

Literary History: A Systematic Approach

Lecture 5:

The Romantic Synthesis: Subjectivity, Individuality and the Problem of Cultural Validity (c. 1780-1832)

1) 18th-Century Paradigm Shift

2) Revolution vs. Synthesis

3) Wordsworth's "Preface" to the *Lyrical Ballads* (1800)

4) Poetic Form

a) Blank Verse and Prose

b) Songs and Ballads

c) The Sonnet

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1) 18th-Century Paradigm Shift

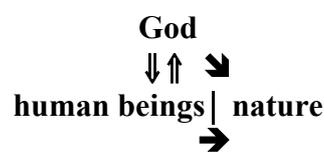
Thomas S. Kuhn, *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions* 1962/1970
applied to 18th century literary history in Furst 2002

This hypothesis envisages the emergence of the new from the familiar via a gradual change of emphasis that ultimately leads to the modification of the entire structure when an innovative paradigm comes to replace the previously established one. [...] In the analysis of paradigm shift, it is not the terminus a quo or the terminus ad quem or even the chronology itself that matters, but rather the nature, direction, and main stages of the transformational process. (3)

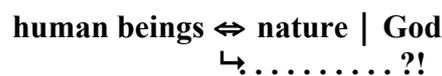
Such a paradigm shift occurs in the metamorphosis of the eighteenth-century model in lyric poetry into the very different Romantic ideal. [...] The paradigm shift was prefigured in the prose of the later eighteenth century, possibly because prose was the genre least subject to the prescriptions of neoclassical usage, and therefore least tied by tradition and convention. (15)

The paradigm shift [...] entails the supplanting of one favored mode of discourse by another very different one. Its total impact amounts to a break in style. But it takes place [...] through a gradual erosion and emendation of the older model, not through a sudden dissonant rupture. The ultimate assertion and emendation of the new paradigm is tantamount to a revolution, yet it is also part of a continuum; though a decisive and perceptible step, it is nevertheless one stage in a process of continuous change. (17)

1) The Traditional View



2) The Modern View



3) Poetic Consequences (cf. Siskin 1988: "The Lyric Turn")

hegemony of the external	→	interiorization
description	→	interpretation
seeing	→	perception
transparency	→	medi(t)ation
denotation	→	connotation
personification/allegory	→	symbol
metonymy	→	metaphor
message	→	meaning
rhetoric	→	'literariness'
addressing an audience	→	addressing the scene, an object, it-/oneself

>> a new author position / a new reader position

>>> a new mode of communication

2) Revolution vs. Synthesis

Abortive thoughts that right and wrong confound,
Truth sacrificed to letters, sense to sound,
False glare, incongruous images, combine;
And noise, and nonsense, clatter through the line.

William Gifford, *The Baviad* (1791)

Neoclassicism

vs.

The Poetics of Sensibility (McGann 1996)

Romanticism

vs.

Neoclassicism *and* the Poetics of Sensibility

William Wordsworth and Samuel Taylor Coleridge, *Lyrical Ballads* (1798, 2nd ed. 1800)

Wordsworth's "Preface" (1800):

Except in a very few instances the Reader will find no personifications of abstract ideas in these volumes [... because] in these poems I propose to myself to imitate, and as far as possible, to adopt the very language of men, and I do not find that such personifications make any regular or natural part of that language [...] [T]his practice [...] has necessarily cut me off from a large portion of phrases and figures of speech which from father to son have long been regarded as the common inheritance of Poets.

[In recent years there have also been poets] who think 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 capricious habits of expression in order to furnish food for fickle tastes and fickle appetites of their own creation.

The invaluable works of our older writers [...] are driven into neglect by frantic novels, sickly and stupid German Tragedies, and deluges of idle and extravagant stories in verse. – When I think upon this degrading thirst after outrageous stimulation I am almost ashamed to have spoken of the feeble effort with which I have endeavoured to counteract it.

3) William Wordsworth, “Preface” to the *Lyrical Ballads* (1800)

For a multitude of causes unknown to former times are now acting with a combined force to blunt the discriminating powers of the mind, and unfitting it for all voluntary exertion to reduce it to a state of almost savage torpor. The most effective of these causes are the great national events which are daily taking place, and the increasing accumulation of men in cities, where the uniformity of their occupations produces a craving for extraordinary incident which the rapid communication of intelligence hourly gratifies.

