
POETICS OF COGNITIVE DISSONANCE AND EMOTIONAL CONTRADICTION: MAPPING THE AESTHETIC LOGIC OF SELF-CONFLICTING CONSCIOUSNESS IN BRITISH ROMANTIC POETRY (1798–1832)

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ABSTRACT

This paper argues that British Romantic poetry between the publication of *Lyrical Ballads* (1798) and the deaths of the second-generation poets and the Reform Act (1832) developed a distinctive aesthetic logic for representing, sustaining, and aestheticizing states of self-conflicting consciousness. Drawing on cognitive dissonance theory, contemporary research on attitudinal ambivalence and mixed emotion, and cognitive literary studies, the paper contends that Romantic poets did not merely *suffer* contradiction as a psychological accident of their historical moment; they transformed contradiction into a generative formal principle. Where classical dissonance theory predicts that conflicting cognitions produce discomfort that agents rush to reduce, Romantic poetics repeatedly stages the *refusal* of dissonance reduction—what Keats famously named “negative capability”—and converts the discomfort of contradiction into aesthetic value. The paper maps this logic across three poetic constellations: Wordsworth and Coleridge’s dialectic of memory, loss, and compensatory imagination; Keats’s odal architecture of suspended contradiction; and the ironic, performative self-division of Byron and the skeptical idealism of Shelley. The analysis proposes that Romantic poetry functions as a historical laboratory of dissonance tolerance, offering literary studies and affective science a shared object: the mind that watches itself want incompatible things and makes of that spectacle a form of art.

KEYWORDS: Romanticism, Cognitive Dissonance, Ambivalence, Negative Capability, Mixed Emotion, Lyric Form, Cognitive Literary Studies

1. INTRODUCTION

British Romantic poetry has long been read as the poetry of powerful feeling, but its more precise signature is the poetry of *incompatible* feeling. The canonical texts of the period 1798–1832 return obsessively to minds caught between belief and doubt, desire and renunciation, hope and historical despair, love of the world and longing to escape it. Wordsworth grieves a visionary power in the very act of claiming “abundant recompense” for its loss. Coleridge composes a magnificent ode about his inability to feel, thereby feeling. Keats yearns to dissolve into the nightingale’s song while insisting that he cannot and should not. Byron builds an entire celebrity persona out of the theatrical display of a self at war with itself, mocking in *Don Juan* the very idealisms he mourns in *Childe Harold*. Shelley addresses a destroying-preserving wind and asks to be simultaneously annihilated and reborn. In each case, the poem does not resolve the contradiction it stages; it organizes itself *around*

the contradiction, as though incompatibility were not a defect of consciousness but its most interesting property.

This paper proposes that we can name this recurring structure with more analytic precision than the traditional vocabularies of “Romantic irony,” “dialectic,” or “paradox” have allowed, by placing Romantic poetics into conversation with the psychological science of cognitive dissonance and ambivalence. Cognitive dissonance theory, in its classical formulation, holds that when a person simultaneously holds cognitions that are psychologically inconsistent, the inconsistency generates an aversive motivational state that the person is driven to reduce—by changing a belief, adding consonant cognitions, or trivializing the conflict (Harmon-Jones, 2019; McGrath, 2017). Contemporary research on attitudinal ambivalence similarly documents the discomfort of simultaneously held positive and negative evaluations of the same object, along with the behavioral and cognitive strategies people deploy to escape that discomfort (van Harreveld, Nohlen, & Schneider, 2015). Yet research on mixed emotions also shows that human beings can and do experience genuinely co-occurring opposite-valence feelings, that such states are reliably elicited by aesthetic and meaningful life situations, and that they are not reducible to rapid oscillation between poles (Berrios, Totterdell, & Kellett, 2015).

