**Abstract**

This introduction lays out the predicates of *David Bowie and the Legacies of Romanticism*, exploring the diversity of Romantic inheritances and considering the ways in which David Bowie can be seen as engaging with them. It argues that while the Romantic period’s influence is less obvious than that of some other literary epochs, this is in large part because Romantic innovations changed so fundamentally the ways in which culture conceives of art and identity. Considering how Bowie engages with these changes allows us to see how Romanticism survives in a range of dynamic shaping forces, empowering later artists through providing both flexible tools to repurpose and overarching systems to reconfigure and oppose.

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**Introduction: David Bowie and Romanticism’s Wild Mutations**

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“Poetry makes nothing happen,” W.H. Auden contends in his elegy “In Memory of W.B. Yeats.” However, he goes on to write that nevertheless “it survives, / A way of happening, a mouth” (246). This collection is concerned with the ways in which the clusters of ideas awkwardly bundled together under the heading of Romanticism survive as ways of happening in the twentieth and twenty-first centuries, albeit in forms necessarily “modified in the guts of the living” (245). Our prisms for examining the ongoing currency of Romantic conceptions are the works, performances, and legacies of David Bowie. We argue that many of Bowie’s manifestations engage in meaningful creative and critical conversations with assumptions that originally crystallized in Romantic-period discourses and forms. Specifically, the five essays that follow explore ideas relating to space, childhood, identity, artistry, and the image of freedom: all key Romantic concerns that continue to resonate in Bowie and his works. In discussing how Bowie’s music, personae, and cultural presences engage with late-eighteenth- and early-nineteenth-century thoughts and artworlds, this volume traces a variety of different forms of remediation, including reflection, diffusion, resistance, amplification, and transfiguration. Bowie is far from being straightforwardly a Romantic artist, but the very complexities of his relationships with Romanticism make him a more revealing lens through which to explore the pervasiveness, richness, and predicaments of our Romantic inheritances. As Auden does for poetry, we would wish to reject a straightforwardly functional vision of Romanticism as a form of action in the present in favour of seeing it as a series of modalities that inventive interpreters like Bowie have been able to extend, nuance, transform, and—in some circumstances—shuck off.

This collection, like many good things, owes its existence to connections sparked by conference conviviality. Its roots lie in after-dinner discussions between Joanna E. Taylor, Beatrice Turner, and myself at the 2015 British Association for Romantic Studies (BARS) conference in Cardiff. The idea of juxtaposing Bowie and Romanticism (two great tastes that we hoped would taste great together) swiftly created a compelling play of possibilities, and the notion of working these up continued to nag at us long after we departed from Wales. Bowie’s subsequent passing—one of the first of 2016’s numerous great losses—intensified our desire to see what we could do by examining Bowie through the prism of Romanticism and vice versa. On the helpful recommendation of Michael Gamer, we asked Emily Bernhard Jackson, who was already completing new work on Bowie and Byron, to join us, and the four of us presented our ideas as a panel at the 2017 BARS conference in York. We were gratified both by the number of people who showed up at a relatively early hour on the Sunday morning after the banquet and by the enthusiasm expressed in questions and responses. This made us keen to develop our thoughts for publication to extend the stimulating conversations we had begun. When we submitted a proposal to the Praxis series, Orrin Wang kindly mentioned that Forest Pyle had recently been thinking about Bowie in relation to his current projects on contemporary Romanticisms; when we subsequently approached him, it swiftly became apparent that his perspective would bring something new and distinctive beyond what we’d gathered in the original panel, so we were delighted when he agreed to contribute this collection’s concluding essay. The completion of this volume is thus a tribute to Romantic Studies’ openness and cordiality. We’d like to offer heartfelt thanks to all those who’ve listened to, supported, and provided feedback on this research as it has developed.

