



Part V

The Age of Romanticism (1798-1832)

Key Words

Romantic poetry	familiar essay
the novel of purpose	oxymoron
terza rima	epizeuxis
Byronic hero	ode



The Romantic period in Britain denoted the period between 1798, marked with the publication of the *Lyrical Ballads* by William Wordsworth and Samuel Taylor Coleridge, and 1832, when Sir Walter Scott died and other major writers were no longer productive.

Romanticism gets its name from romance, the literary form in which desires and dreams prevail over everyday realities. The movement may be regarded as the triumph of the values of imaginative spontaneity, visionary originality, wonder, and emotional self-expression over the classical standards of balance, order, restraint, proportion, and objectivity. It marks a profound transformation in artistic style, in cultural attitudes, and in the relations between artist and society in literature and other arts in the first half of the 19th century.

England experienced the critical change from a primarily agricultural society to a modern industrial nation, in which the balance of economic power shifted to large-scale employers, and with which appeared an immensely enlarging working class. This change occurred in the context of the French Revolution, the Industrial Revolution, and the American Revolution.

1 French Revolution

The early period of the French Revolution evoked enthusiastic support from English liberals and radicals alike. Thomas Paine's *Rights of Man* (1791-1792) justified the French Revolution, and advocated for England a democratic Republic to be established by revolution. William Godwin's *Inquiry Concerning Political Justice* (1793) foretold an inevitable but peaceful evolution of society to a final stage in which all properties would be equally distributed and all governments would wither away. Both works, together with Mary Wollstonecraft's *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman* (1792), had an important influence upon William Wordsworth, Percy Bysshe Shelley, and other Romanticists.

In the early period of the French Revolution, all the leading English writers were in sympathy with it, and Robert Burns, William Blake, Wordsworth, Samuel Coleridge, Robert Southey were among its fervent adherents. The younger writers William Hazlitt, Leigh Hunt, Percy Shelley and Gorge Gordon Byron felt its example comprised humanity's best hope. Under the influence of the American and French revolutions, the idea of "Liberty, Equality, and Fraternity" inspired English writers, and the desire for personal freedom and individual rights encouraged a more daring and imaginative approach to both life and literature.

2 The Industrial Revolution

The Industrial Revolution had begun in the mid-18th century with improvements in machines for processing textiles, and was given immense impetus when James Watt perfected the steam engine in 1785. In the succeeding decades, steam replaced wind and water as the primary source of power in manufacturing, and began the ever-accelerating progress in economic and social conditions. This process introduced more efficient methods of agriculture and animal breeding required to supply a growing population; and it created a new landless class who either migrated to the industrial towns or remained as farm labourers, subsisting on starvation wages.

Meanwhile, the population was increasingly polarised into two classes: the land and factory owner and the waged worker, the rich and the poor. In London the leisure class enjoyed lavish display and moral laxity; in the provinces, the gentry in their country houses carried on their familial and social concerns almost untouched by great national and international events, as reflected in the novels of Jane Austen.

3 Literature Achievements

1) Romantic poetry

Most romanticists were poets because poetry was the best medium to express their feelings and passions. The Romantic period is, therefore, an age of poetry. As a whole, it is usually taken to represent a second renaissance of literature in Britain, especially in lyric and narrative poetry.

The characteristic features of Romantic poetry are as follows:

First, the poetic creation of Romanticism starts as a rebellion against the Neoclassicism. The Romantic poets explore new theories and innovate new techniques in poetry creation. Wordsworth, in the “Preface to *Lyrical Ballads*”, calls for simple themes drawn from humble life expressed in the language of ordinary people. He advocates a quite different standard for the material, content, theme, and language of poetry.

Second, the Romantic poets believe in the moral good of poetry. Their interpretation of poetry is that poetry is a healing energy, and it could purify both individual souls and society. Wordsworth defines the poet as “a man speaking to men”; Shelley believes that poetry can play a very important part in the spiritual life of society. “The great instrument of moral good is the imagination; and poetry administers to the effect by acting on the cause.”



(Shelley: “A Defence of Poetry”)

Third, subjectivity and spontaneity are especially emphasised in Romantic poetry. The Romantic poets establish a new relationship between poetry and poet. They claim the quality of poetry is the quality of the poet. Wordsworth’s definition of poetry is “the spontaneous overflow of powerful feelings”, which originates in “emotion recollected in tranquility”. Shelley believes that “poetry is the record of the best and happiest moments of the happiest and best minds.” Both express that poetry is the direct product of the poet.

Fourth, Romantic poets believe that imagination is the vital faculty that creates new wholes out of disparate elements, as Coleridge argues. Shelley defines the poetry to be “‘the expression of the Imagination’; and poetry is connate with the origin of man.” William Blake says, “where intelligence was fallible, limited, the Imagination was our hope of contact with eternal forces, with the whole spiritual world.”