The wager of this paper is that British Romantic poetry constitutes a sustained historical experiment in what might be called *dissonance aesthetics*: the deliberate cultivation, formal elaboration, and evaluative transvaluation of self-conflicting consciousness. The Romantic poem, on this account, is a technology for doing something that everyday cognition, according to dissonance theory, resists doing—holding contradiction open, dwelling in it, and extracting from it pleasure, knowledge, and form. Keats gave the practice its most famous name when he praised the capacity of remaining “in uncertainties, Mysteries, doubts, without any irritable reaching after fact & reason.” Read through a cognitive lens, negative capability is precisely a program of *non-reduction*: an ethics and aesthetics of tolerating dissonance rather than discharging it (Rejack & Theune, 2019).

Three clarifications frame the argument. First, the claim is not that Romantic poets anticipated Festinger, nor that twenty-first-century psychology “explains” Romantic poetry. Rather, following the methodological lead of cognitive literary studies, the paper treats literature and cognitive science as mutually illuminating: literature offers densely particularized models of mental life that scientific paradigms can help articulate, while those paradigms are in turn tested, stretched, and historicized by literary evidence (Cave, 2016; Zunshine, 2015). Second, the paper treats “self-conflicting consciousness” as a formal as well as thematic phenomenon: contradiction in Romantic poetry lives in syntax, stanza design, apostrophe, tense, and rhyme as much as in declared sentiment (Wolfson, 2018). Third, the historical bracket 1798–1832 matters. The period’s poets wrote inside a collapsing revolutionary hope, an accelerating print culture of celebrity and scandal, an emergent science of mind, and a pervasive rhetoric of national and personal decline; these conditions made contradiction not an occasional predicament but a chronic environment of consciousness (Sachs, 2018; Sha, 2018; Tuite, 2015).

2. Theoretical Framework: Dissonance, Ambivalence, and the Cognitive Poetics of Contradiction

2.1 From dissonance reduction to dissonance tolerance

Cognitive dissonance theory remains one of the most generative paradigms in social psychology precisely because its core claim is so simple: inconsistency among cognitions is motivationally aversive, and organisms act to restore consonance (Harmon-Jones, 2019). Six decades of research have refined the theory's mechanisms—specifying, for instance, that dissonance magnitude depends on the importance and number of relevant cognitions, and cataloguing reduction strategies from attitude change to trivialization to selective exposure (McGrath, 2017). Recent critical assessments have also pressed the theory toward greater conceptual and operational clarity, distinguishing the *inconsistency* itself, the *arousal state* it produces, and the *reduction processes* it motivates as separable components requiring independent measurement (Vaidis & Bran, 2019). This tripartite decomposition is unexpectedly useful for literary analysis, because it allows us to ask of any poem: where is the inconsistency located, how is the affective arousal registered in the texture of the verse, and—crucially—what happens to the reduction imperative?

The Romantic answer to that final question is what makes the period aesthetically distinctive. Where dissonance theory models a mind hurrying toward consonance, Romantic lyric repeatedly *suspends* the reduction process. The poem becomes a formal container within which the aversive state can be held, examined, savored, and transfigured. This is not a denial of the theory but an exploitation of one of its boundary conditions: reduction is effortful and context-dependent, and under certain framings—aesthetic distance, meaningfulness, self-reflective attention—people demonstrably endure and even seek mixed and conflicted states (Berrios et al., 2015; van Harreveld et al., 2015). Art, in this respect, is one of humanity's oldest dissonance-tolerance technologies, and Romanticism is the moment when English poetry made that function self-conscious.

2.2 Ambivalence and mixed emotion

Ambivalence research supplies a second conceptual layer. Van Harreveld and colleagues (2015) distinguish *potential* ambivalence (the simultaneous presence of positive and negative evaluations in memory) from *felt* ambivalence (the experienced conflict when both evaluations become salient), and document the affective, behavioral, and cognitive consequences that follow when choice or commitment forces felt ambivalence into awareness. Romantic lyric situations are, almost formulaically, machines for converting potential into felt ambivalence: the return to a remembered landscape, the address to an unattainable object, the moment of departure or farewell, the confrontation with a work of art or a natural symbol that condenses incompatible meanings. The genre's characteristic occasions—revisitings, valedictions, invocations—are precisely those that render latent evaluative conflict experientially acute.

