



The Romantics - Audio

Romantic Authorship

Nicola Watson

I'm in conversation today with Professor Andrew Bennett from the University of Bristol who is a specialist in the Romantic period, and in particular a specialist in the idea of authorship in the Romantic period. I wanted to start, Andrew, with asking you what do you think the difference between an author and a writer is?

Andrew Bennett

Well I think it's important to understand that the two terms overlap and I don't think we should get too caught up in trying to distinguish them in a fundamental way. However, I think that it is useful to think about the writer as somebody who does something – who writes – and by contrast, the author who is also someone who, on the whole, writes, the author having a certain ideological privilege, a status, which is afforded the author and not necessarily afforded the writer.

Nicola Watson

So all writers are writers, but not all writers are authors?

Andrew Bennett

That's right, yes.

Nicola Watson

So how does a writer become an author?

Andrew Bennett

What we mean when we talk about an author, as I say, is some kind of privileged position. So we think of the author as expressing something that is unique and which is new or original. And we also tend to think of the author as having special powers which are associated with inspiration. What he or she is expressing, comes not only from the heart or from the soul, but also somehow from outside. So it's a very unique kind of role that the author plays in the Romantic period in particular.

Nicola Watson

So we can understand a poem or a piece of writing, or prose perhaps, more particularly through understanding the author or through invoking the author. But equally in that case, does it work in reverse? We get at the author via the piece of writing?

Andrew Bennett

I think both work, that's right, yes. So within this Romantic ideology, as Jerome McGann calls it, there develops an idea that what literature is about, particularly what poetry is about, is the expression of a subjectivity, the author's subjectivity, and that our job as readers is to relate the poem to that subjectivity.

Nicola Watson

So presumably by extension, one of the other effects of authorship is that after a bit you can relate different bits of writing by the same writer together as part of the same project of authorial subjectivity?

Andrew Bennett

That would be the case, yes, because what the author is doing is producing a series of pieces of poems, for example, which are all articulating himself, expressing himself or herself.

Nicola Watson

So that's why when one says 'I'm reading Wordsworth', you somehow conflate the author's name with all his poetry as a body of statement of Wordsworthness?

Andrew Bennett

That's a good way of putting it, yes.

Nicola Watson

My next question is: is this a new phenomenon in the Romantic period? Or has it always been like this?

Andrew Bennett

I think it's new in the sense that there's a new emphasis on the author and particularly on the poet. And I think we need to be talking about the poet as much as the author in this conversation, because it's the poet who is particularly privileged in terms of authorship in the Romantic period. Now what happens with writers like Wordsworth is that there's a new questioning and privileging of what it means to be a poet. This is most strikingly put, I think, in the 1802 version of Wordsworth's Preface to the *Lyrical Ballads*. Now what he does in this preface is, he says: this is a new kind of poetry that I'm writing. It's so new that you may not even recognise it as poetry. But what I therefore need to do is to try to talk about what we

mean by the word 'poetry'. But he then does a very interesting manoeuvre which is to say that in order to talk about what poetry is, I need to ask the question: what is a poet? And then he gives a series of answers to that question. The first thing he says is a poet is a man speaking to men. Now there's a gendered question which we might want to think about. But what he's saying is that a poet is an ordinary person speaking to other ordinary people. But then he immediately qualifies that and gives a series of, a list really, of qualities that a poet has, which is to do with having greater knowledge, greater sensibility, greater understanding and so on than ordinary people. So, I mean I think one of the interesting things about his answer to that question is that it's ambiguous. He's saying that the poet is both an ordinary person and somehow superior and different from other people. Now for me, that idea that you have to answer the question what is a poet, to think about what poetry is, is a new way of thinking about literature in general. And to the extent that that question becomes privileged, it seems to me we are dealing with something quite new. A new emphasis is put on the centrality of the identity of the poet in the Romantic period.

Nicola Watson

So I suppose the follow-on question that arises from that is whether there is an argument going on in the period about the nature of the Romantic poet or whether it's built around the sorts of models that Wordsworth sets up?

Andrew Bennett

Oh, I think there are all sorts of questions and arguments going on around the author and around the poet. Let me give you one example. There's a very powerful and influential strain of thought in the Romantic period which argues that the true poet or genius is unlikely to be fully appreciated in his or her own lifetime. And that argument even goes to the extent of saying that any poet or author that is recognised within his own lifetime is simply a popular poet who's probably not very good at poetry. Then this turns into an argument about the poet needing to be understood after his own death.

Nicola Watson

Thank you very much indeed for a fascinating analysis. Thank you very much indeed, Professor Bennett.