The framing of this collection begs two related questions: why place such emphasis on Romantic legacies, and why use David Bowie to explore these? Taking the first of these questions first: we are aware that from certain perspectives, exploring Romantic resonances in David Bowie might seem to be a rather tangential—or even quixotic—endeavour. For the past three decades, mainstream scholarship in Romantic Studies has been strongly invested in recovering historical circumstances, vesting value claims for works in their conditions of possibility at the times of their creations. This has led many scholars to favour implicitly a stance Tom Mole has called “punctual historicism,” which he defines as a tendency to “think the most important context for understanding literature is the context of its composition or its first publication” (21). This impulse has been the spur for a huge body of significant critical and editorial work that has helped immeasurably in getting us to a position where we can more adequately claim that we might “read a text like its first readers” (23). However, such scholarship, while immensely valuable, should not constitute the whole literary-critical picture. The ways that texts happened in the past are hugely important, but texts and the idea clusters they spawn are also fascinating for the complex ways that they continue to happen in our lives, institutions, minds, and seminar rooms. Clearly, part of our role as Romanticists is to try to remember, imagine, and explain how the Romantic period was for those who lived through it, but it is also important to be explicit that its works and the new affordances of thought and feeling they developed continue to live on in our understandings, apprehensions, and misapprehensions.

In recent years, a growing body of work has made significant progress in investigating how Romantic-period artforms and ideologies have played out in the works of successor artists. Interestingly, much of this research has been issued in the form of essay collections, perhaps indicating a consensus that complex questions regarding legacies are best addressed through providing a series of complementary perspectives rather than seeking to be singular and definitive.[[1]](#endnote-1) While many essay volumes have dealt principally with high cultural resonances, a number have also explored connections with contemporary popular culture, often with an eye to demystifying Romanticism in the seminar room.[[2]](#endnote-2) Such work brings home both the intellectual potential of revivifying Romanticism through analogy and the very real necessity of thinking about how versions and variants of Romanticism might matter now when constructing our syllabi and explaining our passions.

However, while such collections provide both excellent sources and helpful methodological toolkits for investigating the longer-term influence of Romantic-period writing—especially poetry—there is as yet no strongly established equivalent in Romantic Studies to the burgeoning interest in Neo-Victorianism in Victorian Studies. This, I would contend, is in large part due to the prevailing nature of Romantic influence. As Ann Heilmann and Mark Llewellyn have put it, in many respects “‘the Victorian’ has become a homogenized identity—even a signifier—in contemporary culture” (2). Neo-Victorianism is largely predicated on its subject period being defined (or fossilized) in a series of familiar stereotypes. Heilmann and Llewellyn argue that Neo-Victorian texts engage a “self-analytic drive” (5) and constitute “fictional re-encounters” (8), playing off the solidity of the period’s cultural presence by subjecting it to parody, remediation, and revaluation. In doing so, Neo-Victorian works assert—always implicitly, and often very explicitly—that we are no longer Victorian: the period is over, done with, and transcended.

By contrast, the Romantic-period influence on contemporary culture is more nebulous, but in many ways stronger and more pervasive. In *Keywords*, Raymond Williams accurately opined that “literature was specialized towards *imaginative writing* within the basic assumptions of Romanticism” (186). Ideals developed and institutionalized in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries remain right at the heart of modern disciplines and the social assumptions that empower and constrain them. When we talk about art and culture, we do so using a language that has been fundamentally shaped by Romantic assumptions. Despite the efforts of critics like Jerome McGann and Clifford Siskin, it remains far harder to get outside Romanticism than it is to get outside Victorianism. While the latter is associated most strongly with aesthetics and ideologies that can be defined as no longer being our own, the former lingers at the heart of many of our most cherished cultural assumptions.

This is not an unproblematic situation. While Romantic ideologies comprise a powerfully suggestive set of modalities for being and for being in the world, it would be deeply worrying if the recorded thoughts and feelings of two hundred years ago mapped exactly on to our modern ethics and (pre)conceptions. When considered alongside Romanticism’s considerable and potentially disabling authority as a discourse, such dissonances have served to create an influential strand of paranoid criticism that sees the art of the Romantic period as exerting an insidious and powerfully negative influence. As Simon Swift has convincingly argued, “the fear of being enchanted by Romantic illusions, as well as the self-defensive critical mechanisms that aim to guard against it, [are] themselves Romantic legacies” (246). Swift’s view of Romanticism has interesting consonances with Harold Bloom’s view of influence. We might well trace a version of Bloomian anxiety in Alain Baidou’s pronouncements about the “question which weighs upon and threatens to exhaust us: can we be delivered, *finally* delivered, from our subjugation to Romanticism?” (24).