Fifth, a new connotation is given to the concept of nature. Nature is not only the major source of poetic imagery, but also provides the dominant subject matter. Wordsworth conceives of nature as “the nurse,/The guide, the guardian of my heart, and soul/Of all my moral being.” Wordsworth, Coleridge and Southey reject the excessively rational, as well as excessively materialistic world, and choose to live by the lakeside as to escape from the “madding crowd”.

Sixth, Romantic poets also make bold experiments in poetic language, versification and design, and construct a variety of forms on original principles of organisation and style. Examples can be found in Blake’s visionary prophetic poems, in Coleridge’s mystic ballad, “The Rime of the Ancient Mariner”, in Wordsworth’s spiritual autobiography, *The Prelude*, and in Shelley’s symbolic drama, *Prometheus Unbound*. In order to achieve the effect of the individual vision, the medieval or renaissance world is particularly favoured as the setting.

William Blake and Robert Burns are the two notable forerunners of Romantic poetry. Later the works of William Wordsworth, Samuel Taylor Coleridge, George Gordon Byron, Percy Bysshe Shelley and John Keats represent the highest achievements in Romantic poetry. Robert Southey¹ and

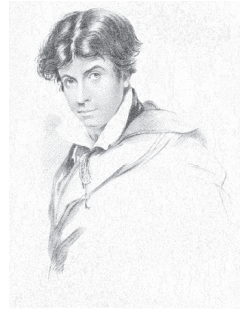
1 Robert Southey (1774-1843): English poet of the Romantic school, one of the so-called “Lake Poets”, and Poet Laureate. Although his fame tends to be eclipsed by that of his contemporaries and friends William Wordsworth and Samuel Taylor Coleridge, Southey’s verse enjoys enduring popularity. Moreover, he was a prolific letter writer, literary scholar, historian and biographer.

Leigh Hunt¹ are also influential figures of the Romanticism.

The Romantic poets are not only innovators of poetic creation but also thinkers of poetic theory. They make unique contributions to the development of literary theory, most notably in the writing of Coleridge and Hazlitt, and in major essays by Wordsworth and Shelley. “Preface to *Lyrical Ballads*” by Wordsworth, “A Defence of Poetry” by Shelley, *Biographia Literaria* by Coleridge, are three brilliant representatives.



Robert Southey, from a painting by John Opie, engraved by W. H. Egleton



Leigh Hunt, a portrait drawn by J. Hayter, engraved by H. Meyer

2) Familiar essays

The periodical essay in England began with Defoe in 1704, and was developed by Addison and Steele in *The Tatler* and *The Spectator*. Addison divided *The Spectator* writings into series essays and occasional papers.

In the 19th century, periodicals increased in number and modern magazines came into being. In 1802, the *Edinburgh Review* started the modern type of periodical publication. In 1820 appeared *The London Magazine*, liberal in politics and contemporary in literary interests. It allowed considerable latitude to its writers, and set its literary standards high.

These new periodicals, by elevating the essay in literary dignity and quality, and making an author able to earn a living as a freelance essayist, served a great promotion for the tradition of English essays.

The familiar essay (“informal” or “personal essay”), as a commentary on everyday subject written in a relaxed and intimate manner, flourished in a

¹ Leigh Hunt (1784-1859): English essayist, poet and writer.



fashion paralleling the course of Romantic poetry. Like the poets, the essayists are personal and subjective; their essays are often candidly autobiographical, reminiscent, self-analytic; the material is reflected in the temperament of the essayist. The subject matter of the essays, like that of poetry, exhibits an extension of range and sympathy for what is beyond the earlier limits of the leisure class and its fashionable concerns. The most important English essayists of this period are William Hazlitt¹, Leigh Hunt, Thomas De Quincey² and Charles Lamb.



William Hazlitt,
self-portrait, ca.1802



Thomas De Quincey

3) Fiction of the Romantic period

Jane Austen and Sir Walter Scott are two major novelists of the Romantic period.

Sir Walter Scott (1771-1832) was a prolific Scottish historical novelist and poet, enjoying popularity throughout Europe during his time. He is now known as “the father of the historical novel”, and many of his works remain classics, including *Ivanhoe*, *Rob Roy* and *Waverley*. “The Lady of the Lake” was among his best known poems.

In this period, two other types of fiction were successively popular. One was the “Gothic novel”, prominent in the late 18th century, exerted distinct influence upon the Romantic poetry.

