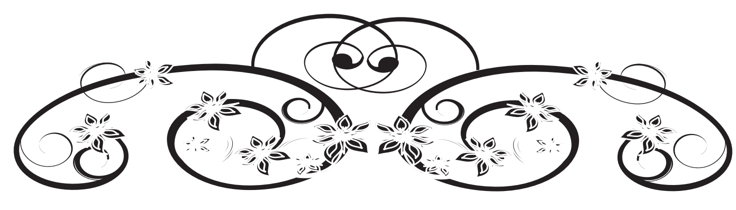
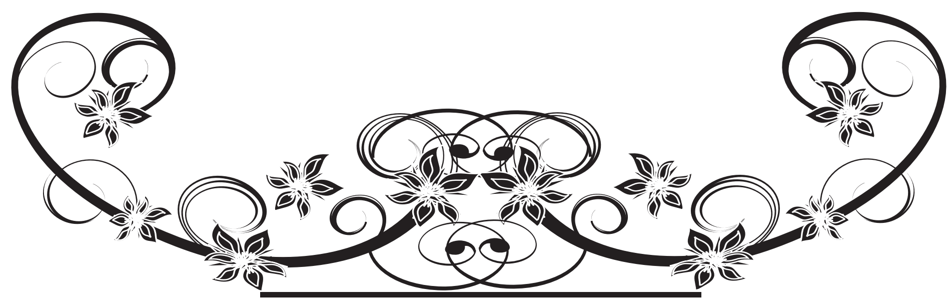


Part V

The Romantic Period



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Romanticism as a literary movement came into being in England in the latter half of the 18th century. It first made its appearance in England as a renewed interest in medieval literature. The movement was ushered by Thomas Percy (1729–1811), James Macpherson (1736–1796) and Thomas Chatterton (1752–1770). William Blake and Robert Burns represented the spirit of what is usually called Pre-Romanticism.

With the publication of William Wordsworth's *Lyrical Ballads* (1798) in collaboration with Samuel Taylor Coleridge, Romanticism began to bloom and found a firm place in the history of English literature. In fact, the first half of the 19th century recorded the triumph of Romanticism.

As is known to all, literature develops with the development of the society, and is often under the influence of social ideologies, especially of politics which is the most decisive; literature reflects the mental attitudes of a time and a nation. The class struggles motivate the development of literature. And economics is also an important factor in the development of literature. 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, Britain became the "workshop of the world" and the English bourgeoisie fattened on world trade, plunder and colonisation. No country was strong enough to compete with England. 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 Parliament and bureaucracy, but it 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. Ruined by the rapid capitalist development, the peasants had to wander for work. They became hired workers in the countryside and cities. Thus, a new class, the proletariat, sprang 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. In many large cities hungry men and women formed groups against the exploiters. The bourgeoisie got richer and richer while the

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labourers became poorer and poorer until they could not support themselves. It was under this unbearable economic condition that the workers' struggle broke out, finding expression in the spontaneous movement of the Luddites (1811–1817), or "frame-breakers", who broke their masters' weaving machines to show their hatred of the capitalists and capitalist exploitation.

July 14, 1789 saw a great event in Europe. That was the French Revolution. The heavily-exploited Parisian people rose and stormed the Bastille, the symbol of feudalism. The Revolution destroyed the feudal economic base. Its influence swept 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 Revolution proclaimed the natural rights of man and the abolition of class distinctions. This, of course, was welcomed by the labouring people in Britain, where 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 watchwords of the Revolution. The Revolution had such a strong influence on Britain that many writers such as William Blake, Robert Burns, George Gordon Byron, Percy Bysshe Shelley, Charles Lamb and even William Wordsworth and S. T. 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 people and the progressive intellectuals of Britain, but it scared the bourgeoisie, especially its upper stratum, who, though having launched their own revolution, could not bear the idea of another nation having a revolution. The British government

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regarded the French Republic as a most dangerous enemy which threatened its very existence. Under the banner of patriotism and fighting "Jacobinism", the British government supported and joined the "Holy Alliance", which was 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 attempted to turn people's thoughts from their own affairs to their neighbours' and so to prevent 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 (1729–1797) spoke against the French Revolution and sang elegies for the downfall of the royalty in France. He wrote a pamphlet *Reflections on the Revolution in France* (1790), which soon became an anti-revolutionary manifesto for all reactionaries in Europe. Thomas Paine (1737–1809), who had been fighting for freedom, was repulsed by Burke's picture of the sufferings of French royalty and nobility, saying "He [Burke] pitied the plumage and forgot the dying bird." In response, Paine wrote the famous pamphlet *Rights of Man* (1791–1792), in which he advocated that politics was the business of the whole mass of common people instead of a mere governing oligarchy. People would not like a government that failed to secure people the rights to "life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness". People had the right to overthrow such a government, if necessary, by revolution. This pamphlet was published soon after the destruction of the Bastille, and added fuel to the flames kindled in Britain by the French Revolution. In consequence, *Rights of Man* was banned and Paine was found guilty of treason. He did not attend the trial, for he had been warned by William Blake of the likelihood of immediate arrest. Instead of returning to his lodgings where the police waited with a warrant, he 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