It is difficult, then, to see how a discourse closely resembling Neo-Victorianism can arise in culture in which Romanticism is still very much with us. However, the currency of Romanticism might well serve to create a space for a different kind of legacy studies that could also address some of the objections of those like Baidou who see Romanticism as an all-encompassing malign influence. I would contend that while Baidou is right to see Romanticism as remaining powerfully operative, the Romanticism that operates now is not the same as that which operated in the early nineteenth century, or indeed in the early twentieth century. Romanticism was always a retrospective imposition, and the very complexities that make defining it so difficult also provide space for artists and critics to shift and change it, moving its centres of gravity and collectively working to challenge its previous assumptions. Like Walt Whitman, Romanticism can internalize contradictions without collapsing; it is large, and can “contain multitudes” (24). If we accept this, we might conceptualize ourselves not as subjugated victims begging for delivery from a unitary Romanticism, but rather as stakeholders who possess Romanticism as a cultural legacy and who can remake it in our own images, censuring and jettisoning qualities and discourses that we find objectionable while drawing on its communicative powers to connect us with our pasts and our contemporaries in old and new forms of mutual understanding.

This brings us to an answer to the second question: why Bowie? He is far from the most obviously Romantic of artists, but this makes him peculiarly suitable for addressing both the ubiquity of Romantic forms and the manners in which these must variously be negotiated, resisted, and reconfigured. Previous scholars examining Romantic legacies in popular music have often drawn direct connections between poets and pop stars, looking at how the latter evoke and make use of the former.[[3]](#endnote-3) However, Bowie offers an excellent test case for considering a more conflicted model of Romantic inheritance. He is a good presence to think with because of the ways he clashes with Romantic conceptions as well as the manners in which he resonates with them. The essays in this volume differ markedly and—we hope—productively in how they conceptualize this combination of harmony and dissonance. At the beginning of his contribution, Forest Pyle writes that “On the surface, David Bowie is one of the least likely matches that I can imagine for a pairing of pop culture with Romanticism.” Bearing in mind the ease with which our initial conversations about Bowie and Romanticism flowed in Cardiff, I was initially quite surprised when I read this, but it makes complete sense as a position. Bowie’s work is not particularly concerned with the natural world, expresses distrust regarding many kinds of visionary experience, and takes pleasure in kinds of artifice with which those who subscribe wholeheartedly to Romanticism’s cult of authenticity are distinctly uncomfortable. Regardless of the real nature of William Wordsworth’s interactions with Dorothy Wordsworth’s journals or his poetical predecessors, the ideal of the Wordsworthian poet does not chime neatly with the principles behind cut-ups, pin-ups, or oblique strategies. In these respects, Bowie is deeply unRomantic, although his being so within a paradigm in which Romanticism still holds considerable sway itself provides a telling commentary on the rarefication and remediation of Romantic-period inheritances.

