

William Wordsworth, “Nutting” (1798/1800): Romantic Nature, Romantic Culture

Outline

- 1) Introduction:
Why Is the Period of Romanticism so Important?**
- 2) Romantic Nature**
- 3) Theorising Romanticism**
- 4) Modes of Romantic Poetry**
- 5) Romantic Culture**

1) Introduction

Key Authors: Romanticism

The 'Big Six':

William Blake (1757–1827)
William Wordsworth (1770–1850)
Samuel Taylor Coleridge (1772–1827)
Percy Bysshe Shelley (1792–1822)
John Keats (1795–1821)
George Gordon Lord Byron (1788–1824)

(Re-)Established Woman Writers:

Mary Shelley (1797–1851)
Charlotte Smith (1749–1806)
Mary Robinson (1757–1800)
Anna Letitia Barbauld (1743–1825)
Joanna Baillie (1762–1852)

“The Romantic era has traditionally been the shortest of the literary periods to take its place in the sequence of epochs that structure anthologies and literary histories, and it is typically granted representation out of all proportion to its duration.”

→ Why?

“In the decades that straddle the turn of the eighteenth century, the categories of ‘aesthetics’ and ‘poetics’ both underwent serious transformation that still matter in the early twenty-first century [...] This is the period [...] identified with the emergence of what might be called a cultural idiom, a whole way of being in the world.”

(Chandler 2009, 9/1f.)

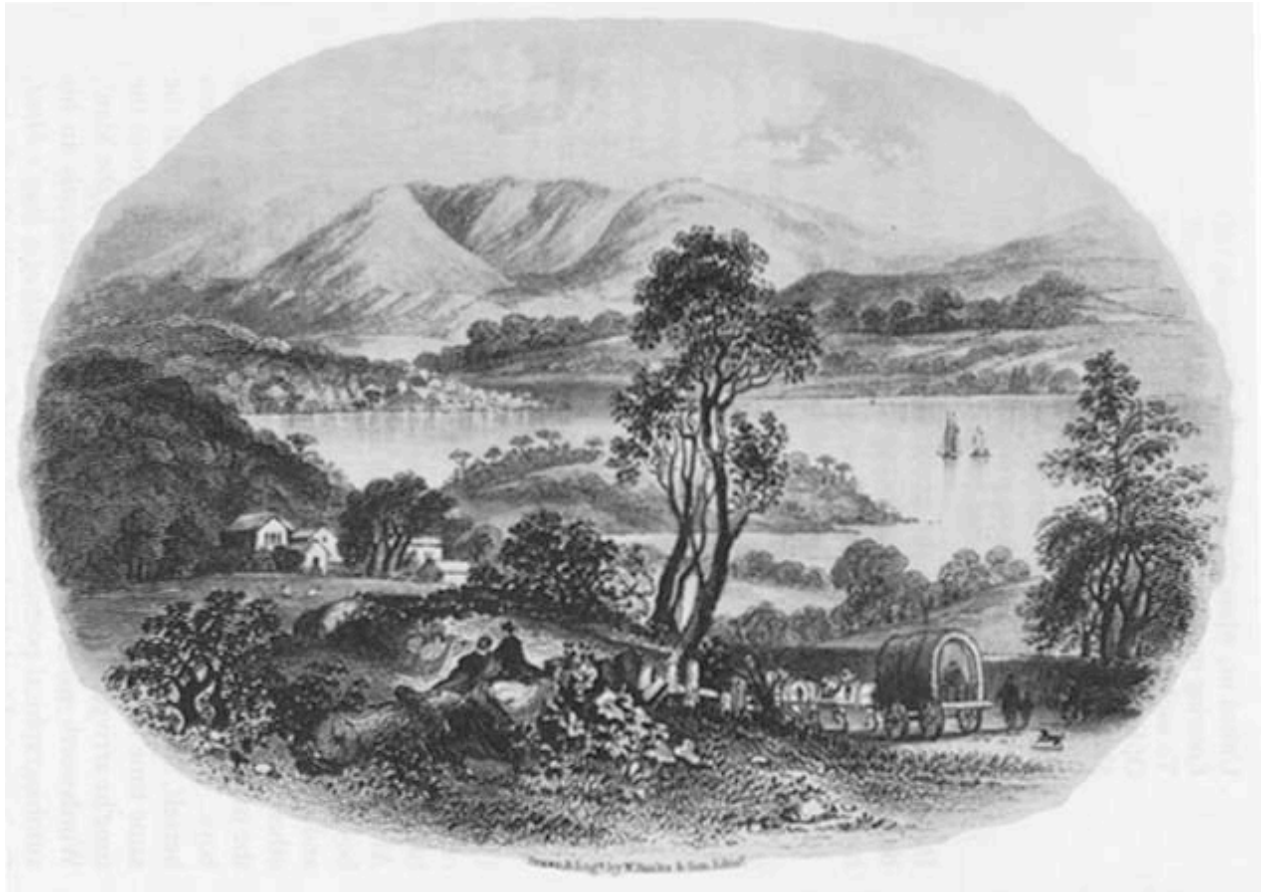
2) Romantic Nature

William Wordsworth, “Nutting”:

written in late 1798, published in the second edition of *Lyrical Ballads* in 1800.

Note (1843) to Isabella Fenwick:

Written in Germany: intended as part of a poem on my own life, but struck out as not being wanted there. Like most of my school-fellows I was an impassioned nutter. For this pleasure, the vale of Esthwaite, abounding in coppice wood, furnished a very wide range. These verses arose out of the remembrance of feelings I had often had when a boy [...].



