



## THE ROMANTICISM POETRY

### A general survey

The Romantic Movement developed in different forms and ways in European countries. In England, we may say that it represented a reaction against the excesses of the French Revolution, the Napoleonic imperialism and also the internal upheavals caused by the Industrial Revolution. The Movement tended to reassert the intrinsic value of man against the corrupting effects of civilization.

«Bliss was it in that dawn to be alive» wrote William Wordsworth in *The Prelude*, at first going into raptures over the French Revolution, which was hailed as the dawn of a new age, a turning point in the history of the world. The French Revolution was greeted by many English writers with great songs of praise and hope, including William Blake who wrote a poem with the title *The French Revolution*. Unfortunately the French Revolution turned into tyranny: Napoleon threw off the mask of the liberator to play the role as a conqueror, and Europe was involved in two decades of war, with the obvious consequences of social chaos and political disorder.

The themes of English Romantic poetry all relate to this widely contrasting flux of history. The main features, which are immediately apparent in Robert Burns, William Blake and other poets, can be summed up very easily:

- a strong feeling for nature (not as a centre of beautiful scenes but as a spiritual influence on life) and for man's place in the natural world;
- poets' interest in common people and low rustic life;
- growing concern in the consequences of industrialism and the dehumanising effects of factories;
- a concern in the ideals of the French Revolution: freedom, equality and fraternity;
- a frequent consideration of the innocent phase of childhood as opposed to the experienced adult;
- rejection of all the rules and conventions of the past, turning away from the values of order, reason and restraint associated with Classicism;
- a faultless style and formal perfection were not considered essential by new emphasis given to imagination, emotion and spontaneity.

Poetry was no longer regarded as a privileged domain, reserved for those who could afford a refined standard of education, but as the proper field of those who possessed a creative mind and a meaningful experience to communicate.

Unlike the poets of Classicism who had operated in the framework of society and had been their objective spokesmen, Romantic poets expressed an inner subjective world, the inner feelings of the individual in a mass-market society. They gave life to one of the most important literary and artistic revolutions in England though they were distinguished by features of their own.

### Two generations of great poets

The first great Romantic poets were Wordsworth and Coleridge: in Wordsworth's emphasis on poetry as «the spontaneous overflow of powerful feelings», in his attribution of importance to «common life» and to the «language really used by men», we see, along with the role ascribed by Coleridge to the «imagination», the basis of English Romantic poetry.

They were followed by a second generation represented by Byron, Shelley and Keats. They all travelled a lot, died young outside their motherland, and all three lived and wrote as if they had some premonition of the tragic shortness of their lives. They were desperately aware of the need to cram a lifetime's experience into the years of youth.



## Minor Poets

Between the minor poets we find Robert Southey (1774-1843), Thomas Campbell (1777-1844), Thomas Moore (1779-1852), Walter Savage Landor (1775-1864) and Leigh Hunt (1784-1859).

Southey is often associated with Wordsworth and Coleridge as a member of the Lake Poets, but he is a minor figure in comparison with his friends: Southey's poetry is much less original. He expressed his ardent sympathy for the French Revolution in the long poem *Joan of Arc* (1796), and wrote long narrative poems in exotic settings (*Thalaba the Destroyer*, 1801; *The Curse of Kehama*, 1810). Except for a few lyrics (*Devil's Thoughts*, 1799), ballads (*The Old Woman of Berkeley* and *St. Michael's Chair*) and comic-grotesque poems (*My Days Among the Dead Are Past*, *After Blenheim* and *The Inchcape Rock*), Southey's poetry is little read today. In 1813 he was appointed Poet Laureate and kept the office all his life.

Campbell wrote patriotic songs such as *Ye Mariners of England* (1801) and *The Battle of the Baltic* (1809).

Moore owes his fame to the *Irish Melodies* (1807-1835), a suggestive collection of songs and ballads, and to his long poem *Lalla Rookh* (1817).

