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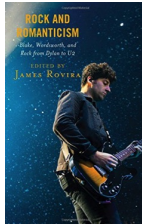
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ROCK AND ROMANTICISM: BLAKE, WORDSWORTH, AND ROCK FROM DYLAN TO U2



Ed. James Rovira
(Macmillan 2018) 302 pp.
Reviewed by [Rebecca Nesvet](#) on 2019-01-21.

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[Editor's note: This book is jointly reviewed with James Rovira, ed. *ROCK AND ROMANTICISM: POST-PUNK, GOTH, AND METAL AS DARK ROMANTICISMS.*]

In British playwright Tom Stoppard's *Rock'n'Roll*, first performed at London's Royal Court Theatre in 2006, rock music inspires 1970s Cambridge student Jan to spontaneous overflows of powerful feeling. A "bounced Czech," as the former child refugee Stoppard once famously called himself, Jan finds himself ambivalently self-exiled from his increasingly authoritarian homeland. Listening to rock'n'roll records, he develops a principled opposition to the authority of his English mentor, a pompous Marxist don, and then, gradually, inches toward riskier forms of dissidence that hit much closer to home. In 1977, when the Czech rock band the Plastic People of the Universe are jailed for their endorsement of the dissident Charter 77, Jan finds them "unbribable" by the Husák dictatorship but also transcendent. The Plastics are "coming from somewhere else, from where the Muses come from," Jan explains. Iconoclastic visionaries and prophetic rebels, they are, in essence, Romantics.

Jan's characterization of the Plastics would not surprise James Rovira, editor of the two critical anthologies reviewed here. According to Rovira, Romanticism never died: it was reborn as rock and roll. "Rock itself is a late-twentieth-century expression of Romanticism," Rovira argues. An "extension, continuation, partner, or doppelgänger" of Romanticism, he contends, rock deserves scrutiny as an echo of the late eighteenth century's intellectual crisis (*R and R: Post-Punk*, 2). The books are best understood as a complementary pair. Though their introductions explain the theoretical underpinnings of the project in nearly identical terms, *Rock and Romanticism: Post-Punk* highlights rock's affinities with the "dark Romantics," primarily William Blake and Lord Byron, while the other volume demonstrates that originally and in its most indicative works, rock is Romantic. The result is a necessary and exhilarating compilation.

This is not the first book to argue that rock is Romanticism revived. In *The Triumph of Vulgarity: Rock Music in the Mirror of Romanticism* (1987), Robert Pattison argued that just as British Romantic "Satanism" celebrated "the common person" for the first time in British literary history, rock and roll re-enacted this revolution in music (qtd. *R and R: Post-Punk*, 13). According to Pattison, rock and roll "begins in the imposition of white Romantic myth on black Southern music" and continues largely as the vestigial continuation of this appropriation, which, in the words of the segregationist North Alabama Citizens' council spokesman Asa E. "Ace" Carter, brings out "vulgarity" in "white kids" (Pattison 36). Carter, notes Pattison, owed much of his racist fantasy to Rousseau's ideas about primitivism and the state of nature. Later Romantic echoes in rock, Pattison contends, include the Satanic provocateur, the pursuit of sexual experience as the infinite, the "subordination of reason to feeling," and "glorification of the technology which is the flower of the West's empirical sciences," from Leyden jars and printing presses in the original Romantic era to the electric guitar today (Pattison 128).

While this is a largely accurate account of rock's common ground with British Romanticism as canonized in 1987, dominated by the safest poems of the "big Six" male poets, Pattison's thesis breaks down when we consider the recent critical explosion of that canon. Today, we know that not all eighteenth- and nineteenth-century British "Romantics" rejected reason, and that not all of them were men. We do not typically isolate Blake, Byron, and Percy Bysshe Shelley as "Satanic poets" who thought Milton aimed in *Paradise Lost* to create sympathy for the devil. We also know that Romanticism did not merely mimic plebeian speech and song: some Romantics, such as Ann Yearsley, Barry Cornwall, and John Clare, were themselves plebeians. This last point complicates the idea of the Romantic as an outsider to "vulgar" culture who aims to claim and repurpose it. Moreover, to Pattison, "vulgarity" is "crude, loud, and tasteless," and "the natural milieu of the vulgarian is the mob" (4-5). At the bicentenary of the Peterloo Massacre (19 August 1819), we ought to understand that a group of ordinary people assembled in passionate pursuit of a common purpose is not always best understood as a mob.

