

Imagined Bodies and the Individual

A preoccupation with matters of the mind, the body and the soul fuelled artistic visions of the individual: imagined and real.

The Romantic period saw the birth of a distinctively modern interest in the individual self. Unsurprisingly, then, it also produced the first recorded use of the word 'autobiography'. The individual self could be real or imagined, viewed from within and observed from without. William Wordsworth devoted thousands of words to exploring the origins of his own creativity in *The Prelude*. Some of his contemporaries took a different path and anatomised the lives of others, both the living and the dead. The Poet Laureate Robert Southey wrote a best-selling edition and biographical memoir of the Nottingham-born poet Henry Kirke White, who had died whilst a Cambridge undergraduate. Imagined bodies

The Reunion of the Soul & the Body. Etching by Louis Schiavonetti from original designs by William Blake from *The Grave, A poem* by Robert Blair (1813). Special Collection Oversize, PR3318.B7.G7



Frontispiece in *The history of the Devil, ancient & modern* by Daniel Defoe (1815). Special Collection, PR3404.H5

and spectres also had their day. William Blake reimagined national bodies in his epic poem *Jerusalem: The Emanation of the Giant Albion* and an 1815 edition of Daniel Defoe's *A Political History of the Devil* showed how

religious controversies and demons of the previous century could be repurposed for an age that saw heated debates about freedom of belief. For writers and artists such as Blake, musings on the individual could assume a distinctly metaphysical dimension, a means of reimagining the possible 'reunion of the soul and body' after death. Yet there were also those who were concerned about the destructive potential of the Romantic anatomisation of the self. They deplored the contemporary obsession with the lives of others and, seeking security after death, invested in patent coffins that claimed to guarantee the safety of the individual's corpse from the predations of grave robbers.



What is a Wife & What is a Harlot? William Blake's Plate 57 in *Jerusalem, A facsimile of the illuminated book* (1951). Special Collection Oversize X, PR4144.J4