

Romanticism

Part 2: Studying Romanticism

Lecture 4: English Romanticism

1) English Romanticism: A Survey

2) Poets and Their Work: Theory and Practice

3) The Problem

1) English Romanticism: A Survey

Focus: New Poetry in Opposition to Neoclassicism

► **'The Big Six'**

- [William Blake (1757-1827)]

'The First Generation':

- William Wordsworth (1770-1850)
- Samuel Taylor Coleridge (1772-1834)

'The Second Generation':

- Percy Bysshe Shelley (1792-1822)
- John Keats (1795-1821)

- [George Gordon Lord Byron (1788-1824)]

Influential Studies:

Abrams 1953/1971, Bloom 1961, Hartman 1964/1970, Mellor 1980

Key Terms:

imagination, spirituality, creativity, process, uniqueness, diversity, reconciliation, synthesis (cf. McGann 1983, 32)

2) Poets and Their Work: Theory & Practice

Neoclassicism

a) Theory

> Alexander Pope, *Essay on Criticism* (1709/11)

b) Practice

> Alexander Pope, *Windsor Forest* (1713)

Alexander Pope, *Essay on Criticism* (1709/11)

First follow Nature, and your judgement frame
By her just standard, which is still the same;
Unerring Nature, still divinely bright,
One clear, unchanged, and universal light,
Life, force, and beauty must to all impart,
At once the source, and end, and test of art.
(Part I, ll. 67-73)

Those rules of old discovered, not devised,
Are Nature still, but Nature methodized;
Nature, like liberty, is but restrained
By the same laws which herself ordained.
Hear how learn'd Greece her useful rules indites,
When to repress and when indulge our flights:
[...]
Learn hence for ancient rules a just esteem;
To copy Nature is to copy them.
(Part I, ll. 88-93 and 139f.)

'Tis with our judgements as our watches, none
Go just alike, yet each believes his own.
[...]
Authors are partial to their wit, 'tis true,
But are not critics to their judgement too?
(Part I, ll. 9f. and 17f.)

Yet if we look more closely, we shall find
Most have the seeds of judgement in their mind:
Nature affords at least a glimmering light;
The lines, though touched but faintly, are drawn right.
(Part I, ll. 19-22)

Pride, where wit fails, steps in to our defense,
And fills up all the mighty void of sense.
If once right reason drives that cloud away,
Truth breaks upon us with resistless day.
Trust not yourself: but your defects to know,
Make use of every friend – and every foe.
(Part II, ll. 210-214)

In wit, as nature, what affects our hearts
Is not the exactness of peculiar parts;
[...]
No single parts unequally surprise,
All comes united to the admiring eyes.
[...]
Avoid extremes; and shun the fault of such
Who still are pleased too little or too much.
(Part II, ll. 243f., 249f., 384f.)

Poets, like painters, thus unskilled to trace
The naked nature and the living grace,
with gold and jewels cover every part,
And hide with ornaments their want of art.
True wit is nature to advantage dressed,
What oft was thought, but ne'er so well expressed;
[...]
But true expression, like the unchanging sun,
Clears and improves whate'er it shines upon;
It gilds all objects, but it alters none.
Expression is the dress of thought, and still
Appears more decent as more suitable.
(Part II, ll. 293-298 and 315-319)

True ease in writing comes from art, not chance,
As those move easiest who have learned to dance.
(Part II, ll. 362f.)

Alexander Pope, *Windsor Forest* (1713)

Thy Forests, *Windsor!*, and thy green Retreats,
At once the Monarch's and the Muse's Seats,
Invite my Lays. Be present, Sylvan Maids!
Unlock your Springs, and open all your Shades,
Granville commands: Your Aid O Muses bring!
What Muse for *Granville* can refuse to sing?

The Groves of *Eden*, vanish'd now so long,
Live in Description, and look green in Song:
These, were my breast inspired with equal Flame,
Like them in Beauty, should be like in Fame.
Here Hills and Vales, the Woodland and the Plain,
Here Earth and Water seem to strive again,
Not *Chaos*-like together crush'd and bruis'd,
But as the World, harmoniously confus'd:
Where Order in Variety we see,
And where, tho' all things differ, all agree.
[...]

