INTRODUCTION

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The "shock of the new" is a phrase normally associated with Modernism[1] but the aesthetics of shock has its roots in Romanticism, where notions of originality, novelty and surprise combined with the concept of the sublime to create compelling new descriptions of art's disruptive powers. Keats's axiom that "Poetry should surprise by a fine excess and not by Singularity" is one example,[2] posing the paradox that art can be simultaneously startling and unobtrusive.[3] Shelley's provocative account of how poetry "strips the veil of familiarity from the world and lays bare the naked and sleeping beauty" that lies beneath is another,[4] one of many anticipations in Romantic thought of Ezra Pound's injunction, a century later, to "make it new,"[5] or of the theory of defamiliarization propounded by the Russian Formalists.[6] A third instance can be found in Wordsworth's ambition (according to Coleridge) to "give the charm of novelty to things of every day" in his contributions to the *Lyrical Ballads* project.[7] The "charm" in question could embrace all forms of the extraordinary-in-the-ordinary, from surprising effects of

1 Robert Hughes, *The Shock of the New: Art and the Century of Change* (London: British Broadcasting Corporation, 1980).

2 John Keats to John Taylor, 27 February 1818, in *The Letters of John Keats*, ed. Hyder E. Rollins, 2 vols. (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1958), 1:238.

3 John Keats to J.H. Reynolds, 3 February 1818: "Poetry should be great & unobtrusive, a thing which enters into one's soul, and does not startle it or amaze it with itself but with its subject" (*Letters of John Keats*, 1:224).

4 P.B. Shelley, "A Defence of Poetry," in *Shelley's Poetry and Prose*, ed. Donald H. Reiman and Sharon B. Powers (New York: Norton, 1977), 505.

5 Ezra Pound, *Make It New: Essays* (London: Faber and Faber, 1934).

6 Viktor Shklovsky, "Art As Device," in *Viktor Shklovsky: A Reader*, ed. and trans. Alexandra Berlina (New York: Bloomsbury, 2017), 73-96.

7 Samuel Taylor Coleridge, *Biographia Literaria*, ed. James Engell and W. Jackson Bate, 2 vols. (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1983), 2:7.

light and shade on a "known and familiar landscape"[8] to what Wordsworth referred to as "the power of the human imagination," under certain conditions, "to produce such changes even in our physical nature as might almost appear miraculous."[9]

This disruptive, defamiliarizing power was not confined to professedly innovative art. Archaism – the "shock of the old" – was an equally potent force, exemplified by the Gothic novel (or *Schauerroman*, "shudder-novel"), in which violent subject matter and fabricated medieval pasts were used to generate readerly frissons from emotions of fear and repugnance. The German *Sturm und Drang* movement in drama and melodrama was a related development, condemned by Wordsworth as a corrupting influence whose effects were to be counteracted by more subtle and salubrious forms of imaginative stimulation (the adjectival qualifiers of "gentle shock of mild surprise" in "There was a Boy" are an index of this recalibration).[10] Another strand in this complex web of generic displacements and rivalries was the appropriation by Romantic lyric poetry of the dynamics of surprise associated with eighteenth-century adventure narrative, now transposed into unexpected sequences of mental events and linguistic special effects.[11] Wordsworth's "Surprised by Joy" is the paradigm but such unpredictable lyric "plots" were ubiquitous.[12]

One of the drivers in this new affective poetics was political. When Shelley in his romantic epic *Laon and Cythna: or, The Revolution of the Golden City* (1817) spoke of "the shock and the surprise / And war of earthly minds,"[13] he was remembering the psychic turbulence of the French Revolution, whose traumatic legacy for former liberals he sought to alleviate with his own immersive story of failed but redemptive revolution. His alliterative pairing of the mutually intensifying nouns "shock" and "surprise" may derive from a favourite book of Shelley's, William Godwin's *Life of Chaucer* (1803), which examines the intellectual roots of an earlier revolutionary moment, the Protestant Reformation. Godwin explains how the

8 Coleridge, *Biographia Literaria*, 2:5.

9 William Wordsworth, "Preface," in *Lyrical Ballads: 1798 and 1802*, ed. Fiona Stafford (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013), 112.

10 "There was a Boy," line 19, in *Lyrical Ballads*, 209. For Wordsworth's view of the "degrading thirst after outrageous stimulation" he sought to counteract, see "Preface," 100.

11 See Christopher Miller, *Surprise: The Poetics of the Unexpected from Milton to Austen* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2015), esp. Chaps. 7 and 8.

