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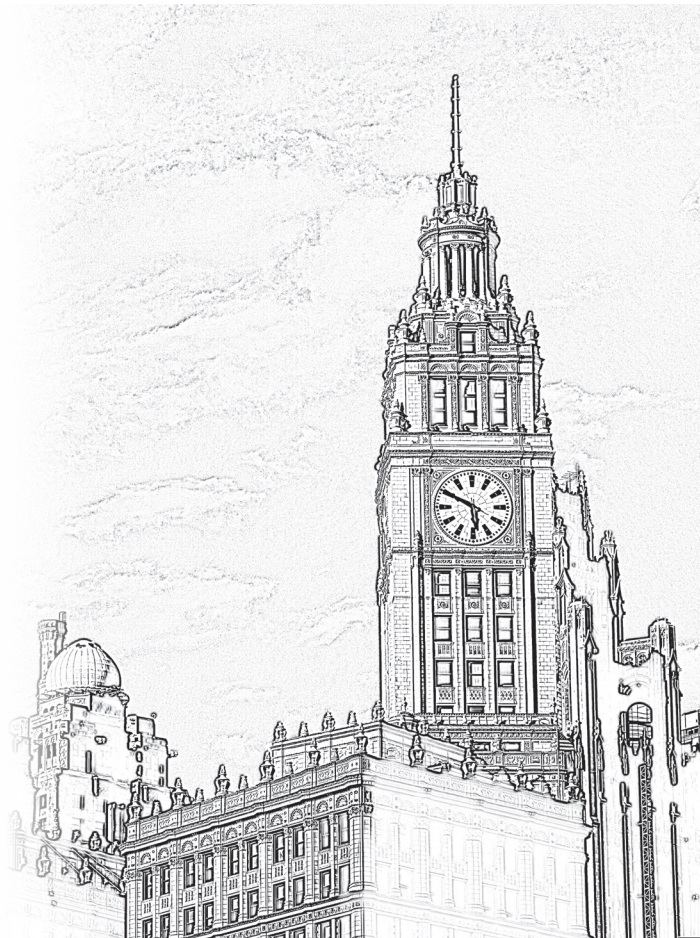
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Part VII

*The First Half of the 19th Century:
The Romantic Period*



Introduction

Romanticism is a movement that flourished in literature, philosophy, music and art in Western culture during most of the 19th century, beginning as a revolt against classicism. There have been many varieties of romanticism in many fields and places at different times.

As a literary movement (1798–1832), romanticism came into being in England in the latter half of the 18th century, represented by William Blake and Robert Burns, the spirit of the pre-romanticism.

As is known to all, literature develops with the development of the society and gets strong influences from other social ideologies, especially from politics. Literature reflects or imitates social life, people's mentality and the mental attitudes of a time and a nation. The class struggles and social upheavals also motivate the development of literature. But the most important and decisive factor in the development of literature is economics. These are true of the literature of all countries. The English romanticism is no exception. It was greatly influenced by the Industrial Revolution and the French Revolution.

After the Industrial Revolution that began in the 1760s, Britain became a "workshop of the world" and the English bourgeoisie fattened on world trade, plunder and colonisation. Britain was becoming a powerful country and called itself "an empire where the sun would never set". No country was strong enough to compete with it. The Industrial Revolution pushed the bourgeoisie to the dominant position in the country. It became the ruling class. The aristocratic class retained some prestige and influence in social life and was still prominent in the Parliament and bureaucracy, but had to submit to the rising, powerful bourgeoisie. As the victim of the Enclosure Movement, the peasants became landless and had to find new ways of living. They became hired workers in the countryside and cities. Thus, a new class, proletariat, had sprung into existence. All the working people lived in dreadful poverty. They were mercilessly exploited and in some places sixteen hours' labour would hardly pay for the daily bread. The bourgeoisie got richer and richer while the labourers became poorer and poorer. It was under this unbearable economic condition that the workers' struggle broke out, finding expression in the spontaneous movement of the Luddites, or "frame-breakers" who broke their masters' weaving machines to show their hatred of the capitalists and capitalist exploitation.