[W]ords metrically arranged will long continue to impart such a pleasure to mankind as he who is sensible to the extent of that pleasure will be desirous to impart. The end of poetry is to produce excitement in coexistence with an overbalance of pleasure. Now, [...] excitement is an unusual and irregular state of mind, ideas and feelings do not in that state succeed each other in accustomed order. But if the words by which this excitement is produced are in themselves powerful, or the images and feelings have an undue proportion of pain connected with them, there is some danger that the excitement may be carried beyond its proper bounds. Now the co-presence of something regular, something to which the mind has been accustomed when in an unexcited or less excited state, cannot but give great efficacy in tempering and restraining the passion by an intertexture of ordinary feeling.

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 [...]

I have said that Poetry is the spontaneous overflow of powerful feelings: it takes its origins from emotion recollected in tranquillity: the emotion is contemplated till by a species of reaction the tranquillity gradually disappears, and an emotion, similar to that which was before the subject of contemplation is gradually produced, and does itself actually exist in the mind.

[The *Lyrical Ballads* were] published, as an experiment which, I hoped, might be of some use to ascertain, how far, by fitting to metrical arrangement a selection of the real language of men in a state of vivid sensation, that sort of pleasure and that quantity of pleasure may be imparted, which a poet may rationally endeavour to impart.

Low and rustic life was generally chosen because in that situation the essential passions of the heart find a better spoil in which they can attain their maturity, are less under restraint, and speak a plainer, more emphatic language [...] because in that situation the passions of men are incorporated with the beautiful and permanent forms of nature. [...] The language [...] of these men is adopted (purified indeed from what appears to be its real defects, from all lasting and rational causes of dislike and disgust) because such men hourly communicate with the best objects from which the best part of language is originally derived.

4) Poetic Form

Two orientations:

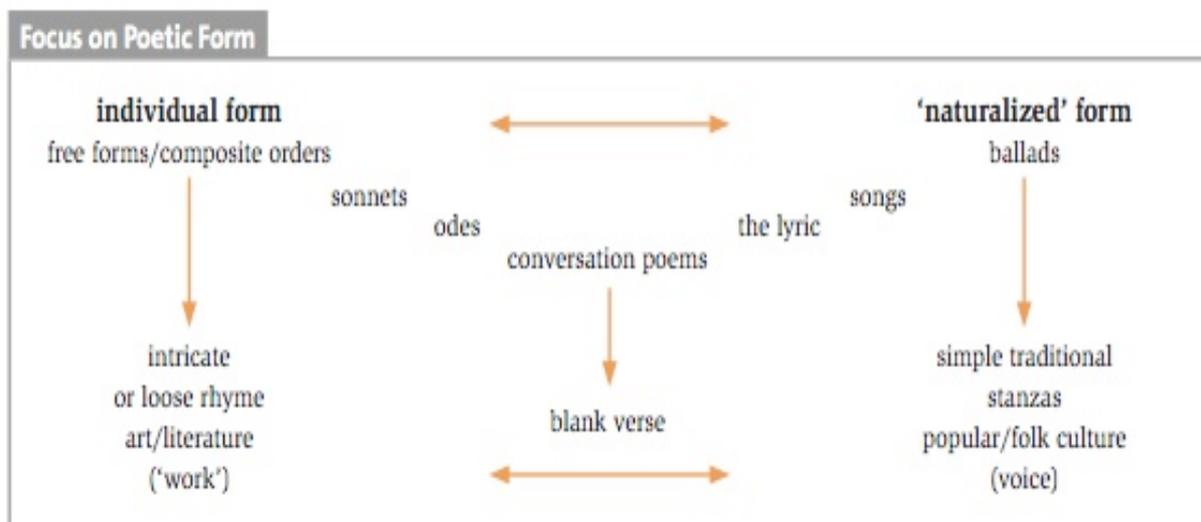
A: a new 'naturalness'

- blank verse meditations ('conversation poems', the 'Greater Romantic Lyric')
- songs and ballads
- [prose]

B: formal innovation and experiment

- sonnets
- odes
- 'composite orders'

(cf. Reinfandt 2008, 71-130)



(Reinfandt 2012, 52)

