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# Romantics Find-A-Song Game: A Technique for Teaching Romantic Poetry in the College Classroom

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## **Romantics Find-A-Song Game: A Technique for Teaching Romantic Poetry in the College Classroom**

### **Introduction**

There are two things I need to introduce to begin here. The first is Jerome McGann's *Romantic Ideology* and some of the fundamental ideas it contains as far as Romantic scholarship and New Historicism are concerned. The second thing I need to introduce, and the central part of this essay, is how McGann's New Historicist position can inform practice in the classroom; indeed, how it must be, in some ways, *accommodated to* the classroom. Ultimately, the technique for teaching I am suggesting here is to get students more comfortable dealing with Romantic poetry by getting them to find modern popular songs in which they think similar themes, ideas, phrases, words, etc. are occurring. (While the example here uses Romantic poetry, I expect the technique can be adapted to any number of educational settings.) The need to think through the implications of the technique arises, in part, as we collapse the critical distance between reader/critic and text: the central issue at hand in McGann's New Historicist work. Thus, first introductions first:

### **New Historicism, Briefly**

In his 1983 *Romantic Ideology*, Jerome McGann put forward what has now become the core of the New Historicist argument to oppose certain formalist reading strategies on the one hand, and certain deconstructive reading strategies on the other. Actually, it is better to say, "to oppose Formalism and Deconstruction," because some of the "strategies" inherent in both of those critical schools are still a part of the New Historicist method. What McGann was working against was Formalism or Deconstruction as labels which were meant to define "schools" of criticism. Classification inevitably limits the activities of academic scholarship by defining a set of procedures which are "okay" to practice while excluding others as faulty or faulted. New Historicism has, indeed, become its own "school" of literary criticism which has ultimately limited its usefulness in some ways. Yet some of its strategies are, I think, crucial to academic scholarship.

In particular (and as the name suggests), New Historicism attends primarily to historical and cultural determinants as they inform, not just as they are "reflected by," a text. The notion of texts simply reflecting cultural conditions does not do justice the power that those conditions have over the text. Culture and history are not just background to a text; they are deeply embedded in the production, and re-production, of that text by author, editor, printer, bookseller, book-buyer, and so on.

What McGann argues against fundamentally are those instances when "Literary criticism presents its results in finished and comprehensive forms, sometimes even in transcendental and non-historical forms" (28). For McGann, and for New Historicism, there are no such things as non-historical forms; there are only those forms which ignore history. The irony of historically ignorant criticism, following McGann's argument, is that it often adopts, without critical inquiry or awareness, the very "Romantic ideology" implicit in its subject. That is, criticism which treats itself as un- or a-historical, and thereby ideology-free, will naturally assume its subject to be equally transcendent of ideology, and equally removed from history. Ironically, such criticism will, at the same time that it ignores historical influence, take its subject matter as perfectly reflective of a particular historical or cultural "moment." In the same flattening procedure which reduces sets of strategies from, say, new historicist strategies to the limiting "school" of New Historicism, the poetry, or sometimes *a* poem, by Wordsworth, for example, comes to stand for--to reflect without distortion--an era which we call "the Romantic." However, as new historical strategies remind us, Wordsworth was as much embedded in the competing ideologies, cultural movements, and historical assumptions of his time, as any critic is in his or her own time. And thus, to take Wordsworth (or any other artist) as somehow *above* his (or her) own historical moment, is to elide that moment's deep influence on any level of the process of textual formation, production and reproduction.

What McGann is quick to note is that while some critical methods take their subject as ideologically transcendent, the subject itself is often emphatically self-reflexive about its own historical position. Romantic poetry especially is often about the act of living and writing poetry at a certain time and place. McGann writes of certain Romantic works, "[they] transcend their age and speak to alien cultures because they are so completely true to themselves, because

they are time and place specific, because they are--from our point of view--*different*" (2). It is problematic, for McGann, that certain scholarship erases this difference by uncritically adopting the ideological assumptions of its subject.

The emphasis of new historicist strategies is to demarcate and emphasize the differences between, say, Wordsworth's ideological, historical and cultural assumptions in *Tintern Abbey* and our own historical moment. Indeed, what does it mean that vagrants were forced to seek shelter in a ruined abbey, yet they do not appear in a poem which takes, as one of its central images, that abbey? The "vagrants" in the poem are curiously erased from the scene, or at least cast as "dwellers," and Wordsworth only presumes their presence in the woods because of "wreaths of smoke / Sent up, in silence, from among the trees!" (17-18). Kenneth R. Johnston writes, "I think he [Wordsworth] went to great lengths...to prevent such powerful associations and experiences [Tintern Abbey as a beggars' camp] from overbearing his poem, by recasting such beggars as 'vagrant dwellers in the houseless woods,' and further distancing them into the Hermit at home in his cave, where he belongs, sitting by his fire, alone" (128).

