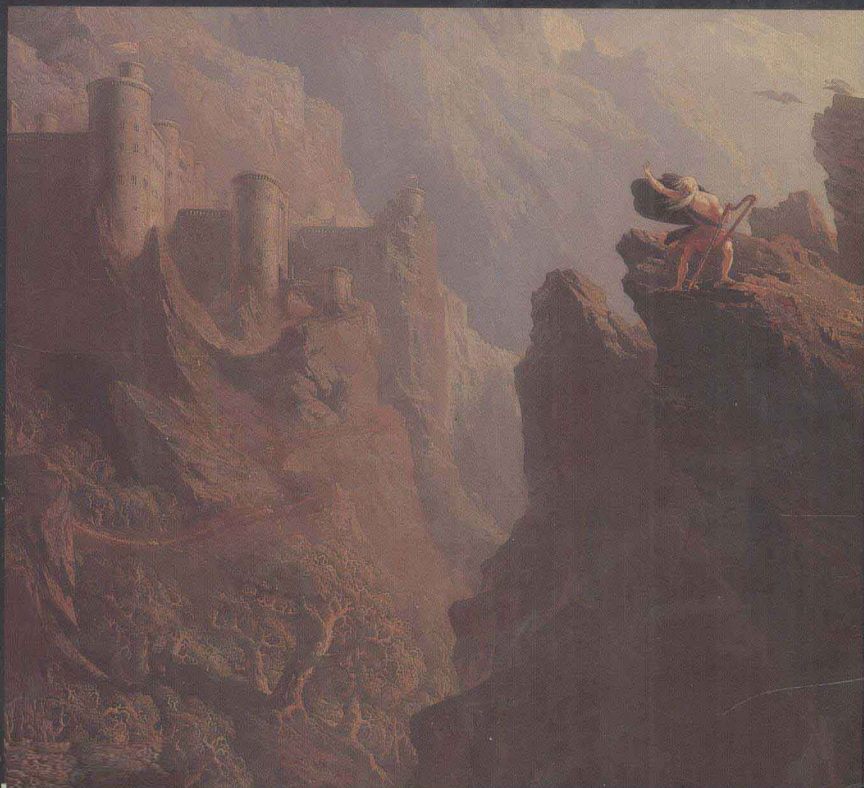


English Poetry of the Romantic Period 1789–1830

J. R. Watson



Longman Literature in English Series

English Poetry of the Romantic Period 1789–1830

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English Poetry of the Romantic Period

Longman Literature in English Series

General Editors: David Carroll and Michael Wheeler
University of Lancaster

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The multi-volume Longman Literature in English Series provides students of literature with a critical introduction to the major genres in their historical and cultural context. Each volume gives a coherent account of a clearly defined area, and the series, when complete, will offer a practical and comprehensive guide to literature written in English from Anglo-Saxon times to the present. The aim of the series as a whole is to show that the most valuable and stimulating approach to literature is that based upon an awareness of the relations between literary forms and their historical context. Thus the areas covered by most of the separate volumes are defined by period and genre. Each volume offers new and informed ways of reading literary works, and provides guidance to further reading in an extensive reference section.

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Author's Preface

This book was written for the Longman Literature in English Series at the invitation of the General Editors, Professor David Carroll and Dr Michael Wheeler; I am grateful to them not only for the original suggestion but also for much kindness and encouragement during its composition.

The book's place in the series has to some extent conditioned its form. For example, I have confined myself fairly strictly within the specified dates, and have said less than I might have done in another kind of book about the development of pre-Romantic poetry; equally, I have said nothing about the Romanticism of the early Victorian period, which under different circumstances would have made a natural epilogue. And since the series will contain a book on the intellectual background of the period, I have written less than I might have done about political, social, and cultural matters: I have deliberately said nothing, for example, about the painting and sculpture of the Romantic period. Within these borderlines, I have tried to make this as useful a book for the student as possible, both in terms of general ideas and in the discussion of individual poets.

Various sections have been read by friends and colleagues, and I am deeply grateful not only to the General Editors but also to Derek Todd, David Fuller, and Michael O'Neill; and above all to Professor T. W. Craik, whose careful reading of the typescript saved me from many errors. I am also much indebted to Margaret Crane for typing the manuscript. The dedication records a long-standing debt, of another kind, to a former teacher, friend, and colleague, without whom this book might never have been written.

I have tried wherever possible to avoid repeating what I have said elsewhere about the Romantic poets, but I am conscious that in the Keats chapter there has been some inevitable recrossing of the ground which was covered in two tapes which I made in 1978 and 1982 for Norwich Tapes Ltd. I am most grateful to Norwich Tapes Ltd for permission to use this material.