The second fictional mode popular at the turn of the century was **the novel of purpose**, written to propagate the new social and political theories current

1 William Hazlitt (1778-1830) was remembered for his humanistic essays and literary criticism, often esteemed the greatest English literary critic after Samuel Johnson.

2 Thomas De Quincey (1785-1859): English author and intellectual, best known for his book *Confessions of an English Opium-Eater*.

in the period of the French Revolution. This kind of novel combines didactic intention with elements of Gothic terror. William Godwin's *Caleb Williams*¹ (1794) is a good example. Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein*² (1818) transforms a story about a fabricated monster into a powerful representation of the moral distortion imposed on an individual who is rejected by society as he diverges from the norm.



Sir Walter Scott, by Sir Edwin Henry Landseer, 1824



Mary Shelley

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- 1 William Godwin (1756-1836): English journalist, political philosopher and novelist. Godwin is most famous for two books: *Enquiry Concerning Political Justice*, an attack on political institutions, and *Things as They Are; or, The Adventures of Caleb Williams* (often abbreviated to *Caleb Williams*), which attacks aristocratic privilege, but also is virtually the first mystery novel. *Caleb Williams* (1794) is a three-volume novel, written as a call to end the abuse of power by what Godwin saw as a tyrannical government.
- 2 Mary Shelley (1797-1851): the daughter of William Godwin and Mary Wollstonecraft, wife of the poet Percy Bysshe Shelley. She was also a novelist, authoring *Frankenstein*. It is a novel infused with some elements of the Gothic novel and the Romantic movement. It was also a warning against the "over-reaching" of modern man and the Industrial Revolution, alluded to the novel's subtitle, *The Modern Prometheus*. The story has had an influence across literature and popular culture.



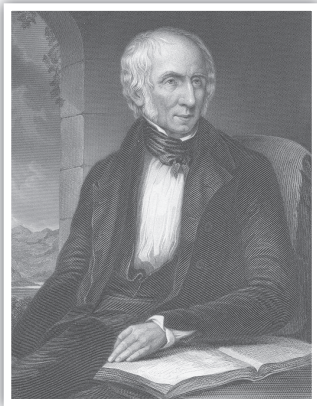
Unit 21

William Wordsworth (1770-1850)

William Wordsworth is a leading English Romantic poet, and England's Poet Laureate from 1843 to 1850.

Life and Writing

Wordsworth was born and grew up on the northern fringe of the English Lake District. His father was an attorney, but died when he was 13; his mother died five years earlier. Wordsworth was sent to school by his guardian uncles. He attended St. John's College, Cambridge, but disliked the academic courses. In 1790 he went on a walking tour of France, the Alps, and Italy, and returned to France late in 1791; during his stay of one year in France he was fired by a passionate belief in the French Revolution and republican ideals, and also fell in love with the daughter of a surgeon, Annette Vallon, who bore him a daughter later. After his return to England, he published in 1793 two poems in heroic couplets.



William Wordsworth, reproduced from Margaret Gillies' 1839 original

In 1795 his friend left him a legacy of 900 pounds, intending to enable him to pursue his vocation as a poet. Wordsworth settled with his sister Dorothy in Somersetshire. They lived a frugal life, and Dorothy made him turn his eyes to "the face of nature" and take an interest in the peasants living in their neighbourhood. She also induced him to transform his observation of the landscape into the revelation of the beauty of nature in poetry. In 1797 he made friends with Coleridge. The intense friendship shaped their lives for the next 14 years and proved one of the most creative partnerships in English

Romanticism. Between July 1797 and September 1798, the Coleridges and the Wordsworths lived and worked intimately together in the Lake District, two miles away from each other. They devoted their time to writing poetry, and jointly published *Lyrical Ballads*.

Wordsworth spent the winter of 1798-1799 in Germany, where he wrote sections of what was to be *The Prelude* and the “Lucy” poems. Then he and Dorothy settled in Dove Cottage of Lake District; he wrote many poems included in the 1800 edition of *Lyrical Ballads*. In 1802 Wordsworth married Mary Hutchinson. The following years saw the births of five children, travels with Dorothy and Coleridge, and new friendships with Sir Walter Scott and De Quincey. His domestic happiness was shadowed by the death of his sailor brother John in 1805, the early deaths of two of his children, and the physical deterioration of Coleridge. But his productivity continued, and his popularity gradually increased.

In 1813 he was appointed stamp distributor for Westmorland, a post which brought him some 400 pounds a year, and in the same year he moved to the northern Lake District, where he lived the rest of his life. In 1843 he was named Poet Laureate. He died at his residence after the publication of a finally revised text of his six-volume works.