I must be clear though; the point is not that Wordsworth *should have* clearly represented the vagrants in the abbey and the economic conditions in pre-industrial England that forced them there--this is not Johnston's argument either--but just that Wordsworth didn't. And one must remember, as the formalist proponents of close reading will remind us, that Wordsworth is not *in* the abbey itself, but rather, as the title makes clear, *A Few Miles Above Tintern Abbey*.

The point that I think is most important to learn from McGann generally (Johnston specifically) and to apply here is that Wordsworth, in *Tintern Abbey* is not reflecting *the* historical and cultural moment (or, indeed, "H"istory). He is reflecting, or better yet representing, *his* moment. And it is a fleeting moment at best. The poem itself is an exploration of these moments, and is clearly informed by Wordsworth's sense of unease with what seems the quick passage of moments. Thus he repeats in the opening lines:

*Five* year have passed; *five* summers, with the length of *five* lone winters! and *again* I hear (ll.1-2; my italics)

New historicist strategies have been much maligned, I think, because they are misunderstood (and sometimes mis-applied by certain critics). Again, the argument is not necessarily that Wordsworth *should have* written a poem about how the material affects of pre-industrial economic reforms were impacting the Lake District in England. What the new historicist argument reminds us is that critics must be *aware* of the historical and cultural context that is *not in* Wordsworth's poem, but that no less informed his writing of that poem.

Where New Historicism has rightfully been taken to task is in its assumption that scholars may ever know "history" or "culture" in any way, or from any source, more "real" than what is presented, say, in Wordsworth. That is, it is clearly a fallacy to assume that there is some "actual" historical context, complete and un-ideological itself, to which we, as readers removed from our subject, might have access. Even if there were some way of constructing, or what will always be re-constructing, an historical and cultural setting which influences and penetrates the creation of a poem like *Tintern Abbey*, it is impossible to think that that re-construction will ever be complete, or, indeed, any less influenced by ideological, cultural and historical assumptions than the art which it surrounds and informs. History will always be a textual re-construction. Even Johnston, in reading for certain absences in Wordsworth, turns to William Gilpin's *Observations on the River Wye* (1781), itself, no more necessarily "real" than Wordsworth's perspective. That Gilpin's work was promoted as a guidebook where Wordsworth's is named as poetry cannot suggest to us, as critical readers, that Gilpin is any less ideologically influenced, or any less subjective, than Wordsworth. Indeed, thanks to the picturesque ideals Gilpin helped so much to shape, wealthy landowners often invited "hermits" to live on their land (as one would buy cattle or build a stream) to give their estate a rustic and rural--a picturesque--feel. The point is that one "history" must always gloss other histories, such that absences and elisions in one author (Wordsworth, for example) will appear as such thanks to inclusions by other authors (like Gilpin). Again, the crucial element in McGann's new historical method is to maintain the distance between critic and subject almost, it seems, in order that such contextual readings as Johnston performs are possible thanks to the broad prospect that distance allows.

Which all leads me into the core of the present essay: the Romantics Find-a-Song-Game. I will address the importance of "theorizing" the game later, but here is the game itself.

### **The Romantics Find-a-Song-Game**

Students are required simply to find a modern song which they think contains some of the same words, phrase, ideas or themes they have seen occurring in Romantic poetry they've been reading for the class. I leave the song genre open, but I suggest that "popular music," broadly defined, is the best place to go for students; since it is the genre students seem most familiar with anyway, most end up going there without prompting. The idea though, is for students to explore a genre that is apparently *different* from the Romantic genre. Thus some clever student might, someday, find a German *lieder* by Beethoven in translation and use that, which would defeat the purpose of the game. It hasn't happened to me yet, but where creative students are concerned, never say never.