However, for me Bowie has always seemed of a kind with Romantic artists in his self-conscious pursuit of iconicity. Like them, he is a figure who sought to be at the centre of debates within and about his time, attempting knowingly to provide a powerful means for audiences and commentators to position their thoughts, feelings, and selves. If Romanticism carved out a space in which artists can stand as recognized yet peculiar representatives of their age, then Bowie is a true heir both in his grapplings with the zeitgeist and in his insistence on maintaining his individual idiosyncrasies even as he appeals for general applause. In “A Defence of Poetry,” Shelley writes that “Poets are the hierophants of an unapprehended inspiration; the mirrors of the gigantic shadows which futurity casts upon the present; the words which express what they understand not; the trumpets which sing to battle, and feel not what they inspire; the influence which is moved not, but moves” (535). This description of the artist as a sensitive but far-from-omniscient barometer seems to me to fit well as a description of Bowie, whose influence seems profounder, more widespread, and less expected than that of other rock stars of his age. The principal word from Shelley’s statement that we might wish to alter were we to use it to describe Bowie is “unapprehended.” In the Seventies in particular, Bowie successfully sought to make both his influences and his staged selves garishly visible, blazing across the mediascape both as a roguish assemblage of half-familiar elements and as something audiences responded to as being radically new. The Bowies of the Seventies grab the lion’s share of the attention in this collection, probably because this was the period of his career in which the steps he danced were most obviously in the Romantic line. Before the off-kilter embrace of more conventional forms in the eighties, the avant-gardisms of the nineties, and the rueful, experimental referentiality of his twenty-first-century material, Seventies Bowies teetered confidently between outsider and archetype, brashly asserting that art was sexy and scuzzy and fake and cerebral, but, above all, that it had the potential to be achingly, Romantically meaningful.

However, to say this is not to imply that smaller-scale connections cannot be drawn between Bowie and the discourses and affordances incubated in Romantic works. It seems to me that there’s more than a hint of Byron’s Manfred in the return of the Thin White Duke “throwing darts in lovers’ eyes” (“Station to Station”). Perhaps there’s also an echo of the lamp that must be replenished but which will still never burn long enough (*Manfred* I.i.1–2) in the solitary candle burning in the Villa of Ormen (“Blackstar”), and this echo might easily be multiplied by working through the incantatory self-assertions and self-fashionings that follow in each case. The eyes of the addressee “at the centre of it all” in “Blackstar” would for Manfred be Astarte’s eyes, around which everything else revolves, their contiguousness with his own eyes—“like to mine” (II.ii.107)—resonating with the doublings and collapsings in Bowie’s lyric. Manfred defines himself against and within nature in his speeches on the Jungfrau and to the Witch of the Alps, joying in following “through the night the moving moon / The stars and their development” (II.ii.70–1) while feeling “degraded back” and “all clay again” (II.ii.78–9) when human frames intrude. Similarly, although perhaps more playfully, the voice that cries out in “Blackstar” desires “eagles in my daydreams, diamonds in my eyes” and denies the social roles of film star, pop star, porn star, and gangster while self-consciously assuming a more sublime stellar identity. These affinities chime with those expressed by Manfred when he praises the sun as “representative of the Unknown” (III.ii.15) or claims that in “starry shade / Of dim and solitary loveliness, / I learn’d the language of another world” (III.iv.5–7). Bowie’s version of this declaration is perhaps more in line with the performative ironies of the later Byron than with Manfred’s solipsistic grieving, but glimpses of the mode linger.

In a similar vein, we might read the experimental fragments and oblique scraps of Berlin Trilogy Bowie as an interesting counterpoint to Coleridge’s proliferating notebook projections, certainties that never fully resolve, floating in anxieties and reversionings. There’s a touch of Shelley’s half-chastened but still-burning utopianism in songs like “Starman,” “Memory of a Free Festival,” and “The Bewlay Brothers,” and a flicker of a maximalist “England in 1819” in “Young Americans.” In imagining the descent of an ambivalent—yet sublime and infinitely compelling—cosmic force into a world with “five years left to cry in,” *The Rise and Fall of Ziggy Stardust* could be read as projecting an Orc for the 1970s rather than the 1790s, a Blakean creation who both streams back into myth and steps out into the quotidian world as a flawed avatar of the times.

I could go on. (And the list I’ve sketched thus far, of course, begs questions. Why just the old-school visionary company? Does Bowie resonate with Anna Laetitia Barbauld, or Felicia Hemans (a similarly generous acknowledger of connections), or (perhaps most plausibly) with Letitia Landon, another artist who felt that she’d come late to the party and needed to negotiate a newly-establishing tradition while making her own voice? Might Bowie be, in certain moods and modes, like Jane Austen, or Lady Morgan, or Walter Scott? Did the suburban kid from unfashionable Bromley fashion himself in ways that chime with Ayrshire’s “heaven-taught plowman,” or with the Helpston man who began by reflecting on the natural world and who ended up echoing everything?) However, more possibilities are not needful, because this is an introduction, not a thesis, and it was to address resonances in depth that we put together the essays in this collection in the first place. Having sketched out models of Romantic inheritance and indicated how Bowie might be used to investigate these, all that remains is briefly to trail the individual contributions before shutting up gracefully and letting them speak for themselves.

