the most panoptic survey of post-Kantian aesthetics and of the way in which they characteristically operate a paradox of liberal freedom: at once controlling and offering up the affect of 'inner space' at the site of imagination.¹²

On a slightly less grand scale and within more familiar literary boundaries, Peter de Bolla's *The Discourse of the Sublime: Readings in History, Aesthetics and the Subject* is a classic example of the deployment of a discursiveness applied to the conceptually unified, but not simply limited, field of the eighteenth-century sublime which links the production of sublimity to the Seven Years War.¹³ Nigel Leask performs a similar and equally impressive task in his *The Politics of Coleridge's Imagination*, where his central concern is to '[insist] upon the materiality of this noumenal quality' and to show 'the progenitor of this current notion of Imagination to have been a thoroughly political animal'.¹⁴ Leask's history takes us back beyond a by now familiar culture split to Coleridge's 'One Life' theory which saw imagination working on behalf of a civic rather than a noumenal mystery. Leask's own argument, in carefully defining itself against uncritical humanists who fall into the trap of replicating a Romantic position, could itself be said to yearn, or

at least lean, towards a satisfying imaginative vision of wholeness instead of living with the breaks, fractures, and discontinuities. (Its own vision of wholeness comes from a subscription to a Harringtonian classical republicanism.) And more recently, in *Romantic Discourse and Political Modernity*, Richard Bourke has argued for a similar lost opportunity in the case of Wordsworth's aesthetics and poetical practices. Wordsworth's appropriation by Victorian culture – what Bourke calls Wordsworthianism – becomes the main object of inquiry as he draws attention to the false consolations and serenity offered by the liberal imagination. The aesthetic is reduced to an ineffective realm of immanence from which it rails against the alienation effect of industrialisation and from which it functions as a 'regulative ideal'.¹⁵

Alan Richardson's 1994 study *Literature, Education, and Romanticism: Reading as Social Practice 1780-1832* outlines the ways in which the production or invention of modern ideas of childhood worked hand in hand with the creation of the category of imaginative literature during the Romantic period. As well as importantly revealing the variety of different forms of writing and the competing varieties of childhood – Lockean and Rousseauist to mention but two – involved in this process, Richardson uncovers the regulatory function played by 'literature': in particular, the ways in which these ideas served to discipline and in many cases to infantilise specific social, ethnic, and gendered groups in the period. For Richardson, the legacy of Romanticism is complex and mixed. Aware of the positive potential of its 'emancipatory and egalitarian practices', his placing of its 'representations and pronouncements on education' leads to a picture of 'social discipline, ideological conformity, and state security'.¹⁶ The expansive human nature and proclaimed individualist human freedom of the Romantic aesthetic is revealed as a dangerously homogenising ideology struggling to keep at bay the threatening particularities of class, ethnicity, and gender. At the bottom of it all and acting, it seems, as the lynch-pin of the system is 'Imagination'. Literature, according to Richardson, 'awake[n]s a common, essential human selfhood, conveying a sense of an ideal mental community to which all readers might belong'. 'Literature could alone perform this function,' he argues (quoting Coleridge) 'because . . . it brought the "whole soul of man into activity", fusing the particular and the general, the individual and the representative, the local and the universal through the "synthetic and magical" power of imagination'.¹⁷

Two major discursive studies of imagination by Pyle and Heinzelman span the period of renewed and more self-conscious historicism which