As for the name, the "Romantics Find-a-Song-Game," I chose to leave it in the ungainly and ugly sounding form it first took. For whatever reason, the "ugly" title seems to stick better in students' minds than anything "clever" I've come up with. Or maybe the other titles just weren't that clever. Regardless, what you call the assignment is of little relevance. Students do seem to embrace the idea of a "game," I think because, especially in humanities classes like English, the "point" of what we do is not always readily apparent. In playing a "game," there are clear rules to be followed which make the game work, and there is a definite goal at the end of the game. One might, I guess, argue that playing a "game" in a college class is too informal a thing to be doing. But I think really that college classes sometimes need to be more serious only in the teaching-method sense and more playful in the intellectual sense. As in any sport, there are rules which must be in place for the game to function. But within that grid there is almost limitless potential for new and creative things to happen: a good model, I think, for the college classroom.

The context in which I've used the game is in teaching ENC 1102, Writing About Literature, at the University of Florida. It has worked equally well in classes of over 30 students and classes of under 15. The Find-a-Song-Game generally comes at the end of a section on reading in the Romantics like Keats, Blake, and others. (The prose of Dorothy Wordsworth or

Maria Edgeworth can work as well.) I find that assigning the game early in what may be a 3 or 4 week section on the Romantics gives students the opportunity to be listening as we read, and searching outside of class, for a good poem-song match. It is all too clear when a student has either picked one song and has refused to budge from that choice, or has picked a song that doesn't really work, but has run out of time to find another. The result is a poem-song "match" wherein the parallels are so broad so as to be of little learning value. Students can be easily frustrated in this case, especially if their classmates have hit on poem-song combinations that really work.

Having given the assignment early, it is not really necessary to dwell on it directly in class, which can often limit reading to one purpose: i.e. reading every poem with a certain song in mind. What the assignment leads up to in my classes though is a day or two of student presentations wherein students must bring in a copy of their chosen song to play for the class, along with a hand-out for each of their classmates which lays out the parallels they've found between the pop song and the Romantic poem. Ideally (and this is something I make clear on the assignment sheet) students are to find actual *words and phrases* that show up in both poem and song, and not just ideas or themes, since "idea" and "theme" can become so broad as to include just about any piece of art a student might bring into class. Suddenly Jimmy Buffet and William Wordsworth become like intellectual twins separated at birth.

Part of what is great about the game is that students seem to really like bringing in "their own" music to share with classmates--that is, music they like personally. I'm sure they experience much of what I experience in introducing students to an artist that I particularly like, whom they've perhaps never met before. And even students who use pop-music with which everyone is very familiar have a sense, I think, that they are opening up the "familiar" in a way that other students hadn't considered before. Thus it is a crucial part of the assignment that students must bring their music in to play for the class. A word of warning though: do not try to get students to listen to entire songs. What might work as a 3 minute radio hit, can drag interminably in a 50 minute class. And, operationally speaking, if you have 30 presenters, that's a lot of minutes listening. In the same way that students are asked to quote sources in their essays, I ask them to pick "highlights" from the music--to "quote" by playing a revealing bit.

(Thus, make sure the CD player you bring in for students to use has a Forward and Reverse search that doesn't just skip from track to track.)

### **Conclusion: Theorizing the Game**

McGann writes, in *Romantic Ideology*,

We may take it as a rule, then, that any criticism which abolishes the distance between its own (present) setting and its (removed) subject matter--any criticism which argues an unhistorical symmetry between the practicing critic and the descending work--will be, to that extent, undermined as criticism. (30)

When I wrote above that what needs to be treated more seriously in the classroom is "teaching-method," I meant that perhaps teachers themselves need to spend more time thinking about and theorizing their own methods. This means, sometimes, little more than asking questions like "why am I teaching the way I am teaching?" "what implications does it have?" and/or "what are the goals?" And certainly there are others worth asking. The point of introducing McGann here and theorizing what otherwise seems a pretty simple classroom game, is that there are certainly consequences in teaching Romantic poetry in a way that asks students to collapse the distance between contemporary and Romantic contexts. As McGann makes clear, criticism that unthinkingly abolishes distance undermines itself as criticism, in that it no longer shows an awareness for the cultural and historical factors which are influencing a certain work.

In that I believe strongly in the core argument McGann puts forward, yet I also believe in the effectiveness of the Find-a-Song-Game, I really felt it necessary to ask myself if these two things weren't at cross-purposes. And, in fact, I don't think they are. Firstly, and most obviously, McGann is dealing with "criticism," by which I think he means scholarly work for publication meant to inform and extend a certain body of existing scholarship. While instructors might teach a certain kind of criticism in the classroom, I don't think it is quite the same kind that McGann has in mind. The crucial difference is that in the classroom, teachers are introducing students to an existing body of scholarship and, for the most part, asking students to be able to enter into the kinds of debates and exchanges that occur within that body. Students, especially those in introductory courses are not really expected to be extending scholarship in the same

way that publishing scholars (or the "critics" of whom McGann writes) are expected to. This is especially true in teaching something like the "Romantics": an area in which existing scholarship forms a corpus almost as imposing in its breadth as the Romantic corpus itself. Also, in teaching Romantic works themselves, students are generally expected more to develop the ability to react to the works and construct arguments based on close reading strategies, than they are expected to extend scholarship on those works. Thus collapsing critical distance in something like the Find-a-Song-Game benefits students more than it undermines criticism, especially if the game can open poetry up to students who otherwise find it *too* distant and foreign a subject.