12 For the concept of lyric "plot," see Peter Hühn, "Plotting the Lyric: Forms of Narration in Poetry," in *Theory into Poetry: New Approaches to the Lyric*, ed. Eva Müller-Zettelmann and Margarete Rubik (Amsterdam: Rodopi, 2005), 147-72.

13 P.B. Shelley, *Laon and Cythna* (Canto VII, stanza 43), in *The Poems of Shelley, Vol. 2: 1817-1819*, ed. Kelvin Everest, Geoffrey Matthews et al. (Harlow: Longman, 2000), 192.

writings of theological reformers like John Wycliffe helped to produce "that shock and surprise which are necessary as the impulse to a revolution."[14] In this reading of history, shock is both the precondition and the consequence of a revolutionary situation, an idea echoed by the Marquis de Sade when he described the violence and extravagance of the Gothic novel as "the inevitable product of the revolutionary shocks with which the whole of Europe resounded" in the wake of 1789.[15]

Another driver in this new sensory aesthetic was science and technology. Public interest in the rapidly developing science of electricity, including the invention of the Voltaic pile, generated a rich metaphorical vocabulary for describing aesthetic experience. As Stephanie O'Rourke has shown, the idea that powerful artworks could produce responses equivalent to "electric shock" gained widespread currency, as did the idea that electrical currents were analogous to other forms of rapid, high-energy transmission, notably the spread of revolutionary politics.[16] Theatres harnessed the emergent technology to create startling new stage spectacles, encouraging a similarly spectacular acting style (as Coleridge famously remarked, seeing Edmund Kean act "was like reading Shakespeare by flashes of lightning"[17]). Other scientific and cultural fields contributed their own share of shocks and surprises, challenging writers to match their discoveries and reinforcing the idea that the "march of intellect" was anything but straightforward.[18]

For William Hazlitt, such proclivities were a defining feature of the period. Much of his diagnostic survey *The Spirit of the Age* (1825) is devoted to analysis of the public addiction to a literature built around sensations of shock and surprise. The craving for "novelty and effect" was epitomized, he suggests, by the work of Thomas Moore, for whom "[a] poem is to resemble an exhibition of fire-works, with a continual explosion of quaint figures and devices, flash after flash that

[14] William Godwin, *Life of Geoffrey Chaucer*, 2 vols. (London: R. Phillips, 1803), 2:217.

[15] Marquis de Sade, "Idée sur les romans" [1800], trans. Mario Praz, in Matthew Gregory Lewis, *The Monk*, ed. D.L. Macdonald and Kathleen Scherf (Peterborough, ON: Broadview, 2004), 415.

[16] Stephanie O'Rourke, *Art, Science, and the Body in Early Romanticism* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2021), esp. 104-81.

[17] Samuel Taylor Coleridge, *Table Talk*, ed. Carl Woodring (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1990), 41. For the developments in stage lighting which underpin this observation, see Tracy C. Davis, "'Reading Shakespeare by Flashes of Lightning:' Challenging the Foundations of Romantic Acting Theory," *English Literary History* 64, no. 2 (1994): 933-54.

[18] Alice Jenkins, *Space and the "March of Mind:" Literature and the Physical Sciences in Britain, 1815-1850* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007). On satirical inversions of this motif across different media, see also Angela Esterhammer, "The March of Mind: Knowledge Mobilization in the 1820s," *European Romantic Review* 35, no.2 (2024): 399-416.

surprise for the moment, and leave no trace of light or warmth behind them."[19] Byron, likewise, in his poetry as in his personal behaviour, "is not contented to delight, unless he can shock, the public,"[20] gratifying his desire for celebrity by giving his readers the degraded sensations they craved. Elsewhere, Hazlitt extends the criticism to modern poets in general: "Always pampering their own appetite for excitement, and wishing to astonish others, their whole aim is to produce a dramatic effect, one way or other – to shock or delight the observers," irrespective of the consequences.[21] Contemporary philosophers like Godwin who peddled tantalizing utopias without explaining how to realize them were open to the same charge, "[p]reposterously seeking for the stimulus of novelty in abstract truth, and the eclat of theatrical exhibition in pure reason."[22]