has characterised the last fifteen years. Heinzelman's pioneering and prescient 1980 study *The Economics of the Imagination* employed a Foucauldian methodology to illuminate the fictive nature of political economy and its relationship to 'literature' from the eighteenth through to the early twentieth century. The significance of Heinzelman's study lies not in defining the nature or characteristics of the literary imagination, but in arguing a case for its involvement and interaction with competing ideas of economy. The effect, again following Coleridge, is to question the assumption of a history of two cultures or the existence of a binary divide between the literary and the economic. Heinzelman's claim for a pervasive 'metaphor of economics' as the 'copula which connects two activities [of Trade and Literature]' leads to an understanding of 'how commerce and literature attempt to transcend and moderate . . . each other'.¹⁸ One might add 'create each other'. Heinzelman's study can now be read alongside more recent work which, equally, has alerted us to the creation of 'literature' in the early nineteenth century by exploring new disciplinary perspectives.¹⁹ For Heinzelman, political economy after Adam Smith is imbued with an imaginative structure which 'has the force of poesis' and which can be seen almost as a counterpoetics. Although his account is always more concerned to maintain his idea of mutual definition rather than a history of conflicts, he presents the mutations of political economy from Aristotle through to Malthus and Ricardo and is able to focus in particular on the conflicting communitarian and proprietorial aspects of Wordsworth's poetry. Important as it is in establishing the ground on which literature and economics are constituted by the early nineteenth century, the 'imagination' of Heinzelman's study turns out to resist definition. In his concluding chapter on William Carlos Williams he discloses that 'the core of all cures for the economist as well as the poet, lies in the dissatisfied labour of the irrepressible imagination'.²⁰

Forest Pyle's more recent study performs a similar function as regards the relationship between imagination and ideology.²¹ For Pyle, 'imagination' is the connecting agent which serves to mask contradictions within culture, in particular the gap between individual and society. At the same time as illustrating imagination's role in offering a mystificatory aestheticisation of a familiar dichotomy, Pyle is rightly sensitive to imagination's resistance to definition. Having decided to describe it as a rhetorical figure, the figure he chooses turns out to be catachresis – a misnaming. Like Heinzelman, Pyle is careful to stress the symbiotic or imbricated relationship between imagination and ideology. Through a

combination of historical materialism derived from critical Marxism and a formal materialism derived from Paul de Man,²² he explores the space occupied by the figure of imagination. He is alert to the dangers and temptations of moving outside ‘the ideology of imagination’ – the lure evident in McGann’s attempt to interrogate a Romantic ideology, a project which, in Pyle’s view, only serves to replicate the wish-fulfilment of the Romantic aesthetic. Pyle’s own definition of the historical subsumes particularity and difference and perhaps even the possibility of discontinuity and fracture. Within the logic of his argument, then, imagination figures as the ineffable. His own figure of catachresis speaks of a longing that can never be satisfied; it is the ‘something missing’ in the space opened up by imagination’s ‘failure’. In asking the following question, Pyle could be said to go beyond the examination of a ‘*particular* figure’ and to assume the existence of a common (human) faculty existing in the present. Having announced the wake of imagination, like Kearney, he addresses a figure already presumed dead. It is a reversibility very similar to Heinzelman’s:

For after Althusser – indeed, after Marx – how can we imagine a product of language or activity of *mind* that would not be ideological? It is my thesis that a reading of ‘the ideology of imagination’ not only sheds light on the imagination but in turn reflects upon the very workings of ideology.²³

In their very different ways, these studies by Heinzelman and Pyle offer valuable cultural histories of imagination. But both also illustrate the power of this figure to resist appropriation at the same time as seeming to offer itself up to it. It can clearly be seen that both Heinzelman and Pyle perform their respective studies of imagination in such a way as to appropriate its opposition: economics and ideology. Both studies are extremely valuable for the way in which they are able to articulate a history of the contest of faculties or discourse within the Romantic period, but both essentially lock imagination into a totalising narrative or at least unescapable reversibility. Having done so they then both invoke another ghostly figure of imagination in order to speculate beyond the impasse. This figure conveniently doubles and manifests itself again outside the terms of critique. For all their sophistication and intelligence both studies manifest the dangers of a holistic approach to imagination.