Most of this book was written in the seventeenth-century splendour of Bishop Cosin's library in the University of Durham. I am most grateful

to the librarians there for their help. I also wish to record my thanks to the Council of the University of Durham for allowing me sabbatical leave in the Epiphany and Easter terms of 1983.

J. R. Watson
15 June 1984

To John A. M. Rillie

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Introduction

'My seminar on Romanticism starts tomorrow. Poor things, they have no idea of what they have let themselves in for - . . .'

(W. H. Auden, letter to Ursula Niebuhr, 1943)¹

English poetry of the Romantic period is not easy to discuss in general terms. Nor is Romanticism, of which it is a part. Auden's wry and compassionate humour was probably stretched to the full when confronting his students (as he goes on to indicate in the letter) with Kierkegaard and Reinhold Niebuhr; the present book will be more orthodox, beginning with the suggestion that English Romantic poetry has certain qualities which set it apart from the poetry written before it. Such a change has been often described: subjective rather than objective, fragmentary rather than complete, organic rather than preconceived in form, interested in nature, the self, the wonderful, and the supernatural. These matters are easily recited, but should not be taken lightly: they are part of an astonishing change of sensibility, under the influence of which we are still living: our ideas about the nature of the individual, the society in which he lives, the natural world which surrounds him, and the role of art in society, all of these are inherited from the Romantic period. As David Perkins has written, 'We are still living in the comet's tail of the early nineteenth century.'²

This is partly because in Western Europe the conditions for living which still operate were being laid down at that time. There was the awareness of radical change, of the break-up of the old stabilities of an agricultural economy and monarchical government; there was the drift to the cities, of which London was the first example, so that Wordsworth, for example, could write touchingly of what was to become a first-generation bewildered for many:

{ Above all, one thought
Baffled my understanding, how men lived
Even next-door neighbours, as we say, yet still
Strangers, and knowing not each other's names.

(*The Prelude*, 1805, vii.116-19)

And there was, thirdly, the dawning awareness of the coming of the machine: the machine which was made by man for his own purposes, but which has come to shape, and even in some cases to dominate, his life. The need for the individual to assert his identity against such pressures, and his intuitive turning to nature, are two of the fundamental impulses behind Romantic poetry.

We may begin with the obvious though not irrelevant observation, that English poetry of the Romantic period is dominated by six great poets. Each was deeply conscious of the work of the others, and sometimes influenced by one or other of them; but in no sense do they ever form a 'school'. Each celebrates his own specific understanding of the world and his place in it, his insight into his own self and its relation to others, his reaction to the social and political realities of his time, and his awareness of the natural world around him. It is a poetry which is based, essentially, upon individual experience; the result is a body of work which is recognisably different from the poetry which preceded it (although signs of Romanticism can be detected earlier) but which is difficult to define without falsifying its complexity, that 'infinite complexity' of which Wordsworth wrote in the Preface to *Lyrical Ballads*:

What then does the Poet? He considers man and the objects that surround him as acting and re-acting upon each other, so as to produce an infinite complexity of pain and pleasure; he considers man in his own nature and in his ordinary life as contemplating this with a certain quantity of immediate knowledge, with certain convictions, intuitions and deductions, which from habit acquire the quality of intuitions; he considers him as looking upon this complex scene of ideas and sensations, and finding everywhere objects that immediately excite in him sympathies which, from the necessities of his nature, are accompanied by an overbalance of enjoyment.³

Wordsworth here draws attention to two matters which are of crucial importance in the identification of Romantic poetry. The first is the almost physical sense of the poet looking about him, of the individual with his senses sharp and bright regarding the external world. The second is the accompanying sense of enjoyment. The poet 'rejoices more than other men', writes Wordsworth, 'in the spirit of life that is in him'; he delights in the world around him, and in his apprehension and understanding of it. This does not mean that his poetry ignores the evils of life. Wordsworth was one of the greatest of tragic poets, and had a deep indignation and compassion for human suffering. It does mean, however, that in his work and that of the other Romantic poets, there is an extraordinary sense of life and energy, of freshness and excitement, as they engage with the great questions raised by the self and the world. Who am I? How did I come to be as I am? What is my relationship to my fellow human beings? What are my feelings in relation to their joy and their suffering? What great

moments do I wish to celebrate? What do I know of nature, or art? What is the best form of political society? What is my understanding of the past, and my hope for the future?