Examples

- Ballads:** S.T. Coleridge, "The Ancient Mariner" (1800)
W. Wordsworth, "Goody Blake, and Harry Gill" (1798)
- Songs:** W. Blake, "Introduction" to *Songs of Innocence* (1789)
- Lyric Poetry:** W. Wordsworth, "I Wandered Lonely as a Cloud" (1804)
- Conversation Poems:** S.T. Coleridge, "The Eolian Harp" (1795)
- Odes:** W. Wordsworth, "Tintern Abbey" (1798)
J. Keats, "Ode on a Grecian Urn" (1819)
- Sonnets:** Charlotte Smith, *Elegiac Sonnets* (1784-1811)
- Composite Orders:** P.B. Shelley, "Ode to the West Wind" (1819)
W. Wordsworth, *The Prelude* (1798-1850)
- Free Forms/Fragments:** S.T. Coleridge, "Kubla Khan" (1797/98; 1816)

a) Blank Verse and Prose

Wordsworth, "Preface"

[T]here neither is nor can be any essential difference [between the language of prose and metrical composition]. [...] They both speak by and to the same organs; the bodies in which both of them are clothed may be said to be of the same substance, their affections are kindred and almost identical, not necessarily differing even in degree; [...] the same human blood circulates through the veins of them both.

[A poetic] selection of the language spoken by men [...] will entirely separate the composition from the vulgarity and meanness of ordinary life, and if metre be superadded thereto, I believe that a dissimilitude will be produced altogether sufficient for the gratification of the rational mind.

(passage added in 1802)

The blank verse is a condition for strongly varied clause and sentence length. [...] In contrast to the tight linearity of the syntagmatic chain [in neoclassicist poems written in heroic couplets] it has a relatively looser development. [...] There is some uncertainty about how it gets from one to the other.

(Easthope 1983, 126f.)

William Wordsworth, "Lines Written a Few Miles above Tintern Abbey, On Revisiting the Banks of the WYE during a Tour, July 13, 1798", ll. 89-112.

For I have learned
To look on nature, not as in the hour
of thoughtless youth, but hearing oftentimes
The still, sad music of humanity.

[...]

And I have felt
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,
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 I am still
A lover of the meadows and the woods,
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; well pleased to recognize
In nature and the language of the sense,
The anchor of my purest thoughts, the nurse,
The guide, the guardian of my heart, and soul
Of all my moral being.

William Wordsworth, "Nutting"

– It seems a day,
(I speak of one from many singled out)
One of those heavenly days which cannot die,
When forth I sallied from our cottage-door,
And with a wallet o'er my shoulder slung, 5
A nutting crook in hand, I turned my steps
Towards the distant woods, a figure quaint,
Tricked out in proud disguise of beggar's weeds
Put on for the occasion, by advice
And exhortation of my frugal Dame. 10
Motley accoutrement! of power to smile
At thorns, and brakes, and brambles, and, in truth,
More ragged than need was. Among the woods,
And o'er the pathless rocks, I forced my way
Until, at length, I came to one dear nook 15
Unvisited, where not a broken bough
Drooped with its withered leaves, ungracious sign
Of devastation, but the hazels rose
Tall and erect, with milk-white clusters hung,
A virgin scene!—A little while I stood, 20
Breathing with such suppression of the heart
As joy delights in; and with wise restraint
Voluptuous, fearless of a rival, eyed
The banquet, or beneath the tree I sate
Among the flowers, and with the flowers I played; 25
A temper known to those, who, after long
And weary expectation, have been blessed
With sudden happiness beyond all hope.
Perhaps it was a bower beneath whose leaves
The violets of five seasons re-appear 30
And fade, unseen by any human eye;
Where fairy water-breaks do murmur on
For ever, and I saw the sparkling foam,
And with my cheek on one of those green stones
That, fleeced with moss, beneath the shady trees, 35
Lay round me, scattered like a flock of sheep,
I heard the murmur and the murmuring sound,
In that sweet mood when pleasure loves to pay
Tribute to ease; and, of its joy secure,
The heart luxuriates with indifferent things, 40
Wasting its kindliness on stocks and stones,
And on the vacant air. Then up I rose