One is tempted to suggest that the critical history of imagination has been too easily swayed by the qualities ascribed to the faculty. Having been described as a synthesising power, the history of imagination has

itself been too synthesising, too willing to incorporate related terms at the expense of cultural and historical difference. Indeed the very ideological power, even hegemonic potential, of 'imagination' could be said to reside in its ability to skip conveniently between the particular and the abstract, between process and product, between cognition and writing. And to separate out a particular history of the imagination from a related sense of a creative human faculty is more difficult than one might initially think. Despite the fact that 'imagination' refers to a bewilderingly diffuse set of ideas, its cultural force has been derived from its ability to articulate opposed, paradoxical, and contradictory ideas. In this sense even the longstanding negative association with the potential synonym 'fancy' or with Hobbes's idea of 'decaying sense' could be seen as an opportunity to be exploited in the Romantic period. This forcing of unity out of contradiction is most strongly associated with Coleridge's acts of Romantic purification, his desynonymisation of the word. As we shall see, the power and pervasiveness of many of Coleridge's articulations of the imagination lie in this double appeal: recognition of a cultural schism simultaneous with a healing synthesis. And, even today, 'imagination' possesses different and sometimes radically opposed identities as it appears at different levels of cultural production and within different disciplinary boundaries. The aggressive demystification it has received within Romantic aesthetics stands in marked contrast to the power and potential it still enjoys in the areas of creative writing, educational psychology, and philosophical individualism.

In the face of this cluttered and apparently overdetermined literary critical field of Romantic aesthetics, recent work in the disciplines of philosophy and education could easily be viewed as surprisingly idealistic, even naive. But it should serve as a salutary reminder to the literary historian of the way in which it might still be possible to formulate positive contemporary accounts of imagination. At the very least it provides a good illustration of how new versions of imagination are still being produced to serve as possible solutions to ontological, pedagogic, and sociological problems. Foremost among recent British accounts is Mary Warnock's *Imagination and Time*, a passionate defence of the ethical possibilities available in the philosophical and Romantic aesthetic ideas of imagination.²⁴ Aggressively disposed to what she sees as the chaotic and anarchic relativism of postmodernism, she argues forcefully for a materialist (at times positively biological) humanism which can overcome, with the help of Hume and Kant, the threat of Cartesian dualism. By charting her own narrative of the correlation of memory and imagin-

ation Warnock (rather like Hume) ruthlessly avoids what she sees as the false premises and metaphysics of religion (particularly Christianity). According to her argument, memory in conjunction with imagination is able to link us not only with the past, but with the future. From this neo-Wordsworthian perspective she offers us a vision of consensus and continuity contained within a sense of unfinished and ever-changing narrative. Imagination is thus seen to guarantee a sense of identity through history and story-telling despite being open to revision and despite having to take account of cultural difference in a multi-ethnic society.²⁵ And in their introduction to a recent collection of essays entitled *Imagination and Education*,²⁶ the editors make a plea for the clarification of the very term imagination which is familiar to a literary historian of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries; and within the volume itself the contradictory and multifarious history of the term is well illustrated. Despite all these problems of definition however there seems to be no difficulty in believing in the psychological reality of something called 'imagination' and in urging its application and exercise in the classroom. What comes across from both these books is the need in their authors for a space labelled 'imagination'. In the latter case, this seems to be almost desperate. Unlike Warnock, they do not seem to see the need to select and construct a particular version of imagination which can be justified, defended, and articulated. And to my mind, the abiding contradiction in this need is the way in which that space of imagination is characterised by alterity/ creativity/ transgression/ freedom and at the same time must be subject to normative notions of development and pedagogy.

If these examples of work in other disciplinary areas seem to replicate many of the problems which literary critics have located historically in the field of Romanticism and its literary legacies, they also provide a contemporary example of how the 'imagination' can be produced to fill a gap in culture. It clearly remains a figure which can be drawn upon to solve a problem in a crisis of representation spanning theory and practice – much as it did in the period 1789–1832.

It is my contention that the discursive analysis of imagination which I offer in the following chapters will provide a more representative history of the term than that which has previously prevailed in Romantic criticism. Only by situating imagination within specific contexts of usage, including those which are critical and even derogatory, can we hope to escape the power of the term as it has been purified and reified in high Romantic discourse. By working discursively and outside the

privileged genre of poetry my account attempts a demystification of the term. We need to pay more careful attention to the different ways in which imagination connects with other competing terms in the matrix of the aesthetic and ideological debates of the time. Only by observing how imagination is offered up in the face of a particular crisis – how it is produced under pressure – can we articulate its resistant history in the context of a prevailing ‘Romanticism’ which pervades not only the wider cultural sphere of literary creativity, but also the more particular activity of literary criticism itself.