Robert Sayre and Michael Löwy's more inclusive idea of Romanticism as a world-view that "critique[s] modernity" (*R and R: Post-Punk*, 4) informs both of Rovira's books. Taking his cue largely from Sayre and Löwy's *Romanticism Against the Tide of Modernity* (2001), Rovira contends that Romanticism's "response to historical conditions in a condition/response model" makes it repeatable. "[S]imilar historical conditions can give rise to similar responses regardless of when and where they occur," he writes, and conditions reminiscent of late-eighteenth-century Britain arose in the 1960s. Like Romanticism, rock music functions as "an aesthetic vehicle for a structure of feeling primary to or separate from any conceptual commitments" (*R and R: Post-Punk* 6, 8).

Seeing themselves in Romantic writers, particularly canonical British Romantic poets, the rock musicians defined by Sayre and Löwy mined their works and posthumous images accordingly. Yet looking beyond the theories of Sayre and Löwy, Rovira isolates Romanticism's tendency to privilege "a structure of feeling primary to or separate from any conceptual commitments": a structure of feeling that is, like Romanticism's revolt against capitalist modernity, revived as rock. "Dark romanticism," Rovira claims with a nod to theorists such as Mario Praz, "reject[s] the environmental effects of capitalism manifested as the trap and curse of the factory," preferring instead to serenade "the common person" rather than, as Pattison claims, the demonized vulgar mob (*R and R: Post-Punk*, 8, 12).

As Rovira's two volumes show, rock's version of Romanticism originated long before the eighteenth century, in Milton's *Paradise Lost*. Developing an idea raised and then abandoned by Pattison, Evan LaBuzetta traces Mick Jagger's Satanic persona, displayed in hits such as "Paint it Black," "Jumpin' Jack Flash," and, above all, "Sympathy for the Devil," to Milton's "cool ... Prince of Darkness" (*R and R: Post-Punk*, 28). The pamphlet culture of Milton's time, pushing back against Charles I's spiritual and political autocracy, anthropomorphized the devil and associated him with various countercultures. Building upon this tradition, writes LaBuzetta, Milton created a new archetype, a Satan-as-rebel figure that cannot necessarily "be blamed for ruining the world" (*R and R: Post-Punk* 35). Over three hundred years later, LaBuzetta notes, the "unexpectedly rich" lyrics of the Stones' "Sympathy with the Devil" developed this idea, and caught on in 1960s Britain, where "teenagers [...] didn't accept the validity of being denounced as devils by those who," like Milton's reviled king Charles I, "were responsible for civil rights abuses and multiple wars" (*R and R: Post-Punk* 39). In thus explaining not only how Milton's devil informs "Satanic" Romantic poetry but also how he returns as one of Jagger's personas, LaBuzetta goes well beyond Pattison.

In another essay on Jagger's Romanticism from *R and R: Blake*, Janneke van der Leest examines the Romantic rhetoric of Jagger's public tribute to his late former bandmate Brian Jones. Before Jones drowned in his own pool at age 27--one of the 1960s rock community's many untimely deaths--Jagger, van der Leest writes, had begun to "overshadow Jones on stage as the band's frontman," and they quickly became "rivals within a rock band, like Shelley and Keats were within the [second-generation] circle of Romantic writers." According to Van der Leest, the Jones represented by Jagger is Romantic and specifically Keatsian: "an artist who has no identity, is variable, and is not self-confident," finding himself an "outsider in a circle of elite poets" (*R and R: Blake* 22, 28). This version of Keats is hardly supported by key studies such as *Poetry and Politics in the Cockney School* (1998), wherein Jeffrey N. Cox persuasively shows that, far from being killed by his negative reviews, Keats was thrilled to be identified in the *Quarterly review* as a member of Leigh Hunt's "Cockney School." Keats's best poetry was "the product of cultural warfare," Cox argues, as he fought back against his critics in ebullient rhetoric (Cox 12). Nevertheless, *Jagger's public reading of Shelley's Adonais at Jones's funeral* turns Jones into a Keats for Jagger's Shelley, immortalizing Jones in the realm of music just as Shelley sought to proclaim the immortality of Keats in the realm of poetry. Ultimately, Van der Leest shows how the relationships between the two poetic dyads, each consisting of mourner and mourned, operate in similar ways across a time gap of nearly two hundred years. If Keats and Jones don't really die (as Shelley and Jagger contend), neither do their Romantic obsequies.

Despite Bob Dylan's claim "not to know or like Blake," the *Cambridge Companion to Bob Dylan* claims that he is Blake's "spiritual twin" (qtd. *R and R: Blake* 8) but does not elaborate further. Testing this claim, Luke Walker finds that the Beat poet and "committed Blakean" Allen Ginsberg fueled Dylan's deep engagement with Blake by playing up the Blake references in Dylan's "Gates of Eden" and collaborating with him on recorded musical performances adapted from Blake's songs. Ginsberg thus initiated a "three-way dynamic of influence between Blake, Dylan, and the Beats" (*R and R: Blake* 4-6). Walker strengthens the case for Dylan's debts to the Romantic canon that has already been made in monographs by critics such as Philippe Margotin and Jean-Michele Guesdon (2015), and reportedly informed Dylan's naming of his son Jesse Byron Dylan (b. 1966). Walker also demonstrates that the 1960s pop cultural reinvention of Blake participates in the long history of his once-obscure literary afterlife.