See Pan with Flocks, with Fruits *Pomona* crown'd,
Here blushing *Flora* paints th' enamel'd Ground,
Here *Ceres'* Gifts in waving prospects stand,
And nodding tempt the joyful Reaper's Hand,
Rich industry sits smiling on the Plains,
And Peace and Plenty tell, a STUART reigns.
[...]

(ll. 1-16/37-42)

Romanticism

William Wordsworth

a) Practice

> 'Lines Written a Few Miles above Tintern Abbey, On Revisiting the Banks of the WYE during a Tour, July 13, 1798'

b) Theory

> 'Preface' to the *Lyrical Ballads* (1800)

William Wordsworth, 'Tintern Abbey' (1798)

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,
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
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
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,
Or of some Hermit's cave, where by his fire
The Hermit sits alone.

[...]

(ll. 1-22)

William Wordsworth, "Preface" to the *Lyrical Ballads* (1800)

[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.

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.

[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 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.

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.

[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)

Samuel Taylor Coleridge

a) Theory

> *Biographia Literaria or, Biographical Sketches of My Literary Life and Opinions* (1817)

b) Practice

> 'Kubla Khan' (c. 1797/98; 1816)

S.T. Coleridge, *Biographia Literaria* (1817)

The IMAGINATION then I consider either as primary or secondary. The primary IMAGINATION I hold to be the living power and prime Agent of all human Perception, and as a repetition in the finite mind of the eternal act of creation in the infinite I AM. The secondary I consider as an echo of the former, co-existing with the conscious will, yet still as identical with the primary in the *kind* of its agency, and differing only in *degree*, and in the *mode* of its operation. It dissolves, diffuses, dissipates, in order to re-create, or where this process is rendered impossible, yet still at all events it struggles to idealize and to unify. It is essentially *vital*, even as all objects (as objects) are essentially fixed and dead.

FANCY, on the contrary, has no other counters to play with but fixities and definites. The Fancy is indeed no other than a mode of Memory emancipated from the order of time and space; and blended with and modified by that empirical phenomenon of the will, which we express by the word CHOICE. But equally with the ordinary memory it must receive all its materials ready made from the law of association.

(from Chapter 13)

S.T. Coleridge,

'Kubla Khan Or, a vision in a dream. A Fragment.'

(c.1797/98; 1816)

In the summer of the year 1797, the Author, then in ill health, had retired to a lonely farm house between Porlock and Linton, on the Exmoor confines of Somerset and Devonshire. In consequence of a slight indisposition, an anodyne had been prescribed, from the effects of which he fell asleep in his chair at the moment that he was reading the following sentence, or words of the same substance, in 'Purchas's Pilgrimes:' 'Here the Khan Kubla commanded a palace to be built, and a stately garden thereunto: and thus ten miles of fertile ground were inclosed with a wall.'

The Author continued for about three hours in a profound sleep, at least of the external senses, during which time he has the most vivid confidence, that he could not have composed less than from two to three hundred lines; if that indeed can be called composition in which all the images rose up before him as things, with a parallel production of the correspondent expressions, without any sensation or consciousness of effort. On awaking he appeared to himself to have a distinct recollection of the whole, and taking his pen, ink, and paper, instantly and eagerly wrote down the lines that are here preserved. At this moment he was unfortunately called out by a person on business from Porlock, and detained by him above an hour, and on his return to his room, found, to his no small surprise and mortification, that though he still retained some vague and dim recollection of the general purport of the vision, yet, with the exception of some eight or ten scattered lines and images, all the rest had passed away like the images on the surface of a stream into which a stone had been cast, but, alas! without the after restoration of the latter [...]
Yet from the still surviving recollections in his mind, the Author has frequently purposed to finish for himself what had been originally, as it were, given to him. but the to-morrow is yet to come.

In Xanadu did Kubla Khan

A stately pleasure-dome decree:

Where Alph, the sacred river, ran

Through caverns measureless to man

Down to a sunless sea.

So twice five miles of fertile ground

With walls and towers were girdled round:

And there were gardens bright with sinuous rills

Where blossomed many an incense-bearing tree;

And here were forests ancient as the hills,

Enfolding sunny spots of greenery.