Each of the Romantic poets struggles to formulate answers to these questions in his own way, using the poetic technique which he has developed as an expression of his deepest self. Like the creatures in Gerard Manley Hopkins's poem, each cries 'what I do is me: for that I came'.⁴ This self-expression, this authenticity, leads towards the conclusion that the main feature which the Romantic poets have in common is their individuality; this is a safe conclusion, but not entirely satisfactory, since the poets are bound to one another by intricate ties of shared ideas and responses as well. Each read the work of the others, and was powerfully conscious of his agreement or disagreement; an analysis of these side-glances, shared enthusiasms, and intuitive likes and dislikes will be one of the connecting threads of the present book.

The disagreements are usually concerned with the ideas which the Romantic poets had about poetry and the role of the artist, and with the reaction to great public events. It is therefore important to consider their work in relation to the features of the period which affected it, from the social and political conditions to the wider and more nebulous background of theory and practice which is called Romanticism.

Romanticism

Romanticism has many beginnings, and takes many different forms; so that in a celebrated essay, 'On the Discrimination of Romanticisms' (1924), A. O. Lovejoy argued that the word 'Romantic' should no longer be used, since it 'has come to mean so many things that, by itself, it means nothing. It has ceased to perform the function of a verbal sign.'⁵ One of his solutions was to recommend the use of the word 'Romanticism' in the plural only; another was to recommend closer analysis of what Romantic ideas consist of. He gave three examples: the preference for nature over art, and for the primitive over the sophisticated; the idea that Classic art is limited, and Romantic art is infinite, Schiller's *Kunst des Unendlichen*; and the unquestionably Romantic Chateaubriand's belief in art and its rules.

Lovejoy's essay had a considerable influence, although, as he foresaw, it did not stop people talking about Romanticism. An intellectually respectable justification for doing so was provided in 1949 by René Wellek, in his essay 'The Concept of Romanticism in Literary History'.⁶ Wellek discreetly defended the use of period terms, holding them to be not arbitrary labels but 'names for systems of norms'; and after a learned discussion of the use of the word 'Romantic' in its own time throughout Europe, he argued that 'on the whole there was really no misunderstanding about the meaning of "romanticism" as a new designation for poetry, opposed to the poetry of

neoclassicism, and drawing its inspiration and models from the Middle Ages and the Renaissance'. In this admirable common-sense view, we can go on speaking of 'Romanticism', and be reasonably certain of what we mean. He provided a magisterial synthesis himself:

we find throughout Europe the same conceptions of poetry and of the workings and nature of the poetic imagination, the same conception of nature and its relation to man, and basically the same poetic style, with a use of imagery, symbolism, and myth which is clearly distinct from that of eighteenth-century neoclassicism.⁷

This was subsequently sharpened and abbreviated to 'imagination for the view of poetry, nature for the view of the world, and symbol and myth for poetic style'.

In the chapters which follow, these unifying ideas will be found in the poetry of the major Romantic poets; although the principal purpose will not be to unearth them in each case, but rather to show how each poet makes his own discoveries about himself and the world. Wellek, after all, was concerned with an attempt to give meaning to the *concept* of Romanticism, and this is a problem in the history of ideas; the major Romantic poets were struggling with the expression, in its most authentic form, of their own individual perceptions and visions. They do not talk about Romanticism; it is only with hindsight that we formulate their work as part of a major shift in the history of ideas in Western Europe.

I have chosen, therefore, to discuss the work of each of the major poets separately, believing that we should understand the Romantic period through them and not them through the Romantic period. In what follows, however, I have tried to relate their poetry to the intellectual and emotional assumptions which helped to shape it, by including three preliminary chapters on the conditions which determined the way in which the major poets set about their work.

One of these is obviously the political and social background of the time, and the writings of those who discussed such things. It was no accident, it would seem, that such innovative poetry flourished at a time of new political initiatives: Hazlitt said of Wordsworth's poetry that it 'partakes of, and is carried along with, the revolutionary movement of our age'.⁸ Throughout his sharp and intelligent criticism, Hazlitt was keen to emphasize the relationship between the 'new' poetry of his forward-looking contemporaries and the attempts to remake society in a new and better form, most notably in the French Revolution. This is no doubt partly a matter of readiness to experiment; but it is also due to the remarkable influence of writers such as Rousseau and Godwin, so that any student of Romantic poetry should have some knowledge of what they say.

The second feature of importance is the development of an interest in certain subjects: in nature especially, but also in dreams and fairy-tales, the Gothic world of enchantment and magic; and, above all, in the self, that subject of endless enquiry, that absorbing, preoccupying individuality