The French Revolution that took place on July 14, 1789 was a great event in Europe. The heavily-exploited Parisian people rose and stormed the Bastille, the symbol of feudalism. The Revolution destroyed the feudal economic base, with its influence sweeping all over Europe.



It is almost impossible for those who had no knowledge of the world history of this period to imagine the extraordinary effect of the French Revolution on the life and thought of England in both cultural and political terms.

The French Revolution proclaimed the natural rights of man and the abolition of class distinctions. In Britain the labouring people and the progressive intellectuals hailed the French Revolution and its principle. Clubs and societies such as the London Corresponding Society and other radical organisations multiplied in Britain, all asserting the doctrine of “liberty, equality and fraternity”, the watchword of the Revolution. The Revolution had such a strong influence that many writers such as William Blake, Robert Burns, George Gordon Byron, Percy Bysshe Shelley, Charles Lamb and even William Wordsworth and Samuel Taylor Coleridge, to mention a few, got their inspirations from it and wrote beautiful poems or prose. Wordsworth was at first very much excited by the Revolution and had been to France twice. Even after he had lost faith and hope and gained a comfortable income, Wordsworth, when writing about the Revolution, would still say, “Bliss was it in that dawn to be alive, / But to be young was very heaven.”

The French Revolution inspired the working (labouring) people and the progressive intellectuals of Britain, but it scared the bourgeoisie, especially its upper stratum, who allowed and had their own revolution but could not bear the idea of another nation having its own revolution. The British government regarded the French Republic as a most dangerous enemy which threatened its very existence with its revolutionary ideas that often spread quickly. Under the banner of patriotism and fighting “Jacobinism”, the British government supported and joined the “Holy Alliance” formed in 1815 by the rulers of Russia, Austria and Prussia to suppress the democratic revolutionary movement in Europe. By doing this, the British government turned men’s thoughts from their own to their neighbour’s affairs and so prevented a threatened revolution at home. The reactionary measures of the British government resulted in the notorious “Peterloo Massacre” in 1819 at St. Peter’s Fields, Manchester, when hundreds of workers were killed and wounded by the troops during a mass rally demanding political reform for which the working people had been fighting for many years.

The political writings of the time also reflected the acute struggle. Edmund Burke spoke against the French Revolution and sang elegies for the downfall of the royalty in France. He wrote a pamphlet entitled *Reflections on the Revolution in France* (1790), which soon became an anti-revolutionary manifesto for all reactionaries in Europe. In his picture of the sufferings of French royalty and nobility, as Thomas Paine said, “He pitied the plumage and forgot the dying bird.” In answer to this, Thomas Paine, the radical pamphleteer who had always been fighting for freedom, wrote *The Rights of Man*, in which he advocated that politics was the business of the whole mass of common people instead of a governing oligarchy. People would not like a government that failed to secure people “life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness”. People had the right to overthrow such a government, if necessary, by revolution. This pamphlet, coming so soon after the destruction of the Bastille, added fuel to the flames kindled

in Britain by the French Revolution. *The Rights of Man* was banned and Thomas Paine was found guilty of treason. The government wanted to arrest him. Fortunately, the accused was not taken prisoner. He did not attend the trial for he had been warned by William Blake of the likelihood of immediate arrest and, instead of returning to his lodgings where the police waited with a warrant, had escaped to France.

The English people became more and more dissatisfied with the reality of their country. Fighting for “liberty, equality and fraternity” also became their national spirit and they never stopped demanding reform for many years to come.

Some reforms had been made in England since 1815. The destruction of the African slave trade, the mitigation of horribly unjust laws, which included poor debtors and petty criminals in the same class, the prevention of child labour, the freedom of the press, the extension of manhood suffrage, the abolition of restrictions against Catholics in the Parliament, the establishment of hundreds of popular schools, under the leadership of Andrew Bell and Joseph Lancaster, to mention but a few of the reforms which marked the progress of civilisation in a single half century. The Reform Bill of 1832 shifted the centre of political power to the middle class.