Artistic Features

Wordsworth appeals directly to individual observation and enjoyment as the foundation of the creation and appreciation of poetry. He bases his own poetic theory on the principle that “all good poetry is the spontaneous overflow of powerful feelings”, and poetry “takes its origin from emotion recollected in tranquility”.

Wordsworth is a poet of nature. He inspires the reader that everything in life can be possibly made poetic. In his depression and isolation, he turns to nature to find spiritual comfort. His deep love for nature runs through poems such as “I Wandered Lonely as a Cloud”, “The Solitary Reaper”, and “Daffodils”.

The themes of many of his poems are drawn from rural life and his characters are ordinary people in countryside. The scenes and events of everyday life and the speeches of ordinary people are important material for his poetic creation.



Major Works

The Prelude, or Growth of a Poet's Mind

Wordsworth's masterpiece is generally considered to be *The Prelude*, an autobiographical, "philosophical" poem in blank verse. The work is a poetic reflection on Wordsworth's own sense of poetic vocation as it develops over the course of his life. Its 14-book layout mimics the epic poem by John Milton, *Paradise Lost*.

Wordsworth wrote the first version of the poem when he was 28, and worked over the rest of it for his long life without publishing it. He never gave it a title; he called it the "Poem to Coleridge" and in his letters to Dorothy Wordsworth as "the poem on the growth of my own mind". The final name was given by his wife.

Lyrical Ballads

Lyrical Ballads, with a Few Other Poems is a collection of poems by Wordsworth and Coleridge, first published in 1798. The book was a landmark of English Romanticism and the beginning of a new age in poetic writing.

As for the nature of their collaboration, Coleridge described it in *Biographia Literaria*, "it was agreed that my endeavours should be directed to persons and characters supernatural or at least romantic... Mr. Wordsworth, on the other hand, was to propose to himself as his object, to give the charm of novelty to things of everyday." Coleridge's contribution to the first edition is "The Rime of the Ancient Mariner"; Wordsworth's includes ballads and narratives such as "The Idiot Boy", and "Simon Lee, the Old Huntsman", and more personal poems such as "Lines Written in Early Spring" and "Lines Composed a Few Miles above Tintern Abbey".

Preface to *Lyrical Ballads* (1802)

THE SUBJECT AND LANGUAGE OF POETRY

...

The principal object, then, which I proposed to myself¹ in these Poems was to choose incidents and situations² from common life, and to relate or

¹ proposed to myself: put forward for consideration.

² incidents and situations: both minor events and state affairs.

describe them, throughout, as far as was possible, in a selection of language really used by men; and, at the same time, to throw over them a certain colouring of imagination, whereby ordinary things should be presented to the mind in an unusual way; and, further, and above all, to make these incidents and situations interesting by tracing in them, truly though not ostentatiously¹, the primary laws of our nature: chiefly, as far as regards the manner in which we associate ideas in a state of excitement. Low 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 co-exist in a state of greater simplicity, and, consequently, may be more accurately contemplated², and more forcibly communicated; because the manners of rural life germinate³ 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. The language, too, of these men is adopted⁴ (purified indeed from what appear to be its real defects, from all lasting and rational causes of dislike or disgust) because such men hourly communicate with the best objects from which the best part of language is originally derived⁵; and because, from their rank in society and the sameness and narrow circle of their intercourse, being less under the influence of social vanity they convey their feelings and notions in simple and unelaborated expressions⁶. Accordingly, such a language, arising out of repeated experience and regular feelings, is a more permanent, and a far more philosophical language, than that which is frequently substituted for it by Poets, who think that they are conferring honour upon themselves and their art, in proportion as they separate themselves from the sympathies of men, and indulge in arbitrary and

1 ostentatiously: marked by or fond of conspicuous or vainglorious and, sometimes, pretentious display.

2 contemplated: looked at thoughtfully; observed in deep thought.

3 germinate: cause to grow or sprout.

4 adopted: used, applied.

5 derived: obtained.

6 unelaborated expressions: simple and plain expressions.



capricious¹ habits of expression, in order to furnish food for fickle² tastes, and fickle appetites, of their own creation.³

