“Bliss was it in that dawn to be alive” (Wordsworth, The Prelude). The years following and immediately preceding the French Revolution witnessed a radical transformation--beginning in France, Germany, and England, but soon spreading to the entire Western world--in the way people understood their relationship to nature, to one another, and most fundamentally to themselves. Together with rapid changes in economic conditions, revolutionary developments in philosophy, theology, aesthetics, and political theory, which collectively go under the label “Romanticism,” created the basic system of values and beliefs with which we still live today. Among writers in particular, a new emphasis on subjectivity and self-consciousness, on inwardness and intuition, encouraged genres such as lyric and autobiography and modes such as the fantastic that privileged self-expression over imitation, sentiment over satire, and imagination over reason. Even when the optimism and energy unleashed by the Revolution withered before a resurgence of political conservatism, writers continued to draw inspiration from the memory of that dawn which this course will try to recapture.

Readings are likely to include texts by Rousseau, Chateaubriand, Goethe, August and Friedrich Schlegel, Kleist, Hoffmann, and the English poets. About half the course will be devoted to close reading of major poets (above all, Blake, Wordsworth, and Shelley). Written work: two medium-length papers and a final exam.