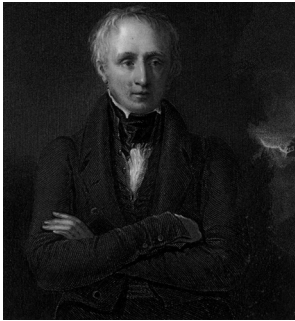
It was amid these social conflicts mentioned above that romanticism arose as a main literary trend, which prevailed in England during the period of 1798–1832, beginning with the publication of Wordsworth’s *Lyrical Ballads* (1798), ending with Walter Scott’s death (1832).

The age of Wordsworth was decidedly an age of poetry. Its great men of genius were mostly eminent in the poetical field. Distinction was more easily achieved in poetry than in prose. The general taste was decidedly set in the poetic direction. This fact helped to mark it as the second great age in English literary history, for poetry was the highest form of literary expression, and poetry seemed to have been most in harmony with the noblest powers of the English genius, just as the young enthusiasts turned naturally to poetry and singing as happy men in the Elizabethan Age. The glory of the age of Wordsworth was in the poetry of Scott, Wordsworth, Coleridge, Byron, Shelley, Keats, Moore and Southey. Of its prose works, those of Scott alone had attained a very wide reading, though the essays of Charles Lamb and the novels of Jane Austen had also slowly won for their authors a secure place in the history of English literature. Coleridge and Southey (who with Wordsworth formed the trio of so-called Lake Poets) wrote far more prose than poetry; Southey’s prose was much better than his verse. There was also a noteworthy development of the novel which was already beginning to establish itself as the favourite literary form of the 19th century. Drama was the only great literary form that was not adequately represented. Many of the great poets, as well as other writers, tried their hands at dramatic work; but there was probably not a single great drama in the stricter sense of the term. The best that we can say is that there was some really noble poetry written in nominally dramatic form. There were many excellent writers, and there was a vast body of excellent works in a wonderful variety of forms.

Chapter 1

William Wordsworth

Life and Works



William Wordsworth (1770–1850) was born in a lawyer's family in Cockermouth, Cumberland. He was brought up by relatives who sent him to school at Hawkshead in the beautiful Lake District in Northwestern England, where he spent his happy school days. Out of school hours, he was free and read widely. He also roamed over the mountains. The beauty of nature attracted him so greatly that nature became his best teacher as he said or implied in many of his poems. The flowers, hills, stars, birds and all things of nature were of greater fascination to him. The constant sight of beautiful nature of the Lake District awoke love and reverence in him. Little by little, the glories of nature grew upon him, until his soul seemed flooded with unutterable delight. This profound passion was fostered by his life in these early years, and grew steadily with his youth. This is why he later wrote a lot of nature poems and was called a nature poet.

At seventeen, in 1787, he went to Cambridge. During the four years there, he was influenced by the young republicans there and was politically enthusiastic about and sympathetic with the French Revolution (1789). He visited France twice, the first time in 1790, the second time in 1792. For economic reasons and relationship with his relatives, he had to leave France in 1792. Of course, his poems of this period had a lot of democratic ideas. With the establishment of the Jacobin dictatorship and the rise of Napoleon in France, Wordsworth lost his former political fervour and changed his attitude towards the Revolution.

In 1795 he and his sister Dorothy settled at Racedom in Somersetshire. A bequest of £900 relieved the financial strain which had caused him anxiety, and secured for him and his sister a modest maintenance. He later accepted the office of a distributor of stamps and was made Poet Laureate. He and his sister passed the rest of their lives in the Lake District, except occasional tours. The two places most associated with him are Grasmere, where he wrote the best of his poetry between the years 1798 and 1808, and Rydal Mount, where he lived in his later years.

His sister Dorothy, as an adviser and commentator of William's poems, helped him a lot in his poetic creation. She won him back from his hopelessness over the Revolution and urged upon him the duty of devoting himself to poetry. Their favourite pastime was walking. To remember one walking, Dorothy wrote a very good journal and Wordsworth wrote "I Wandered Lonely as a Cloud", the famous poem in which he said that nature was the cure of loneliness and solitude.

It was in 1797 that Wordsworth made friends with Coleridge and a year later they jointly published the *Lyrical Ballads*. The majority of poems in this collection were written by Wordsworth. Many of Wordsworth's poems were devoted to the position of landless and homeless peasants ("Michael", "The Brothers", "The Old Cumberland Beggar" and others). Sincerely sympathising with the poor, he criticised capitalism severely. Coleridge's chief contribution was his masterpiece *The Rime of the Ancient Mariner*.