I cannot, however, be insensible of the present outcry against the triviality and meanness both of thought and language, which some of my contemporaries have occasionally introduced into their metrical compositions; and I acknowledge, that this defect, where it exists, is more dishonorable to the Writer's own character than false refinement or arbitrary innovation, though I should contend at the same time that it is far less pernicious in the sum of its consequences. From such verses the Poems in these volumes will be found distinguished at least by one mark of difference, that each of them has a worthy purpose. Not that I mean to say, that I always began to write with a distinct purpose formally conceived; but I believe that my habits of meditation have so formed my feelings, as that my descriptions of such objects as strongly excite those feelings, will be found to carry along with them a purpose. If in this opinion I am mistaken, I can have little right to the name of a Poet. For all good poetry is the spontaneous overflow of powerful feelings: but though this be true, Poems to which any value can be attached, were never produced on any variety of subjects but by a man, who being possessed of more than usual organic sensibility, had also thought long and deeply. For our continued influxes of feeling are modified and directed by our thoughts, which are indeed the representatives of all our past feelings; and, as by contemplating the relation of these general representatives to each other we discover what is really important to men, so, by the repetition and continuance of this act, our feelings will be connected with important subjects, till at length, if we be originally possessed of much sensibility, such habits of mind will be produced, that, by obeying blindly and mechanically the impulses of those habits, we shall describe objects, and utter sentiments, of such a nature and in such connection with each other, that the understanding of the being to whom we address ourselves, if he be in a healthful state of association, must necessarily be in some degree enlightened, and his affections ameliorated.

I have said that each of these poems has a purpose. I have also informed

1 arbitrary and capricious: based on or subject to individual discretion or preference, or determined by chance or impulse.

2 fickle: often changing.

3 It is worthwhile here to observe that the affecting parts of Chaucer are almost always expressed in language pure and universally intelligible even to this day. [Wordsworth's note]

my Reader what this purpose will be found principally to be: namely to illustrate the manner in which our feelings and ideas are associated in a state of excitement. But, speaking in language somewhat more appropriate, it is to follow the fluxes and refluxes of the mind when agitated by the great and simple affections of our nature ...

WHAT IS A POET?

Taking up the subject, then, upon general grounds, I ask what is meant by the word Poet? What is a Poet? To whom does he address himself? And what language is to be expected from him? He is a man speaking to men: a man, it is true, endued with more lively sensibility, more enthusiasm and tenderness, who has a greater knowledge of human nature, and a more comprehensive soul, than are supposed to be common among mankind; a man pleased with his own passions and volitions, and who rejoices more than other men in the spirit of life that is in him; delighting to contemplate similar volitions¹ and passions as manifested in the goings-on of the Universe, and habitually impelled to create them where he does not find them. To these qualities he has added a disposition to be affected more than other men by absent things as if they were present; an ability of conjuring up in himself passions, which are indeed far from being the same as those produced by real events, yet (especially in those parts of the general sympathy which are pleasing and delightful) do more nearly resemble the passions produced by real events, than any thing which, from the motions of their own minds merely, other men are accustomed to feel in themselves; whence, and from practice, he has acquired a greater readiness and power in expressing what he thinks and feels, and especially those thoughts and feelings which, by his own choice, or from the structure of his own mind, arise in him without immediate² external excitement.

But, whatever portion of this faculty we may suppose even the greatest Poet to possess, there cannot be a doubt but that the language which it will suggest to him, must, in liveliness and truth, fall far short of that which is uttered by men in real life, under the actual pressure of those passions, certain shadows of which the Poet thus produces, or feels to be produced, in himself. However exalted a notion we would wish to cherish of the character of a Poet, it is obvious, that, while he describes and imitates passions, his situation is

¹ volitions: the capability of conscious choice, decision and intention.

² immediate: direct.



altogether slavish and mechanical, compared with the freedom and power of real and substantial action and suffering. So that it will be the wish of the Poet to bring his feelings near to those of the persons whose feelings he describes, nay, for short spaces of time perhaps, to let himself slip into an entire delusion, and even confound and identify his own feelings with theirs; modifying only the language which is thus suggested to him, by a consideration that he describes for a particular purpose, that of giving pleasure. Here, then, he will apply the principle on which I have so much insisted, namely, that of selection; on this he will depend for removing what would otherwise be painful or disgusting in the passion; he will feel that there is no necessity to trick out or to elevate nature: and, the more industriously he applies this principle, the deeper will be his faith that no words, which his fancy or imagination can suggest, will be to be compared with those which are the emanations of reality and truth.

EMOTION RECOLLECTED IN TRANQUILLITY

I have said that Poetry is the spontaneous¹ overflow of powerful feelings: it takes its origin from emotion recollected in tranquillity²; the emotion is contemplated till by a species of reaction the tranquillity gradually disappears, and an emotion, kindred to that which was before the subject of contemplation, is gradually produced, and does itself actually exist in the mind. In this mood successful composition generally begins, and in a mood similar to this it is carried on; but the emotion, of whatever kind and in whatever degree, from various causes is qualified by various pleasures, so that in describing any passions whatsoever, which are voluntarily described, the mind will upon the whole be in a state of enjoyment. Now, if Nature be thus cautious in preserving in a state of enjoyment a being thus employed, the Poet ought to profit by the lesson thus held forth to him, and ought especially to take care, that whatever passions he communicates to his Reader, those passions, if his Reader's mind be sound and vigorous, should always be accompanied with an overbalance of pleasure. Now the music of harmonious metrical language, the sense of difficulty overcome, and the blind association of pleasure which has been previously received from works of rhyme or metre of the same or

1 spontaneous: happening or arising naturally, or without apparent external cause.