Meta-analytic work on mixed emotions confirms that opposite-valence feelings genuinely co-occur rather than merely alternating, and that they are most reliably elicited by rich, meaning-

laden stimuli, including aesthetic ones (Berrios et al., 2015). This matters theoretically because it licenses a strong reading of Romantic claims to feel “pleasing sorrow” or “sweet melancholy”: such formulations are not rhetorical confusions but phenomenologically credible reports of blended affect, which the poems then elaborate into structured experiences. Keats’s “aching Pleasure” and “wakeful anguish” are, in this light, precision instruments of affective description.

2.3 Cognitive poetics: form as the medium of contradiction

The third layer of the framework comes from cognitive literary studies, which insists that literary form is not a decorative surface over cognitive content but itself a mode of thinking (Cave, 2016; Kramnick, 2018). Kramnick (2018) argues that literary writing performs kinds of mind-modeling and consciousness-rendering that no other discourse duplicates, treating technique—free indirect style, lineation, metaphor—as cognitive work in its own right. Kukkonen (2020) extends this into a predictive-processing account in which literary texts strategically manage readers’ probabilistic expectations, generating aesthetic effects through designed confirmations and violations of prediction. On such an account, the Romantic poem of contradiction is a *prediction-conflict engine*: its syntax leads the reader to anticipate resolution that the stanza then withholds, its rhyme promises closure that its semantics revokes, and the reader’s own processing thereby simulates, in real time, the poet’s represented dissonance. Hogan (2018) similarly emphasizes that literature does not merely depict emotion but organizes emotional episodes—appraisal, arousal, expression, regulation—into shaped temporal wholes, making the literary text an unparalleled archive of emotion’s microstructure.

Together these strands yield the paper’s central analytic concept: the aesthetic logic of self-conflicting consciousness. By this I mean a repeatable set of formal operations by which Romantic poems (a) generate salient cognitive-affective inconsistency; (b) register its aversive charge in prosody, syntax, and figuration; (c) block or defer the normative reduction strategies (belief change, trivialization, avoidance); and (d) revalue the sustained conflict as insight, beauty, or identity. The following sections trace this four-step logic through the period’s major poetic formations.

3. Wordsworth and Coleridge: Dissonant Memory and the Compensation Plot (1798–1807)

3.1 “Tintern Abbey” and the arithmetic of “abundant recompense”

Lyrical Ballads opens the period with a poetics explicitly premised on self-difference. “Lines Written a Few Miles above Tintern Abbey” is structured as a revisiting, and revisiting is the paradigmatic ambivalence-activating occasion: the same landscape is simultaneously the site of what the poet was and the proof that he no longer is it. The poem’s famous consolation—“Other gifts / Have followed; for such loss, I would believe, / Abundant recompense”—is, in dissonance-theoretic terms, a textbook reduction strategy: the addition of consonant cognitions (“the philosophic mind,” the “still, sad music of humanity”) to offset the dissonant cognition of irrecoverable loss. But the poem’s aesthetic power lies in the visible *effortfulness*

of the reduction. The hedging parenthesis “I would believe” concedes that the recompense is willed rather than found; the verse enacts a mind performing consonance-restoration in public and not quite trusting its own arithmetic. Rohrbach (2015) has shown how Wordsworthian temporality is riven by anticipation and retrospection that never fully synchronize—the poet projecting a future memory of the present moment even as he mourns a past self—so that the lyric “now” is constitutively self-divided. The poem’s final movement, turning to Dorothy as a living archive of the poet’s former self, outsources the contradiction rather than resolving it: what cannot be reconciled within one consciousness is distributed across two.

