

Romanticism: Poetry as Reflection

The late 18th century and early 19th century Romantic movement can be seen as a reaction against the rationalism of the 18th century Enlightenment – the movement is manifested in music, literature and visual arts, and these various artforms influenced each other (eg the grandeur and scale in the landscape painting of artists such as John Martin was enormously popular with the Romantic poets and the Bronte sisters who had a large painting of Martin's in their parlour – see some attached examples at the end of this lecture)

The key English Romantic poets are William Wordsworth, Samuel Taylor Coleridge, William Blake (also a painter and illustrator of his own and other work – see examples later), and the later Romantics Lord Byron, John Keats and Percy Shelley

The Romantics championed the power of the imagination rather than the power of reason, and the use of contemporary vernacular language; the poets and poetry from this period are also characterised by a new rebellious and experimental spirit somewhat akin to the larger social movements in the 1960s (eg the atheism of Shelley, Mary Shelley's feminism, the experimentation with drugs such as opium and laudanum); for the Romantics, Satan is the real hero of Milton's *Paradise Lost* we explored a few weeks ago

The poets, especially Lord Byron, were also the first rock-star like celebrities --Byron is often cited as the first poet in the English language to make a living as a poet; the first printing of *Childe Harold's Pilgrimage* sold out in London in the first day.

At public readings of his work, Byron was mobbed, especially by women, and spied on by tourists and the equivalent of paparazzi when he and the Shelleys were living near Geneva

In England the movement influenced by the ideas and philosophy in Edmund Burke's *A Philosophical Enquiry into the Origin of Our Ideas of the Sublime and Beautiful* (1757) and especially for the later Romantics, the enormously popular Gothic novels of writers such as Ann Radcliffe (*The Mysteries of Udolpho*, *The Italian*), Charles Maturin (*Melmoth the Wanderer*) and Matthew Lewis (*The Monk*). Frequently too, and in keeping with the themes and locations of the Gothic novel, an idealized medieval past is invoked as in Keats' "La Belle Dame Sans Merci," or "The Eve of St Agnes," or later in the 19th century in the work of the Pre-Raphaelite poets and artists (also evident in Tennyson's Arthurian poem "The Lady of Shalott" – see attached painting, and his *Idylls of the Kings*, 1856-85)

The Romantic writers are also responsible for two enduring Gothic myths – the story of *Frankenstein* (written by Mary Shelley) and the story of *The Vampyre* (written by John Polidori) both written as a result of a ghost story competition between Byron and the Shelleys in the summer of 1816.

These influences resulted in a poetry that is a re-evaluation and celebration of nature and its "sublime" power; the poetry is also characterised by reflections on the nature of art and the nature of poetry itself (especially evident in the Keats' poems "Ode to a Nightingale" and "Ode on a Grecian Urn")

In the Preface to his *Lyrical Ballads* in the 1802 edition (first published in 1798) Wordsworth defined poetry as “the spontaneous overflow of powerful feelings,” and also argued for both the contemplation of nature as a ideal subject for poetry and for the use of common language in poetry:

The principal object, then, which I proposed to myself in these Poems was to chuse 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; 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 ostentatiously, 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 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 saw poetry as an opportunity to reconcile “man” with nature; Wordsworth went on the argue that the poet has special gifts and that poetry also has the power to re-awaken emotions:

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 volitions and passions as manifested in the goings-on of the Universe, and habitually impelled to create them where he does not find them.... I have said that Poetry is the spontaneous overflow of powerful feelings: it takes its origin from emotion recollected in tranquillity: 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.