Pursuing this point while also complicating Pattison's account of rock music as white appropriation of African-American musical traditions, Nicole Lobdell examines the Blakean Romanticism of contemporary folk-rock singer-songwriter Martha Redbone and her band The Roots. Redbone was born in Brooklyn to African-American and distantly Native American parents. In her album *The Garden of Love: Songs of William Black* she sets Blake's lyrics to music that incorporates traditional Cherokee and Choctaw chants, Appalachian string-band riffs, and African-American "field-song" (*R and R: Post-Punk*, 51-2; hear for instance *her rendition of Blake's "Garden of Love"*). If songs like these seem quite far from the urban provincial Blake's Cockney visions of London life, especially given his claim that "Natural objects always did, and now do, weaken, deaden, and obliterate my imagination," (qtd. Alexander Gilchrist, *Life of William Blake* [London, 1863], 388) they aren't. Like Blake, Redbone feels decidedly ambivalent about industrialization. "*The Garden of Love*," Lobdell explains, "traces narrative pathways that begin in a communal, organic, and sacred space that is ruined by human institutions." Redbone's songs alter few of Blake's words, but her musical orchestrations and layering of non-Blake vocal material play up the significance of Blake's ideas, demonstrating better than any academic criticism "the universal and contemporary appeal" of Blake's poetry (*R and R: Post-Punk*, 61-62).

Like Dylan, Redbone came to Blake through other people. Her husband directed her to "The Poison Tree," and his contribution recalls how often the artistic coterie and literary family nurtured Romantic writing. Other kinds of Romantic groupings are examined elsewhere in these two volumes. Several essays explore Romantic male community transmogrified as rock. To this end, Emily Bernhard Jackson unearths the Romantic origins of New Romanticism's iconic white ruffled shirts. As she reminds us, the "New Romantics" of 1970s and 1980s Britain such as George O'Dowd (later and better known as Boy George), Leigh Bowery, Adam and the Ants, and Duran Duran often performed in voluminous white collared shirts, usually tieless of course, reminiscent of Byron's shocking fashion statement:



Adam (center) and the Ants in 1981

More generally, in fact, the New Romantics "dressed as Gothic figures and eighteenth-century fops" and idealized "peasants," identified by fans and rock journalists as "indefinable exotics ripped straight out of the pages and portraits of Byron" (*R and R: Post-Punk*, 49). Though a shared costume is a superficial commonality, Bernhard Jackson points out that "we ignore surface at our peril, for it often hides unexpected depths" (*R and R: Post-Punk*, 46). By replicating this feature of Byron's persona, the New Romantics signaled an affinity they developed more substantively in their lyrics. **Adam Ant's "Stand and Deliver"** evokes not only Byron's corsair and *giaour* but even the Shooter's Hill episode of *Don Juan*. Ant sings:

Stand and deliver! Your money or your life!
Try and use a mirror, not a bullet or a knife!

While critics found this couplet a spoof of the eighteenth- and nineteenth-century highwayman craze, Bernhard Jackson argues that Ant's lyrics go much further, archly "refiguring . . . the highwayman as rebel and sage"--as Byron's poetry usually did. Both "Stand and Deliver" and Ant's "Prince Charming" ("don't you ever stop being a dandy...") demand that the listener transcend conventional masculinities and other social mores. For Bernhard Jackson, therefore, they are Byronic "paeans to liberty" (*R and R: Post-Punk* 51).

Complementing Bernhard Jackson's investigation of New Romantic masculinity, Sherry L. Truffin deftly shows how the pastoral, revolutionary, and Gothic imagery of The Pretenders' founder Chrissie Hynde defied the association of Romantic and rock protest with maleness. At the beginning of Hynde's career, music journalism reveals, she strove to live up to the example of the rocker set by the leading male musicians and derived, ultimately, from Romantic forms of masculinity. At first, Hynde concedes, she "totally identified with the male romantic tradition" (qtd. *R and R: Post-Punk*, 62). Conforming, writes Truffin, to the concepts of Romanticism formulated by Sayre and Löwy and, earlier, by Praz, Hynde's songwriting "critique[s] capitalism, calls for social and political revolution," and is redolently Gothic. But according to Truffin, Hynde's later albums go beyond Romantic pastiche to pioneer "a radical feminization of the rock form" (*R and R: Post-Punk* 62). This is informed but not entirely explained by Hynde's turbulent relationship with a male rock musician, Pete Farndon, once her bandmate in The Pretenders, who fatally overdosed in 1983. Like Dorothea Veit-Schlegel, Friedrich Schlegel's wife and subtle critic, Hynde parodies the objectification of the archetypal Woman by the Romantic poet-subject. As Truffin notes, **Hynde's song "Lie to Me"** "expresses anger at the deception" required of the poet's woman. "If you lie to me again," the narrator threatens many, many times--demonstrating that there will be no final lie, no final straw, and no punishment for the male addressee's destructive fabrication. "It's too hard to find the way out / Of your fairytale," the song concludes. Romantic women such as Mary Shelley, Jane "Claire" Clairmont, and Jane Williams would certainly agree, and Williams even had a guitar, provided by Percy Bysshe Shelley. If only, like Hynde, she had used it to critique his fairytale version of her.