In the opening essay, Joanna E. Taylor considers the strong consonances between the manners in which Romantic-period writers located selves through conceptualizing forms of contained space and Bowie’s practices in the sequence of songs featuring Major Tom. Her essay pays particular attention to echoes, which serve both as means of reiterating and as forms that can queer the boundaries between individuals, communities, and environments. After exploring Romantic and post-Romantic modes for locating and challenging individualism using space, Taylor zeroes in on the choral echoes of Coleridge’s “great I AM,” a phrase echoed directly in Bowie’s “Blackstar.” She then tracks the forms that “Blackstar” models back to Bowie’s earliest big hit, “Space Oddity,” which both employs and resists echoes and repetitions to show how Major Tom might “[reject] individualism in order to embrace his own individuality.” Taylor concludes by exploring the ways that Major Tom himself continues to act as a fading but dynamically unsettling (New) Romantic echo in Bowie’s later works.

While Taylor’s essay shows Bowie extending paradigms influenced by Romanticism, Beatrice Turner’s essay finds him appropriating and revoicing Romantic attitudes to childhood innocence while also ironizing these and providing emancipatory alternatives. In her conception, the oft-dismissed “Kooks” provides the key to *Hunky Dory*’s visions of generational definition, transmission, and conflict. While “Kooks” appears to be a cutesy celebration, when placed in the wider contexts of the album and of Romantic appropriations of children as symbolic figures, its fissures, contradictions, and silencings become apparent. Crucially, however, Turner reads in Bowie a kind of resistance that recognizes the power and potential value of the paradigm it critiques. While *Hunky Dory* is ultimately on the side of experience rather than endorsing a restricting and controlling imposition of innocence, its cynicism is far from unalloyed, providing, in Turner’s reading, a complex and nuanced exploration of the difficulties of inheritance.

In her discussion of personal and social identities, Emily Bernhard Jackson argues that the ways in which Bowie configured his personae and self can helpfully be understood as an expansion and extension of a tradition developed in the writings of John Locke, David Hume, and George Berkeley. In opening, she establishes a chain of indexical transmissions through which Bowie may have encountered these philosophers’ ideas, but more importantly, she demonstrates clearly how reading Bowie alongside Enlightenment philosophy surfaces a kind of artistry prepared to commit where its eighteenth-century precursors caviled. In Bernhard Jackson’s reading, Bowie is revealed to have made a quintessentially Romantic move by taking ideas about the sequential and fungible nature of identity that had previously been formulated as relatively abstract conceptions and bringing these into life through a combination of personal commitment, media manipulation, and skilled artistry.

My own essay picks up on some of these arguments by considering how Bowie engages with Romanticism’s creation of specialized forms of artistic identity. After contending that the invention of the capital-A artist was principally a response to Romantic-period innovations, I argue that Bowie works simultaneously within and against this tradition. His lyrics, personae, and mediated existence all serve to expand the range of what can be represented in society and culture, building on the crucial Romantic-period developments that established art as a space of radical exploration and assembly. However, Bowie is more conflicted about the kinds of powers that should be arrogated to the artist than his early-nineteenth-century predecessors. His lyrics often resist the claims to privileged consciousness that canonical Romantic pronouncements like Keats’s “negative capability” letter, Wordsworth’s *Prelude*, and Shelley’s agonizingly self-conscious lyrics seem to advance. Instead, Bowie’s works consistently gesture out towards his audiences, insisting on the liberating faultiness of artistic transmissions and on the crucial role of the listener in making meanings and connections.