This special issue, based on an international symposium held in Paris in May 2025, assesses the impact of this new cultural poetics, examining manifestations of aesthetic shock and surprise across a broad spectrum of Romantic literature from Britain and beyond. Rosa Mucignat's wide-ranging opening article deploys a comparative approach in order to demonstrate that the shockwaves sent across Europe from 1789 onwards were inseparably political and linguistic in nature, resulting in an upsurge both in the activity of translation and in active reflection on the stakes of translating. From the outset, actors as well as commentators of the French Revolution were aware that its unprecedented character called for a bold renewal of language – an "explosion of words" which made for heightened verbal awareness as meaning became ideologically contested and neologisms proliferated. *Constituants* such as Talleyrand and Jacobins were notoriously determined to eradicate *patois*, regional languages and other perceived archaisms from a regenerated national landscape; yet they also advocated the study of foreign languages, not just for the sake of disseminating propaganda abroad, but also in order to invigorate and enrich the native tongue. In the various Italian states, Mucignat goes on to show, the act of translating became even more fraught with political implications, since French revolutionary influences simultaneously helped undermine the conservatism of Tuscan-oriented purists, encouraged individual freedom of invention and aroused emulation in patriots eager to establish contemporary Italian literature and democratic politics on a fully equal footing with their French counterparts. As her examples from Thelwall, Godwin

[19] William Hazlitt, *The Spirit of the Age*, in *The Complete Works of William Hazlitt*, ed. P.P. Howe, 21 vols. (London: William Dent, 1930-1934), 11:170.

[20] Hazlitt, *Spirit of the Age*, 11:76.

[21] William Hazlitt, "On Paradox and Commonplace," in *Table Talk*, in *Complete Works of William Hazlitt*, 8:151.

[22] Hazlitt, "On Paradox and Commonplace," 8:151.

and Barlow, among others, would suggest, neither England nor the English language were quite immune from this protracted shock of revolutionary translation which might ultimately, perhaps, be identified as one of the earliest stages in the inception of European Romanticism.

Critical appreciation of the shock of novelty had been slowly rising throughout the eighteenth century, especially in literature; it was their paradoxical novelty, in fact, which gave cultural plausibility to early manifestations of primitivist taste such as the Gothic novel or Ossianic poetry (it is intriguing that one of the main innovators of late eighteenth-century Italian literature, Melchiorre Cesarotti, should have been the translator of Ossian). Our next two contributions accordingly explore instances of the "shock of the old" in contexts both pre-revolutionary and revolutionary. Sharon Choe's article revisits the pre-Romantic lure of ancient Norse "savagery" by focusing on three translations of the famous *Death Song of Ragnar Lodbrog* (by Thomas Percy, James Johnstone, and Hugh Downman), charting a shift towards more graphic, stylistically bolder renderings of the original's gore imagery. The appeal of Norse war songs should not, however, be understood as merely literary; as she also demonstrates by drawing on Achille Mbembe's conceptualization of "necropolitics," the death-defiance of the heroic Norse warrior epitomized a different configuration of political terror, resistance and community – one that could be readily invoked against the upholders of Ossianic Celticism and appropriated in various ways by the English national imagination.

In the wake of the French Revolution, however, archaic manners and settings were often regarded with added ambivalence, not least as associated with patriarchal tyranny and violence. Addressing another polemical reimagining of history, Eleanor Franzén's essay focuses on Mary Robinson's first, Gothic novel *Vancenza* (1792), where the chivalrous glamour of fifteenth-century Spain fails to conceal female vulnerability to male predation under the *ancien régime*. In such a context, as suggested by the novel's dénouement – a suitably emphatic *coup de théâtre* –, the shock of coming to terms with an oppressive past and its guilty secrets can be, literally, lethal. And yet, as Franzén shows, what may be superficially read as compliance with the rules of the cautionary tale (as suggested by the novel's subtitle, "The Dangers of Credulity") in fact constitutes, on Robinson's part, a shrewd intervention on the liberal side of the Revolution debate, reminding her readers that true emancipation and regeneration would come at a price. The aesthetics of Gothic shock, indeed, could be made to fit many kinds of political purpose during the revolutionary decade and beyond.