Imaginations are culturally and historically specific. We should avoid thinking of the term as a human constant or as an essence. Acknowledging the power and validity of recent political critiques of the mystifying power of the agent of the aesthetic, I would like to argue for the imagination as a strategically deployed category: to see it as reactive – as a reflex or a reaction to an epistemological, cultural, or representational crisis rather than always invoking its hegemonic control or potential. I would like to recover some of its desperation, anxiety, and unhappiness (following Bloom and Hartman) in order to focus on its capacity to reveal an urgent need. Even in the Romantic period itself the ‘imagination’ (above all else) is forced to compete with other would-be hegemonic discourses and subject positions. To see imagination as a sign of crisis rather than a faculty of truth, to focus on its production rather than its content, might reveal a different history and a more helpful potential in the term. Imagination is here not just a form of evasion or an ideological illusion, it is a means of articulating resistance. To invest imagination with some of the excitement, strangeness, and force that has recently been assigned to the idea of the ‘in-between’ might enable us to see more of the dynamic competition for representation which took place at this historical moment, more of the inherent instability of ‘Romanticism’, and more of the competing and conflicting varieties of imagination in the writings of the period.

My choice of authors also reflects my particular interest in the relationship between different forms of literalism and the symbolic in the period. This is a contest which exists at both the wider cultural level and within the work of an individual writer. For example, my analyses of the writings of Paine and Cobbett focus on their literalism: the supposed ‘transparency’ or plainness of their respective styles. By analysing their work in detail my aim is to reveal not only the specific nature of their different literalisms, but also the extent to which this very quality depends on and cannot avoid a sense of aesthetic excess. In Paine and

Cobbett this can take the form of a rationalist revolutionary sublime and an Edenic Tory nostalgia. From this perspective, Wollstonecraft and Hazlitt can be seen to inhabit a problematic middle ground as polite radical or 'liberal' writers whose work in different ways is more evenly struck between aesthetic excess and rationalist empiricism. On the other side of the equation, Coleridge's more famous definitions of the symbol and of the 'Idea' can be compared with Burke's organicism in terms of an ideologically powerful mode of representation which can switch with ease between the particular and the abstract and at the same time claim to absorb within its articulations the isolated and discrete units of mere particularity. This dynamic competition between forms of representational plainness underscores my concern to trace the various projections of imagination produced by Romantic period writers in response to revolution and utility. Some of these larger debates about transparency and symbolic modes of representation which my study defines have a wide-ranging and pervasive significance not only for the literary culture of the period, but also for our appreciation of it at the end of the twentieth century. My examination of imagination's embattled involvement with competing forms of literalism within the prose of the period provides a new foundation for rethinking the history of the Romantic symbol and a starting-point for a reconsideration of our assumptions about the stylistic and generic polarities of Romantic literary texts – the relationship between the 'simplicity' of the ballad and the discursiveness of blank verse in *Lyrical Ballads*, for example.

The story of imagination which emerges from my detailed analysis of six selected authors challenges the still widely-held assumption that 'imagination' inhabits an autonomous aesthetic realm. Imagination here is not simply waged against its cultural opponents – literalism, revolutionary rationalism, utility – it is produced in conjunction and collusion with them. Imagination inhabits the gaps, the fractures, in culture which are produced by the French Revolution and the ideology of utility. And from this position it provides the means for articulating and responding to the dominant forms of culture.

For these reasons, my account of imaginations attempts to address not only the advocates of imagination, but also its opponents. In my chapters on Burke, Wollstonecraft, Hazlitt, and Coleridge I analyze a variety of different constructions of imagination, but all of them are reactive and embattled. In the cases of Wollstonecraft and Hazlitt, imagination has, at times, to be kept at bay, even renounced. But in my chapters on Paine and Cobbett I focus deliberately on the professed