The “Intimations” Ode (1807) makes the compensation plot explicit as an argument—“We will grieve not, rather find / Strength in what remains behind”—and again the grammar betrays the strain. The hortatory “We will grieve not” is a resolution announced, not a state achieved; the ode’s radiant final stanzas about the “meanest flower” producing “thoughts that do often lie too deep for tears” locate the poem’s terminal affect precisely *below* the threshold of discharge. Tears that cannot fall are dissonance that cannot be reduced: the ode ends by naming an arousal state with no available consummation, and offering that unconsummated state as its highest wisdom. Wolfson (2018) demonstrates how Wordsworth’s figures of shadow, haunting, and residue keep the discarded alternative—the lost gleam—formally alive inside the very stanzas that claim to have superseded it; the poem’s consolations are shadowed by the specters of what they console for.

3.2 The experimental ballads: dissonance displaced into narrative

The ballads themselves stage contradiction at the level of narrating consciousness. “The Thorn” gives us a garrulous sea-captain narrator who simultaneously insists he knows nothing (“I cannot tell; I wish I could”) and cannot stop elaborating the story of Martha Ray; the poem is a study in a mind whose epistemic humility and narrative compulsion are flatly inconsistent, and whose obsessive returns to the measurable facts—the pond “three feet long, and two feet wide”—parody the mind’s attempt to reduce affective dissonance by retreating into consonant trivialities. “We Are Seven” builds an entire poem from an irresolvable cognitive standoff: the adult speaker’s arithmetic of mortality against the child’s arithmetic of continuing relation. Crucially, the poem sides with neither; it ends on the little girl’s unmoved “Nay, we are seven!”, leaving the reader holding both frames. The *Lyrical Ballads* project, in this sense, democratizes dissonance: it locates self-conflicting consciousness not in exceptional genius but in beggars, mothers, children, and mad speakers, making contradiction the ordinary texture of mind (Bennett, 2015).

3.3 Coleridge: the ode that feels its own numbness

Coleridge supplies the period’s most vertiginous case: poems whose subject is the failure of the very capacities the poems display. “Dejection: An Ode” (1802) announces “A grief without a pang, void, dark, and drear,” a state of affective flatness—“I see, not feel, how beautiful they are!”—and then articulates that flatness in some of the most affectively saturated verse of the decade. The performative contradiction is total: a poem of eloquent numbness, an ode of failed odal power, a lament that its own existence refutes. In dissonance

terms, Coleridge constructs an inconsistency between first-order state (I cannot feel) and second-order performance (this feeling utterance), and refuses every available reduction: he neither revises the claim of numbness nor mutes the eloquence. The result is a standing contradiction offered as the poem's meaning: dejection, for Coleridge, just is the condition of watching one's "shaping spirit of Imagination" suspended, from a vantage that only that spirit could occupy.

"Frost at Midnight" (1798) runs the compensation plot in a gentler key but with the same double bookkeeping: the father's blessing on the sleeping child—"thou shalt learn far other lore, / And in far other scenes"—converts his own deprivation (the city-pent childhood, the "stern preceptor") into the negative template of the child's plenitude. The consolation is real, yet it is structurally parasitic on the unhealed wound it compensates; the poem's serenity is built directly over its grievance, and the "secret ministry" of frost that frames the poem figures exactly this silent, invisible conversion-work of the dissonant mind. "The Rime of the Ancient Mariner" externalizes the logic into narrative theology: the Mariner blesses the water-snakes "unaware," and thereafter inhabits a permanently split condition—saved yet compelled, forgiven yet driven at "uncertain hours" to repeat his tale. His famous "woful agony" that returns until the tale is told is dissonance theory rendered as gothic mechanism: an arousal state periodically regenerated, discharged through narration, and never finally reduced. Ford (2018) reads the first-generation project as an atmospherics of mediation in which mood, weather, and air become the medium of a consciousness that cannot coincide with itself; the Mariner's becalmed and driven ship charts the meteorology of a self alternately paralyzed and propelled by its own inner inconsistency.