Yet the striving after shock and surprise that was a hallmark of the Romantic era was not exclusively conditioned by political upheaval and changed attitudes

to the past. Building on her recent research, Stephanie O'Rourke's article demonstrates that much of it derived from contemporary responses to the Industrial Revolution. In the wake of Simon Schaffer's pioneering historical work on the publicity surrounding scientific and especially Galvanic experiments,[23] Romantic scholarship has begun to focus on the various political and literary investments of which the mystique of electric shock became the subject during the period.[24] Here, however, O'Rourke proceeds to identify another, more neglected yet significant source of Romantic-era sublimity in the hazards that attended the growth of extractive industries and the expansion of steam power. Drawing on a wide range of intermedial sources, from newspaper reports and treatises on the picturesque to cartoons and panoramas, she takes us on a sobering survey of the railway accidents, landslides, firedamp explosions and various forms of industrial pollution that were perils familiar to the people of the Industrial Revolution, as well as the common fare of newspapers. Indeed, the suddenness of industrial catastrophes, their frequent quasi-unaccountability and the lurid light in which they cast the precariousness of human existence all qualified them for reflecting in especially striking fashion the anxieties that underlay the age of extractivism.

Although the next two articles cover less sinister ground, they are also concerned with manifestations of Romantic-era interest in shock and surprise, particularly in the popular entertainments that were such an important part of metropolitan cultural modernity. Both the scientific and the spectacular again loom large in Henry James Mason's essay, which investigates the ways in which the theatrical entrepreneur John Scott and his singer-songwriter daughter Jane combined technological innovation and crowd-pleasing flair in the elaborate programmes of the Sans Pareil Theatre from 1806 onwards. A long-time colour merchant with international business connections, Scott eventually ventured into theatrical production with a view to advertising both his daughter's musical talents and the fashionable "magic lanterns" he had begun to trade in. With their savvy mix of sentimental songs and urban sophistication, optical phantasmagoria and romantic *frisson*, the Sans Pareil's entertainments show how successfully cultural entrepreneurs of the early nineteenth century would combine heterogenous resources in their effort to surprise and gratify audiences.

A rather different blend of high and low culture is the subject of Sophie Thomas's essay, which examines the spectacular "*poses plastiques*," imitated from famous Classical statues, popularized by the equestrian performer Andrew

[23] Simon Schaffer, "Natural Philosophy and Public Spectacle in the Eighteenth Century," *History of Science* 21 (1983): 1-43.

[24] See Mary Fairclough, *Literature, Electricity and Politics 1740-1840: "Electrick Communication Every Where"* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2017).

Ducrow at Astley's in the late 1820s. Here, the sudden near-spasm (somehow akin to the effect of galvanic shock) with which the performer froze into recognizable postures like that of the Dying Gladiator elicited a pleasant sense of surprise in the audience, blurring the usual boundaries between cultural spheres and giving an unexpected edge to their growing familiarity with Classical models. Ducrow's feats, Thomas suggests, constituted a particularly telling and original take on the "marmoreality," or "tension between vitality and stasis," which famously drew ekphrastic responses from Romantic poets including Byron and Hemans.

Yet Romantic novelty and surprise did not proceed exclusively from the refinements of art and technology – far from it: Nature, as hinted earlier, had ample stores of them. While in one sense it may be said that Romantic Nature-worship merely generalized attitudes that could already be found in Shaftesbury, Thomson or Rousseau, the thoroughness with which the Romantics themselves took up the lead often led to startling results. Indeed, awareness of Nature's endless potential for surprise can be seen as one major source for the renewal of poetic expression, from Wordsworth's early resolve to render in verse "the infinite variety of natural appearances which had been unnoticed by the poets of any age or country"[25] to the "green language" that Raymond Williams identified as a utopian possibility in the work of poets like Wordsworth and John Clare.[26] Two of our contributors go further in engaging with some of the most unexpected manifestations of the Romantic fascination with natural phenomena. Markus Poetzsch revisits Clare's poem "The Mouse's Nest" in the light of dark ecology and the challenge it has posed to mainstream, humanist-leaning ecocriticism, suggesting that Clare's text already generates the kind of demystifying shock Tim Morton and others have aimed to produce by critiquing modern ideologies of Nature. As Poetzsch persuasively argues in his essay, the poem's fourteen lines register a paradigmatic encounter with the "weirdness" of Nature, which ultimately resides not so much in its unmanageable destructiveness as – *pace* the claims of dark ecologists – in the teeming fecundity exemplified by the "odd and […] grotesque" body of the animal; and it is significant that this shock of ontological defamiliarization, taking place in the familiar Northamptonshire countryside, should be conveyed in vernacular language ("prog'd," "sexpools") which flouted the decorum of standard Nature poetry.

Merrilees Roberts's essay, too, departs from more conventional portrayals of Romanticism's idealist relation to Nature, and combines ecocritical concerns with

[25] See the note dictated to Isabella Fenwick and reproduced in William Wordsworth, *An Evening Walk*, ed. James Averill (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1984), 301.