Brief Comment

Wordsworth was a spokesman for the common people. He wrote for them and about them, by using their language. He said, "The principle object—was to choose incidents and situations from common life, and to relate or describe them, throughout, as far as was possible in a selection of language really used by men..." To obtain such situations, "Humble and rustic life was generally chosen, because, in that condition, the essential passions of the heart find a better soil in which they can attain their maturity, are less under restraint, and speak a plainer and more emphatic language; because in that condition of life our elementary feelings coexist in a state of greater simplicity, and, consequently, may be more accurately contemplated, and more forcibly communicated; because the manners of rural life germinate from those elementary feelings, and from the necessary character of rural occupations, are more easily comprehended, and are more durable; and, lastly, because in that condition the passions of men are incorporated with the beautiful and permanent forms of nature."

Wordsworth had his own principle of poetry. He declared that "all good poetry is the spontaneous overflow of powerful feeling" and "takes its origin from emotion recollected in tranquillity". He appealed directly to individual sensations, i.e. pleasure, excitement and enjoyment as the foundation in the creation and appreciation of poetry. The function of poetry lies in its power to give an unexpected splendour to familiar and commonplace things, to "incidents and situations from common life". All kinds of people, ordinary peasants, children, even outcasts, can enter poetry.

As to language used in poetry, he advocated using the language of the common people. In his poems he aimed at simplicity and purity of the language, fighting against the conventional forms of the 18th-century poetry. A passionate lover of nature, his descriptions of lakes and rivers, of meadows and woods, of skies and clouds are exquisite.

Wordsworth wrote a great many poems, fresh in imagination, simple, plain and vivid in language but profound in meaning. He was especially good at writing about nature, childhood memories and common people. Hence he was called the poet of nature. His later major works, to mention a few here, include “Lines Composed a Few Miles Above Tintern Abbey”, “Lucy Poems”, “Ode to Duty”, *The Excursion* and *The Prelude*. He also wrote a lot of sonnets.

Selections

She Dwelt Among the Untrodden Ways

She dwelt among the untrodden ways
Beside the springs of Dove¹,
A Maid whom there were none to praise
And very few to love:

A violet by a mossy stone 5
Half hidden from the eye!
—Fair as a star, when only one
Is shining in the sky.

She lived unknown, and few could know 10
When Lucy ceased to be;
But she is in her grave, and, oh,
The difference to me!

Notes

1. There are several rivers by this name in England, including one in the Lake District.

For Study and Discussion

1. In this poem, the setting is the untrodden ways. Why did the maid live there? Is it because she loved nature? Was she poor? Was she alone or with her parents? Why did few people praise or love her? The language is simple, but it is hard to understand. Why did the poet write about such a girl?
2. The second stanza is especially touching when the poet compares the girl to a violet. It reminds readers of the image of the lady in Bai Juyi’s poem (白居易《琵琶行》) in which there are two lines “千呼万唤始出来，犹抱琵琶半遮面”. Compare the above two lines with: “A violet by a mossy stone / Half hidden from the eye!” What feeling can you get when you read them?

3. In the poem, the poet compares Lucy to a violet and a star at the same time. Is she properly compared? Don't you think there is irony here? Why does the poet use the two images to depict Lucy?
4. What is the rhyme scheme of this poem?

I Wandered Lonely as a Cloud¹

I wandered lonely as a cloud
 That floats on high o'er vales and hills,
 When all at once I saw a crowd,
 A host, of golden daffodils;
 Beside the lake, beneath the trees, 5
 Fluttering and dancing in the breeze.

Continuous as the stars that shine
 And twinkle on the milky way,
 They stretched in never-ending line
 Along the margin of a bay: 10
 Ten thousand saw I at a glance,
 Tossing their heads in sprightly dance.

The waves beside them danced; but they
 Out-did the sparkling waves in glee:
 A poet could not but be gay, 15
 In such a jocund company:
 I gazed—and gazed—but little thought
 What wealth the show to me had brought:

For oft, when on my couch I lie
 In vacant or in pensive mood, 20
 They flash upon that inward eye
 Which is the bliss of solitude;
 And then my heart with pleasure fills,
 And dances with the daffodils.