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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 Parliament; the establishment of hundreds of popular schools under the leadership of Andrew Bell and Joseph Lancaster. These were 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 that Romanticism arose as a main literary trend, which prevailed in England from 1798 to 1832. It began with the publication of *Lyrical Ballads* and ended with Walter Scott's death (1832).

The 19th century was decidedly an age of verse. Most of the great writers were eminent in poetry. The public taste was set in the poetic direction, and the literary distinction was easier to achieve in poetry than in prose. Poetry has long been held as the highest form of literary expression in England, and seems to have been most in harmony with the noblest powers of the English genius. As in the Elizabethan age, the young enthusiasts turned as naturally to poetry as a happy man to singing.

In addition to poetry, this age also produced some influential prose works. Walter Scott's novels have attained a very wide reading; Charles Lamb's essays and Jane Austen's novels have made an impact on the history of English literature. S. T. Coleridge, Robert Southey and William Wordsworth formed the trio of so-called "Lake Poets", but Coleridge and Southey wrote far more prose than poetry. And Southey's prose is much better than his verse. There was also a noteworthy development of the novel, which began to establish itself as the favourite literary form of the 19th century. By comparison, the drama was the only great literary genre that was not adequately represented. Although many of the great poets and other writers tried their hands at dramatic work, they only created some noble poems written in the dramatic form. There was probably not a single great drama in the strict sense. The

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novel was also preferred to the drama as a medium for the portrayal of complex stories and characters.

The literature of this age was rich and varied. There was a vast body of excellent works. The great literary impulse of the age was the impulse of Individualism in a wonderful variety of forms.

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Chapter 19

William Wordsworth (1770–1850)

William Wordsworth was born in Cockermouth, Cumberland, in northwest England. His family was physically vigorous and sound as well as healthy in its moral tone. He lost his parents at an early age, and was left to the care of uncles who discharged their trust in a praiseworthy manner.

Wordsworth went to school in his ninth year at Hawkshead, a village on the banks of Esthwaite Water. These school days were happy ones. He boarded in the village with a kind old dame, whom he fondly described in *The Prelude* (1850), and, out of school hours, he was free from the supervision of tutors. He wrote: "I was left at liberty then, and in the vacation, to read whatever books I liked." He was also free to go about as he pleased, and he roamed early and late over the mountains.

The healthy out-of-door life hardened the fibres of his sturdy frame and kept him vigorous, and the constant sight of nature in the wondrous beauty of the Lake District awoke love and reverence in him. He enjoyed the sports of hunting, skating, and rowing. Little by little, the glories of Nature grew upon him, until his soul seemed flooded with unutterable delight when in her presence. This profound passion was fostered by his life in these early years, and grew steadily with his youth. At seventeen, he went to Cambridge and, for a time, was dazzled by the intercourse with town-bred men, but the infatuation was of short duration, and his four years at college were the least congenial of his life.

His travels on the Continent in his last vacation and after his graduation brought him in contact with the French Revolution, and he came under its spell, as did most of the enthusiastic young men of the time. His hopes were

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stirred and his imagination fired with dreams of an ideal republic, which he fancied would arise from the Revolution. He says:

> I gradually withdrew
> Into a noisier world, and thus erelong
> Became a Patriot; and my heart was all
> Given to People, and my love was theirs. (*The Prelude*, Book IX)

He was prepared to throw himself personally into the struggle, when his relatives recalled him to England to face the ugly spectre of poverty. The rude shock came too suddenly upon his ardent aspirations, and, following closely upon it, came the failure of the revolutionists, the period of anarchy and imperialism in France. He sank into a dejection as deep as his hopes had been high, and, as he slowly recovered from his disappointment, he became more and more conservative in his politics, and less in sympathy with any violent reactions. For this he was censured by Byron, Shelley, and other strong adherents of liberty, but such moderation was more natural to Wordsworth than the excitement of his early years. To the end of his days, he never failed to utter for genuine liberty a hopeful, though calm and tempered note.

He returned from France in 1792. In 1795 a bequest of 900 pounds relieved the financial strain which had caused him anxiety, and secured for him and his sister Dorothy a modest maintenance. They went back to the Lake District, where they spent the rest of their lives save an occasional tour. The two places most associated with the poet 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. Dorothy was his lifelong companion. 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.