But oh! that deep romantic chasm which slanted

Down the green hill athwart a cedarn cover!

A savage place! as holy and enchanted

As e'er beneath a waning moon was haunted

By woman wailing for her demon-lover!

And from this chasm, with ceaseless turmoil seething,

As if this earth in fast thick pants were breathing,

A mighty fountain momentarily was forced:

Amid whose swift half-intermitted burst

Huge fragments vaulted like rebounding hail,

Or chaffy grain beneath the thresher's flail:

Amid these dancing rocks at once and ever

It flung up momentarily the sacred river.

Five miles meandering with a mazy motion

Through wood and dale the sacred river ran,

Then reached the caverns measureless to man,

And sank in tumult to a lifeless ocean:

And 'mid this tumult Kubla heard from far

Ancestral voices prophesying war!

The shadow of the dome of pleasure
Floated midway on the waves;
Where was heard the mingled measure
From the fountain and the caves.
It was a miracle of rare device,
A sunny pleasure-dome with caves of ice!

A damsel with a dulcimer
In a vision once I saw:
It was an Abyssinian maid,
And on her dulcimer she played,
Singing of Mount Abora.
Could I revive within me
Her symphony and song,
To such a deep delight 'twould win me
That with music loud and long,
I would build that dome in air,
That sunny dome! those caves of ice!
And all who heard should see them there,
And all should cry, Beware! Beware!
His flashing eyes, his floating hair!
Weave a circle round him thrice,
And close your eyes with holy dread,
For he on honey-dew hath fed,
And drunk the milk of Paradise.

John Keats/Percy Bysshe Shelley

Theory

- > JK, Letters (1817/18)
- > PBS, 'A Defence of Poetry' (1821)

John Keats, Letters

What the imagination seizes as Beauty must be truth – whether it existed before or not [...]

(to Benjamin Bailey, 22 Nov 1817)

The excellence of every art is its intensity, capable of making all disagreeables evaporate, from their being in close relationship with Beauty and Truth [...] [I]t struck me, what quality went to form a Man of Achievement especially in Literature & which Shakespeare possessed so enormously – I mean *Negative Capability*, that is when man is capable of being in uncertainties, Mysteries, doubt, without any irritable reaching after fact & reason.

(to George and Tom Keats, 21 (27?) Dec 1817)

[I]f poetry comes not as naturally as the Leaves to a tree it had better not come at all.

(to John Taylor, 27 Feb 1818)

Percy Bysshe Shelley, 'A Defence of Poetry' (1821)

The human mind could never, except by the intervention of these excitements [of poetry and art], have been awakened to the invention of the grosser sciences, and that application of analytical reasoning to the aberrations of society, which it is now attempted to exalt over the direct expression of the inventive and creative faculty itself.

The cultivation of those sciences which have enlarged the limits of the empire of man over the external world, has, for want of the poetical faculty, proportionally circumscribed those of the internal world; and man, having enslaved the elements, remains himself a slave.

A man cannot say, "I will compose poetry." The greatest poet even cannot say it: for the mind in creation is like a fading coal which some invisible influence, like an inconstant wind, awakens to transitory brightness: this power arises from within [...] Could this influence be durable in its original purity and force, it is impossible to predict the greatness of the results; but when composition begins, inspiration is already on the decline.

The functions of the poetical faculty are two-fold; by one it creates new materials of knowledge; and power and pleasure; by the other it engenders in the mind a desire to reproduce and arrange them according to a certain rhythm and order which may be called the beautiful and the good.

[O]ur own will be a memorable age in intellectual achievements [...] The most unfailing herald, companion, and follower of the awakening of a great people to work a beneficial change in opinion or institutions, is Poetry. At such periods there is an accumulation of the power of communicating and receiving intense and impassioned conceptions respecting man and nature. [...] Poets are the unacknowledged legislators of the World.

3) The Problem

That a historical period dominated by two decades of war, huge population increases, rampant industrialism and a rapidly expanding publishing industry should borrow the name which Victorians gave to a handful of poets – poets of two distinct generations, whose contemporaries assigned them to three distinct ‘schools’ – does seem a bit of a stretch.

(Schor 1999, 23)

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