The first generation thus establishes the template of the period's aesthetic logic: an occasion activates evaluative conflict; the verse registers the conflict's charge; reduction strategies are visibly attempted and visibly incomplete; and the poem's value is located in the sustained, examined incompleteness. What Wordsworth and Coleridge treat elegiacally—contradiction as the price of temporal existence—the second generation will treat architecturally (Keats), theatrically (Byron), and metaphysically (Shelley).

4. Keats: Negative Capability and the Architecture of Suspended Contradiction

4.1 Negative capability as a cognitive program

If the paper's thesis has a manifesto, it is Keats's December 1817 letter defining negative capability as the state in which a person "is capable of being in uncertainties, Mysteries, doubts, without any irritable reaching after fact & reason." The formulation is remarkable for isolating exactly the components that contemporary dissonance research separates: the inconsistent or indeterminate cognitions ("uncertainties, Mysteries, doubts"), the aversive arousal ("irritable"), and the reduction impulse ("reaching after fact & reason"). Negative capability names the deliberate inhibition of the third component while continuing to host the first and metabolize the second. Rejack and Theune (2019) trace how the concept, a passing phrase in a single letter, became the master-key of Keats criticism precisely because it captures something programmatic about the poems themselves: their refusal of doctrinal

settlement, their hospitality to incompatible perspectives, their conversion of irresolution from a deficit into a capability—the word's own paradox, a *capability* defined negatively, enacts the transvaluation it names.

Keats's speculative letters elaborate the program. The “vale of Soul-making” letter reframes suffering not as a problem requiring theodicean reduction but as the medium in which identity is forged—“a World of Pains and troubles” schooling intelligence into soul. The “Pleasure Thermometer” and the “Mansion of Many Apartments” letters model development as the progressive *darkening* of thought, the opening of doors onto passages “all dark,” which Keats treats as advance rather than loss. Nersessian (2021) reads the odes as documents of a mind in love with a world that injures it, in which erotic attachment and historical catastrophe (the brutal industrial and imperial world of 1819) are inseparable; the poems' famous lushness is not escape from contradiction but the form contradiction takes when it is fully, sensuously inhabited.

4.2 The odes of 1819: stanzaic containers for incompatible states

“Ode to a Nightingale” is built as an oscillation that never becomes a choice. The opening line—“My heart aches, and a drowsy numbness pains / My sense”—already fuses opposites (an ache that is numb, a numbness that pains), and the ode proceeds through a sequence of attempted self-transports (wine, poesy, “easeful Death”) each of which is entertained and abandoned. The pivot “Forlorn! the very word is like a bell / To toll me back from thee to my sole self” dramatizes the collapse of an attempted dissonance-reduction-by-escape; and the ode's actual ending is not a position but a question—“Do I wake or sleep?”—which leaves the speaker suspended between the two frames the poem has been unable to reconcile. The interrogative close is the formal signature of non-reduction: where argument would conclude, the ode inquires.

“Ode on a Grecian Urn” performs the same suspension spatially. The urn's frozen lovers are “For ever panting, and for ever young”—desire perfected by being permanently unconsummated—and the poem's celebration of that state is shadowed, stanza by stanza, with its cost: the “little town” emptied for eternity, the “Cold Pastoral.” The famous chiasmus “Beauty is truth, truth beauty” has generated two centuries of dispute precisely because the poem engineers undecidability about who speaks it and how much it settles; the urn is a “friend to man” whose consolation is a riddle. Read cognitively, the ode constructs an object that *embodies* resolved contradiction (motion in stillness, sound in silence, warmth in marble) and then measures the human speaker's distance from that inhuman resolution: consonance is available, the poem suggests, only to artifacts.