Landor was primarily a prose writer; among his poetical production *Count Julian* (1812) and *Gebir* (1798) deserve to be mentioned.

Hunt, like Landor, was mainly a prose writer; his most remarkable poetical work is *The Story of Rimini* (1816), dealing with the episode of Paolo and Francesca (the tragic tale of the adulterous lovers, already narrated by Dante in his *Inferno*).

## PROSE

### Essays and critical voices

The Romantic period was rich in essays. They can be distinguished in two genres: the familiar essay – dealing with various subjects and the most suitable means of expression of the Romantic poets to reveal their personal feelings and opinions – and the critical essay. The latter was concerned with the works of other authors, which were regarded with sympathy and in order to discover the true personality and the aims of the writer, before proceeding onto a critical analysis.

Among the most famous essayists we may quote Charles Lamb (1775-1834), Thomas De Quincey (1785-1859) and William Hazlitt (1778-1830).

Lamb is best remembered as an essayist, although he had a rich and varied literary career characterized by poetry, drama and some highly important criticism. His best known works are *Essays of Elia* (1820-1823) and *Last Essays of Elia* (1833), masterpieces of simple entertaining (the form of unpretentious essay was a popular feature of magazines in the 1820s and 1830s): under the name of Elia, he talks delightfully and intimately of everyday events, of his literary aspirations, of the people he meets and of the characteristic places of London. Lamb also wrote critical works and essays such as *Specimens of English Dramatic Poets, who lived about the time of Shakespeare* (1808) and *On the Tragedies of Shakespeare, Considered with Reference to their Fitness for Stage Representation* (1812).

De Quincey, like Coleridge, possessed a keen intellect, but soon he became an opium-addict and left his works unfinished. He described his drug-induced dreams in *Confessions of an English Opium Eater* (1821). Other remarkable De Quincey's essays are *Murder as one of the Fine Art* (1827), *Suspiria de Profundis* (1845), *The English Mail-Coach* (1849) and *The Daughter of Lebanon*.

Hazlitt is one of the greatest English critics; a friend and champion of the Romantic poets, his works *On Poetry in General and Lectures on the English Poets* (1818) are lively and convincing essays on the value of art. His work on Shakespeare is still highly regarded, and his *Table Talk* (1821-1822) and *The Spirit of the Age* (1825) are splendid evocations of the period and his personalities. His output was immense and of a consistently high standard, no matter what his subject, showing an exemplary objectivity and independence of judgment.

### Novel

In the 19th century the whole course of literary history changed as the novel, considered to be until then an inferior literary form, became well received and touched the nerve of the readers, who were turned away from the harsh realities of modern life. The century was furnished with a huge range of novels: «historical novels» set far back in time; the «Gothic novel» dealing with frightening and horrifying stories; novels escapist and Romantic in tone; novels portraying society of the time; and novels with science fiction elements (such as *Frankenstein, or the Modern Prometheus*, 1818, by Mary Shelley, 1797-1851). Two of the best-known and best-loved novelist of the time were Sir Walter Scott and Jane Austen, whose reputation has remained high ever since.





## GREAT WRITERS

### William Wordsworth (1770-1850)

#### Life

William Wordsworth, the greatest of the Romantic poets, was born in 1770 in Cockermouth (Cumberland), in the area of the «Lake District» – a region of England called Sommerset strictly connected with nature – with which his name was to become very strongly associated. The second of five children, he lost his mother and was sent to the Grammar School of Hawkshead, then to St. John's College in Cambridge. Wordsworth graduated in 1791 without distinction. Most of his life was spent in the Lake District, apart from his many trips to France (1791-1792) and Germany (1798-1799). When in France he came in touch with the revolutionary movement, and became an enthusiastic supporter of the French Revolution. But later, the violence of the «Period of Terror» disappointed him and made him change his original ideas. Wordsworth suffered from a long spiritual crisis that he overcame by giving up his dreams of political regeneration and devoting himself to literature. In 1795 he met Coleridge and the friendship with the poet was a relevant event in his poetical life. In a few years the creative force of the two poets was to change the course of English poetry. He made his home with his sister, secretary, inspirer Dorothy at Grasmere, picturesque country, where in communion with nature he composed his best poetry. The area became a place of literary pilgrimage, much celebrated in Wordsworth's own works as well as those of many other writers. In 1802 he married a childhood friend, Mary Hutchinson; she gave birth to five children. Wordsworth achieved a great fame and in 1843 was recognized as a public figure and appointed Poet Laureate. He died in 1850 in Rydal Mount and was buried at St. Oswald's Church in Grasmere.