Finally, Forest Pyle’s essay begins by considering Bowie’s wide range of influences beyond Romanticism, showing his vital engagements with celebrity, modernism, and postmodernity. While he tantalizingly sketches the outlines of a glam Romanticism, the main thrust of Pyle’s essay is concerned with a reconfigured queering Romanticism mediated, among others, by Walter Pater, Oscar Wilde, and Walter Benjamin. His lens for exploring this constellation is Todd Haynes’s 1998 film *Velvet Goldmine*, which does not feature Bowie or include his music in a direct sense, but which is dominated by what Pyle calls the Bowie-Image, a conduit for and avatar of the electric vivacity of art. In Pyle’s reading, *Velvet Goldmine* is a “site of both nostalgia and ebullience, alternating currents in Romanticism’s transmissions to our future.” In being so, it becomes a place of prospective liberation and of freedom from the need to be redeemed, capturing—albeit with nuance—the image of potential transcendence transmitted through Romantic poetry and through Bowie’s “gift of sound and vision.”

When Bowie himself (or one of his personae) imagined what being a “Star” would be like, its potentialities included both the deeply personal or banal (“I could fall asleep at night”) and the nakedly commercial (“I could do with the money”). However, he also invested stardom with the potential for radical change, arguing that he “could play the wild mutation as a rock & roll star.” In this collection, we have experimented with taking Bowie at his word, tracing the ways in which we might see his personae, lyrics, music, and presences as wild mutations of Romantic inheritances. The extent of our success is for you to judge, but it’s been an amazingly fun project to put together. We hope you enjoy this collection as much as we have, and that you find some of the things it has to say useful in your own examinations of Romantic lineages and transformations.

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1. To take a few highlights: the contributors to Andrew Radford and Mark Sandy’s *Romantic Echoes in the Victorian Era* (2008) and Mark Sandy’s subsequent *Romantic Presences in the Twentieth Century* (2012) have insightfully discussed how a succession of principally canonical poets and novelists have responded to Romantic provocations, providing opportunities to “revisit those Romantic echoes which with ‘keener sounds’ reverberate” (Radford and Sandy 1). In *Legacies of Romanticism* (2012), Carmen Casaliggi, Paul March-Russell and their collaborators adroitly explore the ways in which “Romanticism has constituted, and been reconstituted by, subsequent developments in artistic theory and practice” (8). Jacques Khalip and Forest Pyle’s *Constellations of a Contemporary Romanticism* (2016) takes a more explicitly theory-led approach, with contributors examining from a range of angles the manners in which modern culture has been drawn to and illuminated by Romantic formations. In doing so, they laudably seek, in words developed from Walter Benjamin, “to make good on the terms of that [secret] agreement [between previous generations and current ones] . . . to conjure something mutually illuminating in the two-way street of past and present” (1). [↑](#endnote-ref-1)
2. In particular, a lot of excellent scholarship exploring historical consonances and artful anachronism has been published on *Romantic Circles*. We are very glad that our collection will join Laura Mandell and Michael Eberle-Sinatra’s 2002 Praxis volume [*Romanticism and Contemporary Culture*](https://romantic-circles.org/praxis/contemporary/index.html), whose contributors collaborated “to think about the similarities and differences between the fan’s love for pop culture and the academic’s love for literary history” (para. 3). Themes from this collection have recently been revisited in D.B. Ruderman and Rachel Feder’s 2017 Pedagogies Commons special issue [*Teaching Romanticism with the Contemporary*](https://romantic-circles.org/pedagogies/commons/contemporary), which collects approaches that “wield the contemporary to peel back the cloak of canonicity that sometimes obscures Romantic literary experiments, all the while making students better readers—indeed, Romanticist readers—of their own literary, cultural, and historical moments” (para. 2). See also Brian Bates’s 2020 edited volume on [*Keats in Popular Culture*](https://romantic-circles.org/praxis/popkeats). [↑](#endnote-ref-2)
3. The final five contributions to Steve Clark, Tristanne Connolly and Jason Whittaker’s *Blake 2.0* offer perceptive explorations of William Blake’s influence on music and musicians, and James Rovira’s recent *Rock and Romanticism* collections (2017 and 2018) trace a wide range of Romantic echoes in the music of the past sixty years. [↑](#endnote-ref-3)