[26] Raymond Williams, *The Country and the City* (London: Chatto and Windus, 1973), 127-41.

the conceptualization of physiological shock in Romantic-era medicine so as to offer a provocative re-reading of Shelley's *Alastor*. While the poem has often been seen as a near-straightforward satire of the Wordsworthian "Poet" and his egotistically sublime pretensions, her suggestion is that it deploys a complex dialectic of delusion and disenchantment, in which the poet's ultimately mistaken idealism is both debunked and vindicated as sexual desire – including, shockingly, the kind of sexual and even masturbatory desire that ends up wearing and consuming him. The drama of *Alastor* finds its quietly surprising resolution as the Poet becomes one with the faceless processes of Nature, in a boldly materialistic move which makes for unassuming yet beautiful poetry.

Throughout the Romantic era, as we have seen, the search for gentle, natural or unobtrusive forms of shock and surprise maintained an uneasy dialectic with the presumably more specious or spurious varieties of titillation provided by a budding culture industry. One particularly successful instance of novelty in a subdued key was the novels of Jane Austen, which Sir Walter Scott in his review of *Emma* praised for replacing once and for all the wilder incidents of romance with "a correct and striking representation of that which is daily taking place around [the reader]."[27] Correct *and* striking, true to (ordinary) life *yet* striking: such is Austen's art. The final contributor to the volume, Christopher Miller, expands on his prior work – with suitably learned playfulness – to illustrate this premise by sketching a typology of shocks and surprises in the Austenian corpus. The findings are, to paraphrase Miller quoting Austen, surprising and not surprising, at once and by turns. We learn, for instance, that occurrences of "shock" in the English novel grew more frequent during the eighteenth century, possibly as "surprise" lost its original edge; and that Austen herself not only reworked the poetics of shock in a finer tone, but also engaged in a "sociolinguistics of surprise," which often betrays in her characters the unwanted knowledge they had been attempting to suppress while simultaneously functioning as an index to moral and/or social judgment. We learn, too, that surprise serves as a pivot for the subtler drama unfolding in the novels, whereas professions of shock – probably as a consequence of semantic inflation – tend to make for more straightforward comedy and satire. From *Northanger Abbey* onwards, Miller brilliantly reminds us that Austen never quite stopped naturalizing the poetics of Gothic shock, which means that she never lost sight of it altogether. Similarly, and in spite of Anne Elliot's advice to Captain Benwick in *Persuasion*, her novelistic prose might have had more in common with some Romantic (Wordsworthian) poetry than is

[27] [Anonymous], *Quarterly Review* (March 1816), reprinted in *Jane Austen: The Critical Heritage*, ed. Brian Southam, 2 vols. (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1968), 1:62.

usually thought – both, after all, present what might be seen as a potentially therapeutic dimension hinging on the abreaction of shock.

Austen's carefully calibrated use of the idiom of shock and surprise, and her interest in the alleviation of shock rather than simply the exploitation of it, sets her apart from many of her contemporaries, certainly if Hazlitt's analysis of the pervasive shock-addiction of the Romantic period is to be believed. The inflationary nature of aesthetic shock is undoubtedly part of its dynamic, the cultural consequences of which have been more fully registered in later periods than in this one. Scholars such as Fredric Jameson, for example, building on the insights of Walter Benjamin, have argued that by the late twentieth century, the shock effect of Modernist innovation had become routinized and institutionalized.[28] Immersed in a culture that, as Rita Felski puts it, "is driven by an insatiable demand for novelty and sensation," and in which even the "aura of revolution" has become "a styling and marketing advantage," we are now "immune to the shocking," an immunity that has become part of the definition of the postmodern condition.[29] Whether such a trajectory can be discerned in the Romantic literature of shock and surprise, and the public response to it, is a topic for further investigation. What the case studies collected here establish is that Romanticism was indeed the period in which this powerful aesthetic first emerged, across a wide spectrum of genres and media and under precise historical and cultural conditions.

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[28] Fredric Jameson, "Postmodernism and Consumer Society," in *The Anti-Aesthetic: Essays on Postmodern Culture*, ed. Hal Foster (Port Townsend, WA: Bay Press, 1983), 111-25.

[29] Rita Felski, "Shock," in *Uses of Literature* (Malden, MA: Blackwell, 2008), 107.

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