Notes

1. According to Dorothy's description in *Grasmere Journals* for April 15, 1802, she and Wordsworth took a walk that day and came across a belt of daffodils. Two years later, Wordsworth recollected that experience in tranquility and wrote down this poem.

For Study and Discussion

1. This poem best represents the poet's central idea of his creative process—"emotion recollected in tranquility". What do you think of this idea?
2. In this poem, the image of cloud is outstanding and important, so is the image of daffodils. In some sense, they form a contrast: the cloud is lonely and the daffodils are happy. How do they contribute to expressing the mood of the poet?
3. In the third stanza, the poet does not use "I". Instead, he says "A poet could not but be gay". Why does he use "a poet" to stand for "I"? Can you find such phenomena in other poems, either Chinese or foreign?
4. What is the rhyme scheme of this poem? Learn the first stanza by heart.

Sonnet: Composed upon Westminster Bridge

September 3, 1802¹

Earth has not anything to show more fair:
 Dull would he be of soul who could pass by
 A sight so touching in its majesty:
 This City now doth, like a garment, wear
 The beauty of the morning; silent, bare, 5
 Ships, towers, domes, theaters, and temples lie
 Open unto the fields, and to the sky;
 All bright and glittering in the smokeless air.
 Never did sun more beautifully steep
 In his first splendor, valley, rock, or hill; 10
 Ne'er saw I, never felt, a calm so deep!
 The river glideth at his own sweet will:
 Dear God! the very houses seem asleep;
 And all that mighty heart is lying still!



Notes

1. The date of this experience was not Sept. 3, but July 31, 1802. Its occasion was a trip to France. See Dorothy Wordsworth's *Grasmere Journals* for July, 1802. The conflict of feelings attending Wordsworth's brief return to France, where he had supported the French Revolution, evoked a number of personal and political sonnets.

For Study and Discussion

1. In the hands of romantic poets, sonnet began to take the task of expressing the poets' feelings about nature and other things rather than merely love. From this sonnet, what can you get about the poet's feeling about London?
2. At what time of the day does the poet write this poem? Find the words that can give you the hint.
3. If you were asked to learn some lines by heart, which lines would you choose? Why?

The Solitary Reaper¹

Behold her, single in the field,
Yon solitary Highland Lass!
Reaping and singing by herself;
Stop here, or gently pass!
Alone she cuts and binds the grain, 5
And sings a melancholy strain;
O listen! for the Vale profound
Is overflowing with the sound.

No Nightingale did ever chaunt
More welcome notes to weary bands 10
Of travellers in some shady haunt,
Among Arabian sands:
A voice so thrilling ne'er was heard
In spring-time from the Cuckoo-bird,
Breaking the silence of the seas 15
Among the farthest Hebrides.

Will no one tell me what she sings?²
Perhaps the plaintive numbers flow



For old, unhappy, far-off things,
And battles long ago: 20
Or is it some more humble lay,
Familiar matter of to-day?
Some natural sorrow, loss, or pain,
That has been, and may be again?

Whate'er the theme, the Maiden sang 25
As if her song could have no ending;
I saw her singing at her work,
And o'er the sickle bending;—
I listened, motionless and still;
And, as I mounted up the hill, 30
The music in my heart I bore,
Long after it was heard no more.

Notes

1. This is one of the rare poems which were not based on Wordsworth's own experience. Wordsworth said that it was suggested by a passage in Thomas Wilkinson's *Tours to the British Mountains* (1824), which he had seen in manuscript: "Passed by a female who was reaping alone: she sung in Erse (the Gaelic language of Scotland) as she bended over her sickle; the sweetest human voice I ever heard: her strains were tenderly melancholy, and felt delicious, long after they were heard no more."
2. The poet does not understand Erse, the language in which she sings.

For Study and Discussion

1. Since this poem is not one based on the poet's own experience, why does the poet write this poem? What does he want to express in this poem?
2. What impresses the poet the most?
3. The poet even could not understand what she sings. How can the singing touch him? What view of life does the poem reflect?
4. Learn the last stanza by heart.