2 tranquillity: a state of peace and quiet.

similar construction, an indistinct perception perpetually renewed of language closely resembling that of real life, and yet, in the circumstance of metre, differing from it so widely, all these imperceptibly make up a complex feeling of delight, which is of the most important use in tempering the painful feeling, which will always be found intermingled with powerful descriptions of the deeper passions. This effect is always produced in pathetic and impassioned poetry; while, in lighter compositions, the ease and gracefulness with which the Poet manages his numbers are themselves confessedly a principal source of the gratification of the Reader. I might perhaps include all which it is necessary to say upon this subject by affirming, what few persons will deny, that, of two descriptions, either of passions, manners, or characters, each of them equally well executed, the one in prose and the other in verse, the verse will be read a hundred times where the prose is read once ...

Lines Composed a Few Miles Above Tintern Abbey

The complete title of the poem is “Lines Composed a Few Miles Above Tintern Abbey, on Revisiting the Banks of the Wye During a Tour, July 13, 1798”. The poem was printed as the last item in *Lyrical Ballads*. According to Wordsworth’s note, “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 made his first visit to the Wye valley and the ruins of Tintern Abbey, in Monmouthshire in August 1793, when he was 23 and on a solitary walking tour. The poem was written five years later when he, with his sister Dorothy, paid the place a second visit. The difference between the present landscape and the remembered “picture of mind” gave rise to a meditation, in which the poet conveyed the effect of nature on the growth of his mind.

The poem is written in blank verse.

Five years have past; five summers, with the length



Tintern Abbey by William Gilpin in *Observations on the River Wye* (1782)



Of five long winters! and again I hear
These waters, rolling from their mountain-springs
With a soft inland murmur¹. — Once again
Do I behold these steep and lofty cliffs, 5
That on a wild secluded scene impress
Thoughts of more deep seclusion;² 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-tufts³,
Which at this season, with their unripe fruits,
Are clad⁴ 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 dwellers⁵ in the houseless woods, 20
Or of some Hermit's cave, where by his fire
The Hermit sits alone.⁶

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;

1 a soft inland murmur: suggesting the tranquillity of the place, as contrasted with the roaring waves in the sea.

2 a wild secluded scene impress/Thoughts of more deep seclusion: notice the harmony between the secluded scene and the more secluded mind of the poet. "A wild secluded scene" is a deserted place undisturbed by the outside world.

3 these orchard-tufts: the little hill was overgrown with fruit trees.

4 clad: clothed.

5 vagrant dwellers: wanderers who take rest in the wood.

6 Lines 1-22 gives a description of the present landscape.

And passing even into my purer mind, 30
With tranquil restoration:¹ — 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;² that blessed mood,
In which the burthen³ 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 frame⁴
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
Unprofitable,⁵ and the fever of the world,⁶ 55
Have hung upon the beatings of my heart —
How oft, in spirit, have I turned to thee,
O sylvan Wye!⁷ thou wanderer thro' the woods,
How often has my spirit turned to thee!

1 Lines 26-31 is a good illustration of the poet's idea that poetry "takes its origin from emotion recollected in tranquillity".

2 Of aspect more sublime: of more sublime nature.

3 burthen: burden.

4 corporeal frame: human body.

5 the fretful stir/Unprofitable: irritating and useless human activity.

6 the fever of the world: worldly desire.

7 sylvan: of the woods. Wye: a river that runs near the Tintern Abbey.



And now, with gleams of half-extinguished thought,¹ 60
With many recognitions dim and faint,
And somewhat of a sad perplexity²,
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
I came among these hills; when like a roe 70
I bounded o'er the mountains, by the sides
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 pleasures³ of my boyish days, 75
And their glad animal movements all gone by)
To me was all in all.⁴ — 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 appetite⁵; 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 joys⁶ are now no more,

1 with gleams of half-extinguished thought: with the memory about this place growing dim.

2 a sad perplexity: the poet becomes sad because the scene now is different from what he visualized in his memory.

3 The coarser pleasures: the rough and crude pleasure in boyhood.

4 To me was all in all: Nature was the most beloved to me five years ago.

5 An appetite: a strong desire.

6 aching joys: intense joy. This is a use of oxymoron in rhetoric by putting together two words of entirely different meanings.

And all its dizzy raptures.¹ Not for this
 Faint² I, nor mourn nor murmur, other gifts
 Have followed; for such loss, I would believe,
 Abundant recompence. 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.³ 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,⁴
 And what perceive; 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.