#### Works

**Poetry.** Wordsworth's first publications are two poems in «couplets»: An Evening Walk (1793), a heroic work describing the beauty and the importance of rural life, and Descriptive Sketches (1793), also written in a conventional manner. In them he describes his emotions in admiring the splendid landscape of the Alps, underlining the simple and free life of the Switzerland farmer.

His first very important work is Lyrical Ballads (1798), poems jointly produced with his friend Coleridge. The Preface to the Lyrical Ballads is considered the «Manifesto of the Romantic Movement» as it expresses the Romantic poetical theories and aims. There he explained his efforts of relating incidents from common life in a language really used by men. He underlined the importance of poetry as a form of knowledge based on concrete experience because it has its origins in sensations which are transformed into emotions. Nature is a lawgiver and a guide to the moral life of man: human being and nature cannot exist without each other and nature is the main source of spiritual growth. The role of the imagination is to modify the objects observed through the eyes of the soul.

The long autobiographical «blank verse» poem The Prelude, or, Growth of a Poet's Mind, undoubtedly his masterpiece, was largely written between 1799 and 1805, even if it was not published until just after his death.

Michael (1800), a pastoral poem, and The Excursion (1814), a long philosophical poem (on God, man and nature) in nine books of blank verse, are of considerable importance.

In Poems in two volumes (1807) there are some of his famous short poems: Resolution and Independence, The Solitary Reaper (the chosen subject is a young girl who is reaping and singing in an unknown language which recalled the fantastic and magic landscape of a farther land), Elegiac Stanzas Suggested by a Picture of Peele Castle, Ode to

Duty, Intimations of Immortality from Recollections of Early Childhood,

My Heart Leaps Up when I Behold and some Miltonic sonnets. These poems are the best examples of how Wordsworth is able to give «the charm of novelty to things of everyday, and to excite a feeling similar to the supernatural by awakening the mind's attention from the lethargy of custom». Poetry has performed its function if we manage to see the loveliness and the wonders of the world in a solitary reaper or in a rainbow, in a field of Daffodils or when we walk upon Westminster Bridge on a beautiful morning.

The White Doe of Rylstone (1815) is a Romantic poem where the author is mainly interested in the moral and religious side of the subject.

Two volumes of Miscellaneous Poems were published in 1815; Peter Bell and The Waggoner in 1819; The River Duddon in 1820.

The issues in Wordsworth's poetry can be seen clearly in the poem Lines Composed a Few Miles Above Tintern Abbey. We find description of a rural landscape; truth and meaning are found in the natural world, in the harmony in nature. The poet is not just concerned with presenting his personal perception but to discuss and question his vision.





**The Prelude.** It's of great importance to read The Prelude to fully appreciate Wordsworth's poetry. We come to know how his life is marked not by events, but by spiritual experiences. The work is a picture of the author's experiences and his personal interpretation of these experiences.

Wordsworth himself and his own imagination is the principal subject of the narrative. After the death of his parents, the orphan William was looked after by some relatives and sent to a school in the beautiful Lake District. Here, the school of nature attracted him more than the discipline of the classics, and he learned more from flowers, hills and stars than from books. The poet never felt lonely with nature, but it was just the opposite. He very much loved the solitary hours spent alone in the woods and fields: Burns, Keats and other poets describe the outward aspects of nature, while Wordsworth describe the feelings stirred up in the man who goes alone through the woods and fields. He recollects not only the joys of his childhood in the Lake District, but also his fears and pains. The poem is a discussion and analysis of his response to his own childhood experience.