And dragged to earth both branch and bough, with crash
And merciless ravage; and the shady nook
Of hazels, and the green and mossy bower, 45
Deformed and sullied, patiently gave up
Their quiet being; and, unless I now
Confound my present feelings with the past,
Even then, when from the bower I turned away
Exulting, rich beyond the wealth of kings, 50
I felt a sense of pain when I beheld
The silent trees and the intruding sky.—

Then, dearest maiden! move along these shades
In gentleness of heart; with gentle hand
Touch—for there is a Spirit in the woods. 55

(1800)

b) Songs and Ballads

William Wordsworth:

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

(1804; 1807)

William Blake

In his "Introduction" to his *Songs of Innocence* (1789), the poet, painter and engraver William Blake reflects upon the gap between being and representation by introducing the figure of a piper whose art moves from the realm of innocent involvement to the realm of representation. Interestingly, this fall from grace is inaugurated by a child who urges the piper to broaden the functional potential of his art by enriching first its affective and then, in a move from pure music to singing and writing, its semantic and representational potential:

Piping down the valleys wild
Piping songs of pleasant glee
On a cloud I saw a child,
And he laughing said to me;

"Pipe a song about a lamb"; 5
So I piped with merry cheer.
"Piper, pipe that song again—"
So I piped, he wept to hear.

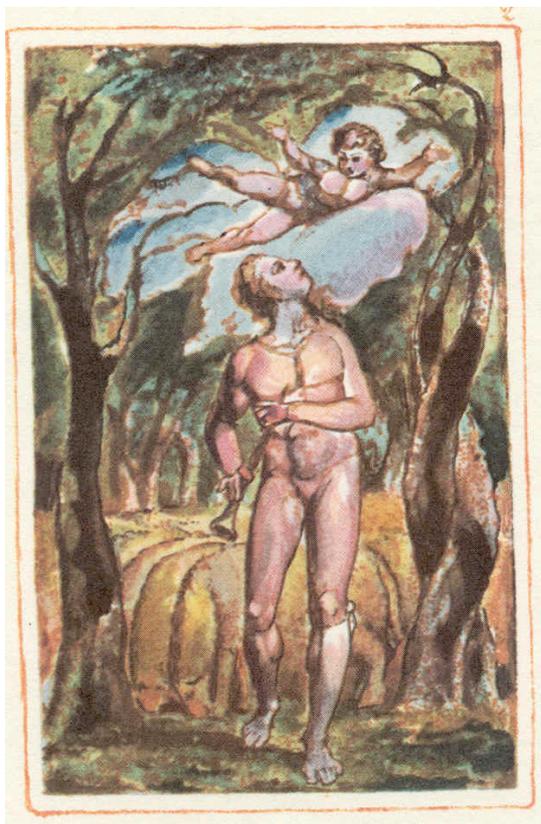
"Drop thy pipe, thy happy pipe,
Sing thy songs of happy cheer." 10
So I sung the same again
While he wept with joy to hear.

"Piper sit thee down and write
In a book that all may read—"
So he vanished from my sight. 15
And I plucked a hollow reed,

And I made a rural pen,
And I stain'd the water clear,
And I wrote my happy songs
Every child may joy to hear. 20

In the course of the poem, the fall from grace is clearly depicted as a **fall into language** which has the capacity to add joy to the world (lines 12, 20) but lets the world vanish from sight (15). Writing about the world is necessarily at a distance from the world, it "stain[s]" (18) its original being. In Blake's frontispiece for the collection, the piper/writer is depicted in the act of stepping out of the world of original being into experience.

(Reinfandt 2012, 50)



c) The Sonnet

John Keats:

If by dull rhymes our English must be chain'd,
And, like Andromeda, the sonnet sweet
Fetter'd, in spite of pained loveliness;
Let us find out, if we must be constrain'd,
Sandals more interwoven and complete
To fit the naked foot of Poesy;
Let us inspect the lyre, and weigh the stress
Of every chord, and see what may be gain'd
By ear industrious, and attention meet;
Misers of sound and syllable, no less
Than Midas of his coinage, let us be
Jealous of dead leaves in the bay wreath crown;
So, if we may not let the muse be free,
She will be bound with garlands of her own.
(1819)

Rhyme Schemes:

Italian/ Petrarchan Sonnet:	abba abba * cde cde (cdc cdc)
English Sonnet:	abab cdcd efef * gg
Keats:	abcabdcabdcdede

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