For William Blake this contemplation of nature is manifested most clearly in the *Songs of Innocence* and the *Songs of Experience* (published together in 1794 with the subtitle “Shewing the Two Contrary States of the Human Soul”). In keeping with the Romantics celebration of the sublime beauty of nature, Blake’s poem “London” is a bleak portrait of dark vices and emotions of the city:

**I wander thro' each charter'd street,
Near where the charter'd Thames does flow,
And mark in every face I meet
Marks of weakness, marks of woe.**

**In every cry of every Man,
In every Infants cry of fear,
In every voice, in every ban,
The mind-forg'd manacles I hear.**

**How the Chimney-sweeper's cry
Every black'ning Church appalls;
And the hapless Soldier's sigh
Runs in blood down Palace walls.**

**But most thro' midnight streets I hear
How the youthful Harlot's curse
Blasts the new born Infant's tear,
And blights with plagues the Marriage hearse.**

The city is not simply a dark place of misery and unhappiness – living in London gives rise to “mind-forg’d manacles.” Even marriage and the birth of a new infant is damned – the juxtaposition of “marriage” and “hearse” succinctly captures the final mood of the poem. For Wordsworth, who lived in the calm and very beautiful Lake District of England, the poet is better advised to contemplate nature as the manifestation of beauty which gives rise to philosophical and emotional delight.

For the later Romantics – Keats, Shelley and Lord Byron, the contemplation of nature and its Gothic grandeur also gives rise to melancholy thoughts about mortality, but also a contemplation of the power of poetry and art. In the Shakespeare sonnet sequence we looked at a few weeks ago, we saw that Shakespeare sees the writing of literature as a means of immortalizing his love:

**But thy eternal summer shall not fade,
Nor lose possession of that fair thou ow'st,
Nor shall death brag thou wander'st in his shade,
When in eternal lines to time thou grow'st,
So long as men can breathe, or eyes can see,
So long lives this, and this gives life to thee.**

Sonnet 18

For Keats these themes are explored in two of this week’s focus poems, “Ode to a Nightingale” and “Ode on a Grecian Urn” both of which explore the relationship between nature and art.

O for a draught of vintage! that hath been
Cool'd a long age in the deep-delvèd earth,
Tasting of Flora and the country-green,
Dance, and Provençal song, and sunburnt mirth!
O for a beaker full of the warm South!
Full of the true, the blushful Hippocrene,
With beaded bubbles winking at the brim,

And purple-stained mouth;
That I might drink, and leave the world unseen,
And with thee fade away into the forest dim:

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Fade far away, dissolve, and quite forget
What thou among the leaves hast never known,
The weariness, the fever, and the fret
Here, where men sit and hear each other groan;
Where palsy shakes a few, sad, last grey hairs,
Where youth grows pale, and spectre-thin, and dies;
Where but to think is to be full of sorrow
And leaden-eyed despairs;
Where beauty cannot keep her lustrous eyes,
Or new Love pine at them beyond to-morrow.

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Keats compares his own mortality and the torments of life with the eternal melody of the nightingale and the [Dance, and Provençal song, and sunburnt mirth!](#) The simple beautiful song of the bird, in its idealized natural world, is not subject to the decaying and dying world of the speaker. Keats almost contemplates suicide in this state of bliss, listening to the nightingale's song:

Now more than ever seems it rich to die,
To cease upon the midnight with no pain,
While thou art pouring forth thy soul abroad
In such an ecstasy!
Still wouldst thou sing, and I have ears in vain—
To thy high requiem become a sod.

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Thou wast not born for death, immortal Bird!

No hungry generations tread thee down;
The voice I hear this passing night was heard
In ancient days by emperor and clown:
Perhaps the self-same song that found a path
Through the sad heart of Ruth, when, sick for home,
She stood in tears amid the alien corn;
The same that ofttimes hath
Charm'd magic casements, opening on the foam
Of perilous seas, in faery lands forlorn.

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The nightingale becomes a symbol for Keats of the immortality of nature.

In “Ode on a Grecian Urn” Keats again explores the relationship between life and art, but this time the relationship is more complex. The figures on the Grecian urn, though beautiful, also give rise initially to melancholy thoughts because their world is frozen in time:

Heard melodies are sweet, but those unheard
Are sweeter; therefore, ye soft pipes, play on;
Not to the sensual ear, but, more endeared,
Pipe to the spirit ditties of no tone.
Fair youth, beneath the trees, thou canst not leave
Thy song, nor ever can those trees be bare;
Bold Lover, never, never canst thou kiss,
Though winning near the goal---yet, do not grieve;
She cannot fade, though thou hast not thy bliss
Forever wilt thou love, and she be fair!
Ah, happy, happy boughs! that cannot shed

Your leaves, nor ever bid the Spring adieu;
And, happy melodist, unweari-ed,
Forever piping songs forever new;
More happy love! more happy, happy love!
Forever warm and still to be enjoyed,
Forever panting, and forever young;
All breathing human passion far above,
That leaves a heart high-sorrowful and cloyed,
A burning forehead, and a parching tongue.