**Wordsworth's art and poetical message.** The poet expressed the deepest aspiration of English Romanticism. He broke with the tradition of the past speaking of the small happenings of country life, occupations and feelings of humble people, and emotions aroused in his hearth by the contemplation of nature. He created a new poetical language, not by introducing the terms and the expressions of the popular language into literature, but by trying to interpret and express emotions in common and simple words, rejecting the artificial poetic diction used in conventional 18th century verse. When we read Wordsworth for the very first time, we are astonished by the absolute simplicity of his poetry; and this is just the effect he wanted to produce. Unlike classical poets, he was not concerned with the outward aspect of nature, but he penetrated deeply into its spirit to capture its true essence and the mysterious links with man. He contemplated it as a transcendental power, as a reflection of God and source of superior truth.

Sometimes Wordsworth's poetry may appear overcharged by a didactic and moralizing tone, and an excessive insistence on his mission of teacher and moralist. But in spite of these defects, he reaches, at times, the highest poetical level due to the freshness of the images and the subtlety of the impressions.

In the years of maturity he became more and more conservative and his capacities declined; his last writings expressed only didactic aims, not reaching the very high level of inspirations and magical qualities of his early poetry.

Wordsworth and his time. As an acute observer of human nature, he realized the weakness of men and their bent towards errors, when they are not protected by strict laws. So the poet appealed to the necessity of a hard moral discipline imposed from above to guide men and to limit the effects of their shortcomings. His interest in humble people and in rustic life, rather than express social and political concerns, reflect an intellectual curiosity.

For his renounce to the revolutionary principles of his youth and his fears of reforms, Wordsworth was bitterly criticized by the new generation of Romantic poets: Shelley compared him to «Simonides, the flatterer of the Sicilian tyrants».

## Samuel Taylor Coleridge (1772-1834)

### Life

Coleridge was born at Ottery St. Mary, Devonshire, in 1772. He was intended for a church career, being the youngest son of a village vicar, but on his father's death he was sent to school in London and his brilliant career as an inspired, widely read talker and thinker began. Coleridge went to Cambridge University but did not graduate; he became involved in radical politics and in the mid 1790s also started taking opium. This balance of brilliance and despairing addiction characterized his whole life. In 1794 he met Southey, a radical Romantic poet, and together they conceived the scheme of an ideal society, the «Pantisocracy», to be established in America by twelve couples. The project soon failed and survived only in some of Coleridge's enthusiastic sonnets. In 1795 he married Sarah Fricker, Southey's sister-in-law. Coleridge and Wordsworth had been friends since 1795, and remained close for many years, during which Coleridge's health declined, his opium addiction increased, and he devoted himself more to the study of philosophy than poetry. During a journey to Germany (1797-1799) with Wordsworth and Dorothy, Coleridge became absorbed in the philosophy of Kant, which he tried to spread among his countrymen. In 1800 he returned to England moving to the Lake District, living with his friends Wordsworth and Southey, who are often remembered as the Lake Poets. From 1804 to 1807 he had been living in Malta, working for sometime in the British Administration of Malta. In 1808 Coleridge returned to England, working first as a journalist, then as lecturer. From 1816 to the end of his life, he lived under the care of Dr. Gillman, who helped him to fight his slavery to opium. He died of a hearth attack in London, in 1834.





## Works

**Poetry.** His first work was *Poems on Various Subjects* (1796), a collection of poems, some of which express the poet's enthusiasm for the French Revolution, and some others are the result of his meditations.

Between 1797 and 1798, Coleridge wrote a series of blank verse «conversation» poems addressed to his friend William Wordsworth: *Fears in Solitude*, *This Lime Tree Bower My Prison*, *The Nightingale* and *Frost at Midnight*.