1 Lines 66ff. contain the poet's famed description of the three stages of his growing up, defined in terms of his evolving relations to the natural scene: the young boy's purely physical responsiveness (Lines 73-74); the postadolescent's aching, dizzy, and equivocal passions — a love that is more like dread (Lines 67-72, 75-85: this was his state of mind on the occasion of his first visit); his present state (Lines 85ff.), in which for the first time he adds thought to sense.

2 Faint: lose heart and courage, become depressed.

3 hearing oftentimes ... /To chasten and subdue: as the poet advances in age, he is aware of the sorrows and miseries of human life, but with the influence of nature on him, they appear to him like quiet, soothing music, which has the power to purify and refine his soul.

4 Here Wordsworth expresses his view that the "creative sensibility" contributes to its own perceptions, which is often reiterated in *The Prelude*.



Nor perchance,
If I were not thus taught, should I the more 115
Suffer my genial spirits¹ to decay:
For thou art with me here upon the banks
Of this fair river; thou my dearest Friend²,
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 inform³
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

1 genial spirits: creative powers; "genial" here is the adjectival form of the noun "genius".

2 my dearest Friend: the poet's sister, Dorothy.

3 inform: inspire.

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
Of past existence¹ — 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!

I Wandered Lonely as a Cloud

The original experience of the poem was two years earlier of his composition of it. According to Dorothy Wordsworth's *Grasmere Journal*, April 15, 1802, "It was a threatening misty morning — but mild. We set off after dinner from Eusemere — Mrs. Clarkson went a short way with us but turned back. The wind was furious and we thought we must have returned. We first rested in the large Boat-house, then under a furze Bush opposite Mr. Clarkson's, saw the plough going in the field. The wind seized our breath, the Lake was rough. There was a Boat by itself floating in the middle of the Bay below Water Millock — We rested again in the Water Millock Lane. The hawthorns are black and green, the birches here and there greenish but there is yet more of purple to be seen on the twigs. We got over into a field to avoid some cows — people working, a few primroses by the roadside, wood-sorrel flower, the anemone, scentless violets, strawberries, and that starry yellow flower which Mrs. Clarkson calls pile wort. When we were in the woods beyond Gowbarrow Park we saw a few daffodils close to the water side."

¹ Of past existence: reminder of the poet's own "past experience" five years earlier (see Lines 116-119).



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 of¹ 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 dance².

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,³ 20
They flash upon that inward eye
Which is the bliss of solitude;⁴
And then my heart with pleasure fills,
And dances with the daffodils.

1 a crowd,/A host of: a large number of.

2 in sprightly dance: in lively dance, dance full of energy.

3 In vacant or in pensive mood: in a free or a deeply thoughtful state of mind.

4 They flash upon that inward eye/Which is the bliss of solitude: when alone, the poet recalls the beautiful scene, which gives him great pleasure.

The Solitary Reaper

Unlike most of his poems, this poem is not based on Wordsworth's own experience, but suggested by a passage in Thomas Wilkinson's *Tours to the British Mountains* (1824), which the poet has seen in manuscript: "Passed 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."

The poem is written in iambic tetrameter. The rhyme scheme for each stanza is *ababccdd*.

Behold her, single in the field,
Yon solitary Highland Lass!¹
Reaping and singing by herself;
Stop here, or gently pass!
Alone she cuts and binds the grain, 5
And sings a melancholy strain²;
O listen! for the Vale profound
Is overflowing with the sound.

No Nightingale did ever chaunt³
More welcome notes to weary bands 10
Of travellers in some shady haunt,
Among Arabian sands⁴;
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 Hebrides⁵.
Will no one tell me what she sings?⁶ —

1 Highland Lass: girl in the mountain area of Scotland.

2 a melancholy strain: a sad tune.

3 chaunt: (*archaic*) chant.

4 Arabian sands: Arabian desert.

5 Hebrides: islands off the western coast of Scotland.

6 Will no one tell me what she sings: The poet does not understand Erse, the language in which she sings.



Perhaps the plaintive numbers¹ flow
For old, unhappy, far-off things,
And battles long ago; 20
Or is it some more humble lay²,
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.

Composed upon Westminster Bridge, September 3, 1802

The poem was written in the early morning on September 3, 1802, although the experience was on July 31, 1802, when the poet was on a trip to France. The conflict of feelings attending Wordsworth's brief return to France, where he had once been a revolutionist and the lover of a French girl, evoked a number of personal and political sonnets.

The poem depicts a vivid picture of the quiet beauty of an urban morning. London, in its early morning, appears to be extremely serene and peaceful.