“Ode on Melancholy” makes the aesthetic logic fully explicit and doctrinal. Its first stanza is a catalogue of prohibited reduction strategies—“No, no, go not to Lethe,” do not numb, do not discharge, do not escape—for the explicit reason that anodynes will “drown the wakeful anguish of the soul,” and the anguish must be kept *wakeful* to be of use. The third stanza then delivers the period's most compressed statement of blended affect: Melancholy “dwells with Beauty—Beauty that must die; / And Joy, whose hand is ever at his lips / Bidding adieu; and

aching Pleasure nigh, / Turning to poison while the bee-mouth sips." Joy and grief are not alternated but co-resident—"in the very temple of Delight / Veil'd Melancholy has her sovran shrine"—and access to the shrine is restricted to "him whose strenuous tongue / Can burst Joy's grape against his palate fine": the connoisseur of contradiction, the trained dissonance-taster. This is Berrios and colleagues' (2015) mixed emotion elevated into an initiatory discipline; the ode is, quite literally, an instruction manual for eliciting and sustaining opposite-valence co-occurrence.

"To Autumn" is often read as the odes' serene exception, but its serenity is achieved by distributing contradiction into the season itself: ripeness that is also ending, a music of "wailful" gnats and "full-grown lambs" (lambs no longer lambs), the "soft-dying day." The poem does not resolve the tension between plenitude and death; it composes them into a single sensory continuum, achieving at the level of imagery what "Melancholy" prescribes at the level of doctrine. Nersessian (2020) argues that Romantic figuration in general—and Keatsian figuration in particular—does its deepest work by *declining* to harmonize what history has broken, letting formal devices mark the places where reconciliation is unavailable; "To Autumn," on such a reading, is not consolation but the most disciplined possible refusal of it.

4.3 The dreamer–poet split

Keats's late fragment "The Fall of Hyperion" turns the aesthetic logic reflexively upon poetry itself. Moneta's challenge—distinguishing the poet who "pours out a balm upon the world" from the dreamer who "vexes it"—forces the dreaming speaker to adjudicate his own vocation, and the fragment famously cannot complete the adjudication; Keats abandoned it with the contradiction intact. The poem thus ends the Keatsian arc where the letters began: with a consciousness that has made the inability to choose between self-descriptions into its most profound self-description. What negative capability proposes as temperament, the 1819 odes engineer as architecture: stanzas as pressure vessels in which incompatible cognitions are held at high affective temperature without explosion or discharge, and the reader is invited to inhabit, for the duration of the form, a mind that does not need to make itself consistent to be whole.

5. Byron and Shelley: Performed Self-Division and Skeptical Idealism

5.1 Byron: contradiction as persona, irony as method

Byron converts self-conflicting consciousness from a private predicament into a public performance—arguably the first modern celebrity built on the marketable spectacle of a divided self. Tuite (2015) shows how Byron's "scandalous celebrity" fused fascination and repulsion in his audience, an ambivalence the poet actively engineered: the Byronic hero is designed to be adored and condemned in the same gesture, and Byron's own self-presentation oscillated strategically between confession and mockery of confession. The persona is the dissonance, commodified.

Childe Harold's Pilgrimage III–IV (1816–1818) stages the earnest register of this division. The famous declaration “I have not loved the world, nor the world me” is immediately doubled by the concession that he has “not flattered its rank breath” yet still stands “among them, but not of them”—belonging and estrangement asserted in a single stanza-breath. Canto III's alpine sublime repeatedly claims self-dissolution into nature (“I live not in myself, but I become / Portion of that around me”) in stanzas whose relentless first-person grammar demonstrates the opposite; the poetry of self-forgetting is the period's most insistent self-display. Byron differs from Wordsworth not in escaping the contradiction but in half-knowing, and half-advertising, that the escape fails.