At the same time, however, there is nothing to say that once students bring popular music and Romantic poetry together, that collapsed distance cannot be reopened. Indeed, reopening distance that had appeared to be closed might render subtle differences between contemporary and past contexts all the more substantial. For example, suppose a student found a parallel between a Romantic poem like Blake's "London" and the modern song "Subdivisions" by Rush. Blake writes, "I wander thro' each charter'd street, / Near where the charter'd Thames does flow" (Erdman, 26). Through the repetition of "charter'd," Blake reminds us that the city of London is becoming organized and gridded by a power that is not the speaker's own. Indeed, the term harkens back to the British Magna Carta (or "Charta"), a document much debated in Blake's cultural milieu: part 2 of Paine's *Rights of Man*, for example (Peterfreund, 107). Many argued that the rights *granted* by the Magna Carta were not those which could be granted at all, but were rather intrinsic and automatic for all people. I would direct interested readers to Heather Glen's reading of "London" in her *Vision and Disenchantment*: one of many excellent sources for readings of Blake's work. The point here is that Blake's poem is very much about power, and how power organizes material places like cities, and finally, how that organization affects the speaker who wanders through the city. Rush's "Subdivisions," speaks of "geometric order" and the "insulated border[s]" of the subdivisions, "sprawling on the fringes of the city." "Opinions all provided, the future pre-decided, detached and subdivided, in the mass production zone...Nowhere is the dreamer or the misfit so alone." One finds in both poem and song, artists exploring the deep connection between material, city surroundings and individuals within those surroundings. Blake's

*chartered streets* and Rush's *provided opinions* and *geometric order* share some connection as expressions of control and power located beyond the individual speaker.<sup>(1)</sup>

But having succeeded in collapsing the distance between a poem written circa 1793, and a song written circa 1982, there is nothing to say that re-opening that distance cannot provide even more and new insight. What is the *difference* then, between a 20th century city and 18th century London? Why doesn't Blake deal with subdivisions? Why weren't there subdivision in Blake's time? Or, are the speakers in the two works similar or different? This last question might lead back to Blake's poem and a discussion of the "mind-forg'd manacles" that the speaker recognizes versus the "Subdivisions" speaker's seeming acceptance of the pre-decided future. What are the implications for agency here?

Ultimately then, I think that the Find-a-Song Game works very well to involve students in making a connection to certain Romantic works that will inevitably work on an individual basis, since the connection is forged through their own personal contemporary tastes in music. And while I think the game is a very effective teaching technique, I have also spent some time here theorizing its implications, especially in terms of its greatest danger: collapsing and entirely eliding the distance between reader and subject. This danger is mitigated in two ways. Firstly, we must remember that as teachers, especially those in introductory courses, we cannot hold students to the same kinds of expectations that critics are held to, in terms of maintaining critical distance or managing a breadth of cultural, contextualizing knowledge. And secondly, there is nothing to say that after the introductions are over, students might re-open the distance they've closed through a consideration of larger contextual issues: questioning the nature of 18th and 20th century cities, for example.

To conclude, I can personally speak for the effectiveness of the Find-a-Song-Game in getting students more comfortable in dealing with subject matter that might, at first, seem to them remote and therefore of little personal and social relevance. However, in asking students to consider how "distant" Romantic themes, ideas, and phrases persist in contemporary popular music, with which students inevitably feel more comfortable and connected, what at first might feel remote can be made to speak more clearly and more directly. Involving students in their own education (and, indeed, bringing new ideas to other students through class

presentations) seems fulfilling for them, since it gives them a sense of responsibility and effectiveness in the classroom. But just because the game "works," that is, it meets the goals I want it to, does not mean it, or any other classroom technique, should go untheorized and unquestioned. If nothing else, asking questions of classroom methods should serve to make those methods continually more effective.

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1. I leave it for others to find further connections in this example (there are many), and other examples entirely.

**By:** Jason Snart

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