More attention to such feminist critique of Romanticism could have enhanced another essay about destructive Romantic masculinity in rock. Caroline Langhorst's analysis of the anti-capitalist, working-class, suicidal self-fashioning of Joy Division and its tragic frontman Ian Curtis dances around significant complexities in Curtis's work by refusing, for instance, to explain or analyze "the etymological origin of the band name" (*R and R: Post-Punk*, 93) or to significantly probe how the band's credible associations with neo-Nazism, then ascendant in Britain, might also function as a kind of hypermasculine "dark Romanticism." "Joy division" is a Nazi euphemism for the officer-serving brothels located in concentration camps and featuring imprisoned women as enforced prostitutes. If Langhorst believes that Curtis appropriated this phrase for his band's name to make an ironic statement, she should have made this point explicitly and documented it carefully.

Unearthing the Romantic roots of rock more productively, Samuel Lyddon Gladden finds Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein* well translated for modern music fans by David Bowie and Steven Patrick Morrissey. For Gladden, Bowie is a "Promethean figure," not just in his music and self-fashioning but in films such as *The Man who Fell to Earth* (and, I would add, *Labyrinth*); Morrissey's use of *bricolage*, or patchwork, and his self-presentation as a work of *bricolage*, Gladden writes, renders him both creature and creator and reveals the doppelgänger relationship between those two post-Shelleyan archetypes (*R and R: Post-Punk*, 151). In Gladden's opinion, **Morrissey's music video masterpiece "November spawned a monster"** is "perhaps the smartest film version to date" of Mary Shelley's novel. The lyrics address the Creature, perhaps in the moments before his yellow eye first opens:

Sleep on and dream of love
Because it's the closest you will
Get to love
Poor twisted child
So ugly, so ugly
Poor twisted child.

As for the visuals, the shooting location--Nevada's Death Valley under a cold blue sky--rivals the Swiss Alps for dizzying altitude and picturesque inhospitality. Clearly, only the Creature could survive there.

If "November spawned a monster," Rovira's two books seem likely to spawn a minor critical tradition: studies in rock-n-roll Romanticism or perhaps Rock-n-Romanticism. The nascent project invites further research and lends itself to teaching not only because it riffs on the Romantic canon but also because *R and R: Post-Punk* includes a thorough, helpful "Discography" in its Appendix and because Rovira is willing to update his arguments with refinement and even self-critique. To this end, a third volume will reportedly highlight the influence of neglected female Romantics on rock as well as the affinities between Romanticism and neglected female rockers.

I look forward to this next volume because the *Rock and Romanticism* project compels us not only to reread Romanticism and rock in light of each other, but seriously to undermine the notion of Romanticism as a period or a community rather than an aesthetic, a mode, and an ethos. The latter is certainly suggested by the lyrics of one of the most indicative, and certainly overplayed, rock anthems ever recorded:

There's a feeling I get
When I look to the west
And my spirit is crying for leaving
In my thoughts I have seen
Rings of smoke through the trees
And the voices of those who stand looking.
Oh, it makes me wonder...
It really makes me wonder...

Led Zeppelin's revolt against industrial modernity begins with an overflow of feelings that Wordsworth would surely find poetic, prompted by the ballad-singer's gaze into a sublime vista in the direction of the setting sun: symbol of transience, mortality, and counter-revolutionary suppression. He experiences clairvoyant visions, though they are not necessarily explicable by any orthodox theology. Though he may not hear "ancestral voices prophesying war," he hears the voice of some sort of primeval throng, and all of it, despite the promise that "the Piper will lead us to reason," makes him wonder but not fully understand. After the deaths of William Wordsworth, Robert Southey, and Mary Shelley, has there been any clearer imaginative explication of Romanticism?

Rebecca Nesvet is Associate Professor of English at the University of Wisconsin/ Green Bay.

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