This is a sonnet following the Petrarchan form, with the rhyme scheme *abba, abba* in the octave and *cdcdcd* in the sestet.

Earth has not anything to show more fair:
Dull would he be of soul who could pass by³

1 plaintive numbers: a mournful song.

2 lay: a short lyrical poem meant to be sung.

3 Dull would he be of soul who could pass by: he who could pass by would be of a dull soul, that is, one must be a dull person if he could pay no attention to such a beautiful sight.

A sight so touching in its majesty:
This City now doth, like a garment, wear
The beauty of the morning; silent, bare¹, 5
Ships, towers, domes, theatres, and temples lie
Open unto the fields, and to the sky;
All bright and glittering in the smokeless air.
Never did sun more beautifully steep²
In his first splendour, valley, rock, or hill; 10
Ne'er saw I, never felt, a calm so deep!
The river glideth at his own sweet will:³
Dear God! the very houses seem asleep;
And all that mighty heart is lying still!

Critical Points

A Summary of the Main Idea in “Preface to *Lyrical Ballads*”

The Preface covers a number of issues and is wide-ranging in its survey of the place of *Lyrical Ballads* on the contemporary literary scene. The topics covered include the following:

1. The principal object of the poems. Wordsworth places the emphasis on the attempt to deal with “natural man”, arguing that such men live much closer to nature and, therefore, are closer to the well-springs of human nature. From this, we can see how much Wordsworth owes to that 18th century preoccupation with “natural man”, associated particularly with the writings of Rousseau.

2. Humble and rustic life as subject matter. Wordsworth outlines his reasons: Because in that condition, the essential passions of the heart find a better soil; our elementary feelings may be more accurately contemplated, and more forcibly communicated; the manners of rural life are more easily comprehended, and are more durable; the passions of men are incorporated with the beautiful and permanent forms of nature.

1 bare: empty; here it refers to the fogless and smokeless air in early London morning.

2 steep: let sit in a liquid to extract a flavour or to cleanse; soak; saturate.

3 The river glideth at his own sweet will: the river moves smoothly, effortlessly and imperceptibly at his own will. The river: the Thames River.



3. Language of the poems. For Wordsworth (and Coleridge) this choice of subject matter necessarily involves a rethinking of the language of poetry. They prefer the language of “ordinary men”, a plainer and more emphatic language. They believe that “such a language, arising out of the repeated experience and regular feelings, is a more permanent, and a far more philosophical language.”

4. Definition of poetry. When Wordsworth attempts to define poetry, he pays much emphasis on its effects on the reader. “For all good poetry is the spontaneous overflow of powerful feelings”. Clearly, poetry, for Wordsworth, has a vital role in educating the mind and sensibility of his readers, a moral purpose.

5. Definition of a poet. “What is a poet” is a question frequently asked and answered by Romanticism. Wordsworth’s answer illustrates the poet as genius, as special person, capable of re-articulating thought and feeling so as to educate the reader.

The Preface is itself a masterpiece of English prose, exemplary in its lucid yet passionate defense of a literary style that could be popular without compromising artistic and poetic standards. Moreover, it is also vital for helping us to understand what Wordsworth and Coleridge were attempting in their collection of verses, and also provides us with a means of assessing how successfully the poems themselves live up to the standards outlined in the Preface.

Questions

Preface to *Lyrical Ballads*

Give a brief summary of the main idea for each topic, and

1. explain the difference of principles of poetic writing between Neoclassicism and Romanticism;
2. quote from the Romantic poems to reveal the great influence of the Preface upon the poem writing.

Lines Composed a Few Miles Above Tintern Abbey

1. Is there any difference between the pleasure the poet takes in nature as a child and that he draws from it now? How does the poet’s mind grow in his reflection on the past and nature?
2. Quote from *Lyrical Ballads* and the Preface to prove how the process of the composition and the conclusion of the poem illustrate the poet’s idea of poetry creation.

I Wandered Lonely as a Cloud

1. Compare the prose description by Dorothy and the poem by Wordsworth, find how extensive Wordsworth's use of the prose description is, and see the difference between prose description and poetry.
2. How does Wordsworth's "poetry of nature" in this poem transform itself into "poetry of self-consciousness"?

The Solitary Reaper

Why does the poet present imaginative, exotic interpretations when describing the reaper's singing?

Class Activities

Write poems and read them in class. Following the standards illustrated in the Preface and the example of Wordsworth, write poems about how nature reflects your thoughts and how your mind is being nourished by your reflection of nature.

QUOTATIONS

Is there not an art, a music, and a stream of words that shalt be life, the acknowledged voice of life?

—William Wordsworth

The child is the father of the man.

—William Wordsworth