But Keats turns this idea of the sterility of art around by the end of the 3rd stanza, and again compares the mutability of his own life with the ideal world of the urn where things remain forever young:

When old age shall this generation waste,
Thou shalt remain, in midst of other woe
Than ours, a friend to man, to whom thou say'st,
"Beauty is truth, truth beauty"---that is all
Ye know on earth, and all ye need to know.

Like the well-known opening line of Keats' poem "A Thing of Beauty is a Joy Forever", the poet suggests here – after the notion in Shakespeare's sonnets – that art will endure. Keats' friend and fellow Romantic poet Shelley would later declare in his 1819 treatise *A Defence of Poetry* that :

It is impossible to read the compositions of the most celebrated writers of the present day without being startled with the electric life which burns within their words. They measure the circumference and sound the depths of human nature with a comprehensive and all penetrating spirit, and they are themselves perhaps the most sincerely astonished at its manifestations; for it is less their spirit than the spirit of the age. Poets are the hierophants of an unapprehended inspiration; the mirrors of the gigantic shadows which futurity casts upon the present; the words which express what they understand not; the trumpets which sing to battle, and feel not what they inspire; the influence which is moved not, but moves. Poets are the unacknowledged legislators of the world.



John Martin "The Fall of Babylon" (1831)



John Martin *The Bard* (1817)



Illustration for "The Sick Rose" from *Songs of Experience* by William Blake



Illustration for *Songs of Innocence and Experience* by William Blake (1794)



ADAM AND EVE SLEEPING

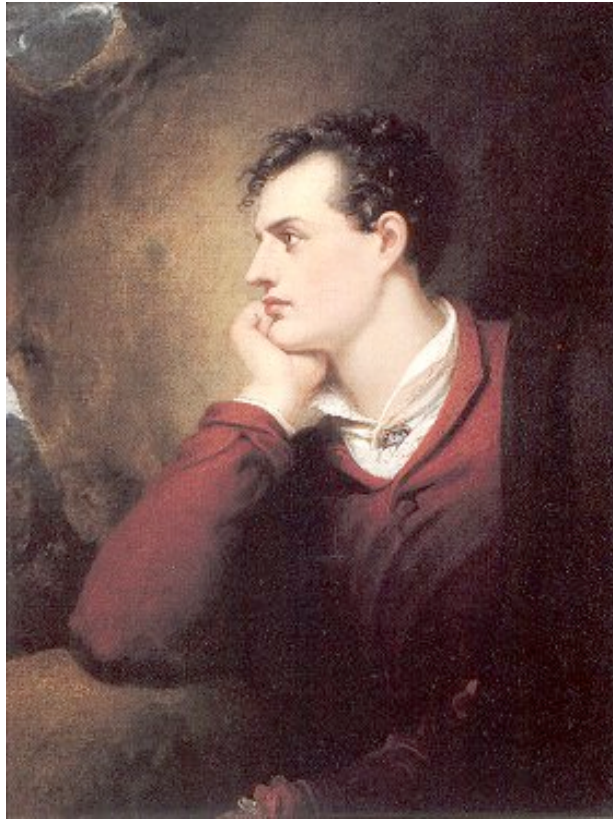
*Him there they found
Squat like a toad, close at the ear of Eve*



“The funeral of Shelley” by Louis Edouard Fournier (1889)



Portrait of George Gordon, Lord Byron in Albanian Dress by T Phillips (1835)



Portrait of Lord Byron by Richard Westall (1813)



Portrait of Percy Shelley by Amelia Curran 1819



John William Waterhouse "The Lady of Shalott" (1888)