In 1797 he made friends with S. T. Coleridge, and a year later they jointly published *Lyrical Ballads*. The majority of poems in this collection were written by Wordsworth. S. T. Coleridge's chief contribution was his masterpiece "The Rime of the Ancient Mariner". Many of Wordsworth's poems in *Lyrical Ballads* were devoted to the position of landless and

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homeless peasants, for example, “Michael”, “The Brothers”, “The Old Cumberland Beggar”. Sincerely sympathising with the poor, he at the same time severely criticised capitalism.

In his poems Wordsworth aimed at simplicity and purity of the language, fighting against the conventional forms of the 18th century poetry. The poet was a passionate lover of nature. His descriptions of lakes and rivers, of meadows and woods, of skies and clouds, are exquisite.

Lines Composed a Few Miles above Tintern Abbey[1]

Five years have past; five summers, with the length
Of five long winters! and again I hear
These waters, rolling from their mountain-springs
With a soft inland murmur.—Once again
Do I behold these steep and lofty cliffs, 5
That on a wild secluded scene impress
Thoughts of more deep seclusion; and connect
The landscape with the quiet of the sky.
The day is come when I again repose
Here, under this dark sycamore, and view 10
These plots of cottage-ground, these orchard-tufts,
Which at this season, with their unripe fruits,
Are clad in one green hue, and lose themselves
’Mid groves and copses. Once again I see
These hedge-rows, hardly hedge-rows, little lines 15
Of sportive wood run wild: these pastoral farms,
Green to the very door; and wreaths of smoke
Sent up, in silence, from among the trees!
With some uncertain notice, as might seem
Of vagrant dwellers in the houseless woods, 20
Or of some Hermit’s cave, where by his fire
The Hermit sits alone.

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These beauteous forms,
Through a long absence, have not been to me
As is a landscape to a blind man's eye: 25
But oft, in lonely rooms, and 'mid the din
Of towns and cities, I have owed to them
In hours of weariness, sensations sweet,
Felt in the blood, and felt along the heart;
And passing even into my purer mind, 30
With tranquil restoration:—feelings too
Of unremembered pleasure: such, perhaps,
As have no slight or trivial influence
On that best portion of a good man's life,
His little, nameless, unremembered, acts 35
Of kindness and of love. Nor less, I trust,
To them I may have owed another gift,
Of aspect more sublime; that blessed mood,
In which the burthen of the mystery,
In which the heavy and the weary weight 40
Of all this unintelligible world,
Is lightened:—that serene and blessed mood,
In which the affections gently lead us on,—
Until, the breath of this corporeal frame
And even the motion of our human blood 45
Almost suspended, we are laid asleep
In body, and become a living soul:
While with an eye made quiet by the power
Of harmony, and the deep power of joy,
We see into the life of things. 50

If this
Be but a vain belief, yet, oh! how oft—
In darkness and amid the many shapes
Of joyless daylight; when the fretful stir

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Unprofitable, and the fever of the world, 55
Have hung upon the beatings of my heart—
How oft, in spirit, have I turned to thee,
O sylvan Wye! thou wanderer thro' the woods,
How often has my spirit turned to thee!

And now, with gleams of half-extinguished thought, 60
With many recognitions dim and faint,
And somewhat of a sad perplexity,
The picture of the mind revives again:
While here I stand, not only with the sense
Of present pleasure, but with pleasing thoughts 65
That in this moment there is life and food
For future years. And so I dare to hope,
Though changed, no doubt, from what I was when first[2]
I came among these hills; when like a roe
I bounded o'er the mountains, by the sides 70
Of the deep rivers, and the lonely streams,
Wherever nature led: more like a man
Flying from something that he dreads, than one
Who sought the thing he loved. For nature then
(The coarser pleasures of my boyish days, 75
And their glad animal movements all gone by)
To me was all in all.—I cannot paint
What then I was. The sounding cataract
Haunted me like a passion: the tall rock,
The mountain, and the deep and gloomy wood, 80
Their colours and their forms, were then to me
An appetite; a feeling and a love,
That had no need of a remoter charm,
By thought supplied, nor any interest
Unborrowed from the eye.—That time is past, 85
And all its aching joys are now no more,

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And all its dizzy raptures. Not for this
Faint[3] I, nor mourn nor murmur; other gifts
Have followed; for such loss, I would believe,
Abundant recompense. For I have learned 90
To look on nature, not as in the hour
Of thoughtless youth; but hearing oftentimes
The still, sad music of humanity,
Nor harsh nor grating, though of ample power
To chasten and subdue. And I have felt 95
A presence that disturbs me with the joy
Of elevated thoughts; a sense sublime
Of something far more deeply interfused,
Whose dwelling is the light of setting suns,
And the round ocean and the living air, 100
And the blue sky, and in the mind of man:
A motion and a spirit, that impels
All thinking things, all objects of all thought,
And rolls through all things. Therefore am I still
A lover of the meadows and the woods, 105
And mountains; and of all that we behold
From this green earth; of all the mighty world
Of eye, and ear,—both what they half create,
And what perceive[4]; well pleased to recognise
In nature and the language of the sense, 110
The anchor of my purest thoughts, the nurse,
The guide, the guardian of my heart, and soul
Of all my moral being.