In 1798 the *Lyrical Ballads* appeared, written with Wordsworth: Coleridge's fame as a poet rests on the *Rime of the Ancient Mariner*.

In 1802 he composed *Dejection, An Ode*, an autobiographical poem in which the poet complains about the loss of the creative power.

During the period of his closest association with Wordsworth he composed marvellous fragments of the poems *Christabel*, a story of witchcraft (the work is notable for its influence on later «vampire fiction»), and *Kubla Khan* (both in 1816). The visionary quality of these famous fragments is stressed by the remindful power of the words; rhyme, assonance and rhythm help to create this exotic atmosphere. *Kubla Khan* is a story describing the «pleasure-dome», the «sunless sea» and the evocative qualities of that imagined place: Xanadu. The unfinished poem consists of visionary images (under the influence of opium), suggesting themes of eternity and change. The poet dreamed the vision on which *Kubla Khan* is based, in 1799. Coleridge maintained (so the story goes) that the writing down of the poem was interrupted by the arrival of a visitor, «a person... from Porlock».

In 1817 *Sibylline Leaves* appeared.

**His contribution to Lyrical Ballads.** The *Rime of the Ancient Mariner* (1798) is Coleridge's chief contribution to the *Lyrical Ballads* and one of the masterpieces of world literature. A Gothic tale is told by using a medieval ballad form. The concept of how time and suffering have their effects and «how man must suffer to be wise», which Blake had underlined in his *Songs of Innocence*, very often recurs in the literature of the Romantics. The last lines of Coleridge's *Rime* sum up the movement away from «bliss», from innocence to experience: «A sadder and wiser man, / He rose the morrow morn».

In *The Rime of the Ancient Mariner* the combination of three elements succeed to create a perfect style: the exotic, the magic and the realism. Coleridge introduces the reader to the «supernatural» with a phantom ship, a crew of dead men, the overhanging curse of the albatross, the magic breeze, the arctic sea, nevertheless he creates a sense of reality. Some of its descriptions of the lonely sea show a perfect rhyme and melody. Perhaps we should say suggestions rather than descriptions, in fact the author rather than describing things, makes suggestions and our imagination supplies the details.

The «*Ancient Mariner*» belongs to the tradition of legendary figures who after committing a particular crime are condemned to wander to expiate and to be redeemed; but he also represents man's fall, punishment and salvation. The «albatross» represents the love bond that links man to nature: when he kills the albatross he also breaks the bond with nature.

The ballad has been differently interpreted: as an allegory of the fall, as repentance and salvation of man, and as the metaphor of a process from spiritual death to rebirth.

Besides *The Rime*, Coleridge contributed only three other poems to the volume; in fact his whole poetic output was small, though tremendously influential.

**Other works.** On his return from Germany, the poet published his translations of Schiller's tragedies *Piccolomini* and *Wallenstein*. Between the years 1809 and 1810, Coleridge issued a newspaper, «*The Friend*», but he had already published ten issues of a political newspaper, «*The Watchman*». He also turned to theatre and wrote two plays, *Remorse* (1797) and *Zapolya* (1816). In 1816 appeared *The Statesman's Manual*; in 1817 the *Biographia Literaria*, his major prose work; and in 1825 *Aids to Reflection*. Coleridge's philosophic work *Treatise on Logic* and the unfinished *Magnum Opus* reflect the influence of many authors and reveal his merits as a thinker. Nowadays Coleridge is also considered a profound critic.

**Biographia Literaria.** The volume *Biographia Literaria* is composed of 23 chapters of autobiographical notes and dissertations on various subjects, including some incisive literary theory, criticism and philosophical discussions about Kant, Fichte and Shelling. In this masterpiece, Coleridge discusses the «nature of poetry». It confirmed his concern with mysterious, «supernatural or at least romantic» things, and the dual intention of *Lyrical Ballads* to balance the supernatural and «subjects... from ordinary life». With great modernity it also anticipates some elements of Russian Formalism and in particular the notion of the «defamiliarizing» function of poetry.