Don Juan (1819–1824) then weaponizes the failure. The poem's ottava rima is a dissonance machine at the level of prosody: six lines build a lyric, sentimental, or philosophical elevation that the couplet detonates—“And thus they form a group that's quite antique, / Half naked, loving, natural, and Greek”—so that the reader is trained, stanza by stanza, to hold earnestness and mockery as co-present frames. Byron's digressive narrator announces the program outright: “if I laugh at any mortal thing, / 'Tis that I may not weep.” The line is a précis of dissonance aesthetics in the ironic mode: laughter does not replace grief but caps it, and the poem's comedy is everywhere pressurized by the mourning it forestalls. Where Keats suspends contradiction inside the stanza, Byron *alternates* it at high frequency until alternation becomes simultaneity in the reader's processing—precisely the prediction-management dynamic that Kukkonen (2020) identifies as literature's probabilistic art: *Don Juan* teaches its reader a rhythm of expectation (elevation, deflation) and then plays that rhythm virtuosically, so that even its sincere moments arrive pre-ironized and its ironies ache. *Manfred* (1817) gives the tragic statement of the same structure: a hero whose crime and whose conscience are indistinguishable, who refuses both the demons' claim on him and heaven's pardon—“The mind which is immortal makes itself / Requit for its good or evil thoughts”—dying in a sovereignty that is also total isolation. Refusal of every external consonance becomes, for Byron, the last form of integrity.

5.2 Shelley: idealism under skeptical interrogation

Shelley's version of the divided mind is epistemological. His lyrics characteristically posit an absolute—Power, Intellectual Beauty, the One—and simultaneously subject the positing mind to skeptical audit. “Mont Blanc” (1817) is the exemplary case: the mountain figures “The secret Strength of things / Which governs thought,” yet the poem's closing question—“And what were thou, and earth, and stars, and sea, / If to the human mind's imaginings / Silence and vacancy?”—suspends the entire vision on the possibility that it is projection. The poem does not choose between realism and idealism about its own central symbol; it ends by making the undecidability itself the object of awe. “Hymn to Intellectual Beauty” performs the same double movement temporally: the Spirit's visitations are the ground of the poet's dedication, and their “inconstancy” is the ground of his despair; the hymn worships an intermittence.

"Ode to the West Wind" (1819) compresses Shelley's self-conflict into its central apostrophe: the wind is "Destroyer and preserver" in a single vocative breath, and the poet's petition is correspondingly split—he asks to be lifted "as a wave, a leaf, a cloud" (dissolution of agency) precisely in order to become the wind's prophetic instrument (maximal agency). "Make me thy lyre" requests an annihilation that is also an empowerment. The famous closing question—"If Winter comes, can Spring be far behind?"—is grammatically hope and rhetorically doubt: posed as a question, hope is asserted in the one mood that cannot assert. Sha (2018) situates such moves within Romantic engagements with contemporary science, where imagination functioned as a disciplined instrument for entertaining hypotheses without foreclosing them; Shelleyan lyric runs on exactly this hypothetical energy, affirming in the optative and interrogative what it cannot affirm in the indicative.

The late, unfinished "The Triumph of Life" (1822) darkens the audit into vision: the pageant of the living chained to Life's chariot, Rousseau as a "deformed" root who both indicts and exemplifies the ruin of idealism, and the fragment's terminal, unanswered question—"Then, what is Life?"—left standing at Shelley's death. Khalip (2018) reads such Romantic terminal forms as an aesthetics of "last things," in which disaster is not an event the poem reports but a condition the form inhabits; the fragment's incompleteness is not accident elevated to meaning but the logical endpoint of a poetics that had always located truth in the unresolved. Goodman (2022) likewise shows how post-Enlightenment poetics registered historical experience as *disturbance*—unease, motion-sickness, the feeling of history in the nerves—rather than as settled knowledge; Shelley's untriumphant "Triumph" is that registration at maximal intensity, a consciousness processing a history it can neither affirm nor exit.