Nor perchance,
If I were not thus taught, should I the more 115
Suffer my genial spirits to decay:[5]
For thou art with me here upon the banks
Of this fair river; thou my dearest Friend[6],

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My dear, dear Friend; and in thy voice I catch
The language of my former heart, and read 120
My former pleasures in the shooting lights
Of thy wild eyes. Oh! yet a little while
May I behold in thee what I was once,
My dear, dear Sister! and this prayer I make,
Knowing that Nature never did betray 125
The heart that loved her; 'tis her privilege,
Through all the years of this our life, to lead
From joy to joy: for she can so inform
The mind that is within us, so impress
With quietness and beauty, and so feed 130
With lofty thoughts, that neither evil tongues,
Rash judgments, nor the sneers of selfish men,
Nor greetings where no kindness is, nor all
The dreary intercourse of daily life,
Shall e'er prevail against us, or disturb 135
Our cheerful faith, that all which we behold
Is full of blessings. Therefore let the moon
Shine on thee in thy solitary walk;
And let the misty mountain-winds be free
To blow against thee: and, in after years, 140
When these wild ecstasies shall be matured
Into a sober pleasure; when thy mind
Shall be a mansion for all lovely forms,
Thy memory be as a dwelling-place
For all sweet sounds and harmonies; oh! then, 145
If solitude, or fear, or pain, or grief,
Should be thy portion, with what healing thoughts
Of tender joy wilt thou remember me,
And these my exhortations! Nor, perchance—
If I should be where I no more can hear 150
Thy voice, nor catch from thy wild eyes these gleams

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Of past existence[7]—wilt thou then forget
That on the banks of this delightful stream
We stood together; and that I, so long
A worshipper of Nature, hither came 155
Unwearied in that service; rather say
With warmer love—oh! with far deeper zeal
Of holier love. Nor wilt thou then forget,
That after many wanderings, many years
Of absence, these steep woods and lofty cliffs, 160
And this green pastoral landscape, were to me
More dear, both for themselves and for thy sake!

Notes

1. The poem was printed as the last item in *Lyrical Ballads* with the title "Lines Written a Few Miles above Tintern Abbey, on Revisiting the Banks of the Wye during a Tour, July 13, 1798".
   Wordsworth once said, "No poem of mine was composed under circumstances more pleasant for me to remember than this. I began it upon leaving Tintern, after crossing the Wye, and concluded it just as I was entering Bristol in the evening, after a ramble of four or five days, with my sister. Not a line of it was altered, and not any part of it written down till I reached Bristol."
   Wordsworth first visited the Wye valley and the ruins of Tintern Abbey on a solitary walking tour in August, 1793 when he was 23 years old. The puzzling difference between the present landscape and the remembered "picture of the mind" gave rise to an intricately organised meditation, in which the poet reviewed his past, evaluated the present, and (through his sister as intermediary) anticipated the future. His introspection lasted until he rounded back quietly upon the scene "these steep woods and lofty cliffs", which marked his point of departure.
2. The following contains Wordsworth's famous descriptions of the three stages of his growing up in terms of his evolving relations to the natural scene: the

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young boy's purely physical responsiveness (lines 75–76); the post-adolescent's aching, dizzy, and equivocal passions—a love more like dread (lines 69–74; lines 77–87), which was his state of mind on the occasion of his first visit; his present state (line 87 and the following), which was a combination of thought and sense. All his knowledge of human suffering, painfully acquired in the interim, chastened him while it enriched the visible scene. Meanwhile he grew aware of an immanent "presence" which linked his mind and all the elements of the external world.

3. faint: lose heart
4. The fact that apparent changes in the sensible world turn out to be projected by the changing mind of the observer gives evidence that the faculties "half create" the world. What the eyes and the ears "perceive" are those that remain unchanged between the two visits. The view that the "creative sensibility" contributes to its own perceptions is reiterated in the early books of *The Prelude*.
5. Nor perchance…to decay: Perhaps, even if I had not learnt to look at nature in the way I have just described, I still would not have suffered a decay in my creative powers.
   genial: the adjectival form of the noun "genius" (native powers)
6. my dearest Friend: his sister Dorothy
7. existence: experience

She Dwelt among the Untrodden Ways

She dwelt among the untrodden ways
　Beside the springs of Dove[1],
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.

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