The Vale of Esthwaite. Steel engraving by W. Banks, 1840.

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 10
And exhortation of my frugal Dame.
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, 20
A virgin scene!—A little while I stood,
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 kindness 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

Gabriel Josipovici, "I Heard the Murmur and the Murmuring Sound." *What Ever Happened to Modernism*. New Haven: Yale University Press, 2010: 48–62, 54.

→ **Wordsworth's "Nutting" depicts a primal scene of cultural modernity**

"The poem is so shocking because we sense that it is not so much the act of violence which is seen as a rape of nature as the very presence of the child; the act merely dramatises what had been latent all along [...]. The paradox for Wordsworth is that only in the midst of nature does he feel fully himself [...], and yet his very presence in nature robs it of precisely that which made it such a source of healing and joy."

3) Theorizing Romanticism

Definition

In the preface to *Lyrical Ballads*, → **Wordsworth's definition of poetry** reads as follows:

"[A]ll 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 [...] but by a man who, being possessed of more than usual organic sensibility, had also thought long and deeply. [...] I have said that Poetry is the spontaneous overflow of powerful feelings; it takes its origins from emotion recollected in tranquillity; the emotion is then 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."

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,

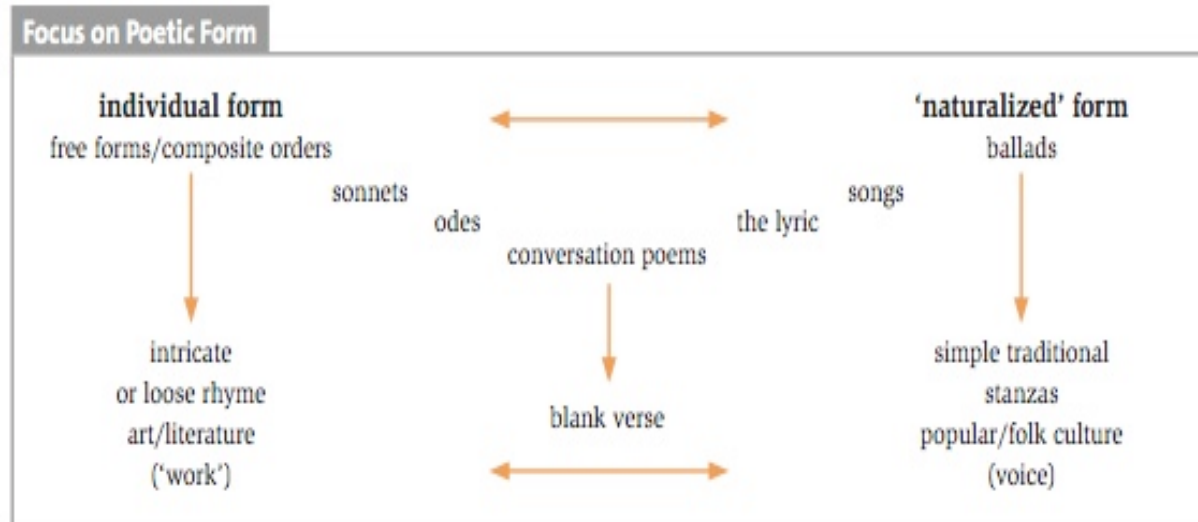
And I made a rural pen,
And I stain'd the water clear,
And I wrote my happy songs
Every child may joy to hear. 20

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.



William Blake,
Songs of Innocence (1789),
frontispiece.

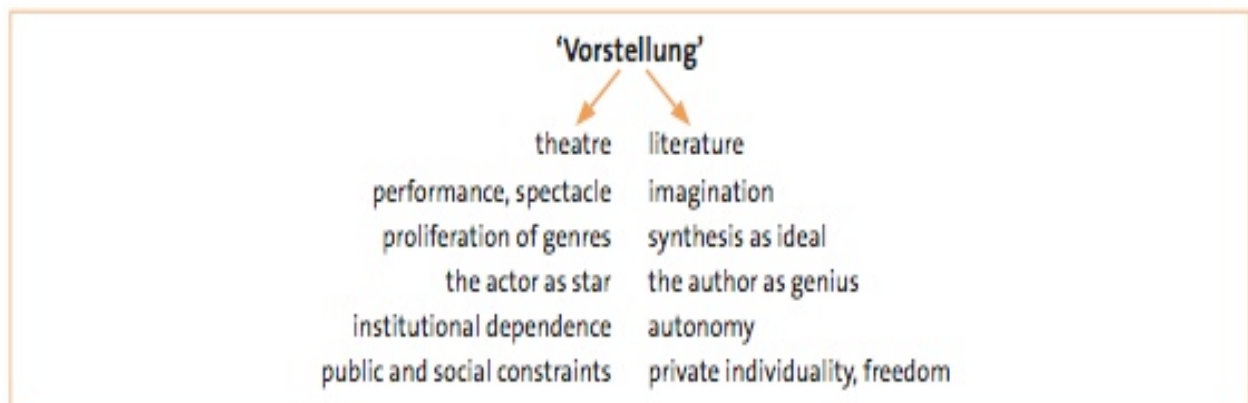
4) Modes of Romantic Poetry



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)

5) Romantic Culture



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b) Select Standard Works

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c) Eminently Useful

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