5.3 The wider field: contradiction as period style

The logic mapped here across the canonical five was a period style, not a coterie trick. Felicia Hemans's *Records of Woman* (1828) builds poem after poem on the collision of domestic ideology with its human cost—celebrating the affections in narratives where the affections destroy their bearers—so that the volumes' famous "sweetness" is everywhere internally contested. John Clare's asylum-era and enclosure poems mourn a landscape whose loss constitutes his poetic identity: "I Am" asserts selfhood in the language of self-vacancy ("I am the self-consumer of my woes"). Even the period's popular annuals traded in the pleasurable sorrow that Berrios and colleagues (2015) would identify as prototypical mixed emotion. By 1832 the aesthetic logic of self-conflicting consciousness had become the default expressive grammar of English verse—the inheritance against which Victorian poetry's dramatic monologue (contradiction distributed into character) and *In Memoriam* (doubt institutionalized as faith's "better" half) would define themselves.

6. Conclusion: Toward an Aesthetic Logic of Self-Conflicting Consciousness

This paper has argued that British Romantic poetry between 1798 and 1832 developed, refined, and transmitted a four-step aesthetic logic: the activation of cognitive-affective inconsistency by a lyric occasion; the registration of its aversive charge in the fine grain of form; the visible blocking or deferral of the mind's normative reduction strategies; and the

transvaluation of the sustained conflict into beauty, knowledge, and identity. Wordsworth and Coleridge established the template in the elegiac mode, staging compensation plots whose incompleteness was their honesty. Keats perfected the architectural mode, engineering stanzaic containers—and in negative capability, an explicit program—for holding incompatible states at high affective temperature. Byron theatricalized the logic, converting self-division into persona and prosody; Shelley epistemologized it, suspending his own absolutes on interrogatives that his fragments never closed.

Three implications follow. For literary studies, the framework offers a way to reunify vocabularies that have grown apart—Romantic irony, paradox, ambivalence, negative capability—under a single, psychologically articulated description, while keeping the emphasis where formalist criticism has always placed it: on the poem as the *doing* of thought, not its report (Kramnick, 2018; Wolfson, 2018). It also historicizes the logic: dissonance became a period style because the period made contradiction chronic—revolutionary hope curdling into reaction, a rhetoric of decline saturating cultural self-understanding, celebrity culture rewarding performed self-division, and an emergent science of mind making consciousness newly an object to itself (Faflak & Sha, 2022; Sachs, 2018; Tuite, 2015).

For the psychology of emotion, Romantic poetry constitutes a high-resolution historical archive of dissonance tolerance and mixed emotion—phenomena that laboratory paradigms, oriented toward reduction and resolution, have only recently begun to model adequately (Berrios et al., 2015; Vaidis & Bran, 2019). The poems document, with a temporal and phenomenological precision unavailable to self-report scales, what it is like to inhabit felt ambivalence over the duration of a structured experience, and what regulatory work aesthetic form can perform: not the elimination of conflict but its containment, examination, and revaluation (Hogan, 2018; van Harreveld et al., 2015). Keats's prohibition list in "Ode on Melancholy" is, among other things, a folk theory of emotion regulation that inverts the modern default—prescribing sustained exposure where the reduction-oriented mind prescribes escape.

Finally, for cognitive literary studies, the Romantic case clarifies what the interdisciplinary is for. The traffic between poem and paradigm runs both ways: dissonance theory sharpens our description of what "Dejection" or the "Nightingale" ode is doing, and those poems, in turn, expose the theory's tacit normativity—its assumption that consonance is the mind's telos. The Romantics propose the alternative that their forms embody: that a consciousness capable of remaining in its own contradictions, "without any irritable reaching," is not a failed consistency-machine but the fullest kind of mind. Their poetry is the demonstration that this capability can be built, stanza by stanza—and that its products are among the permanent resources of the language.

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