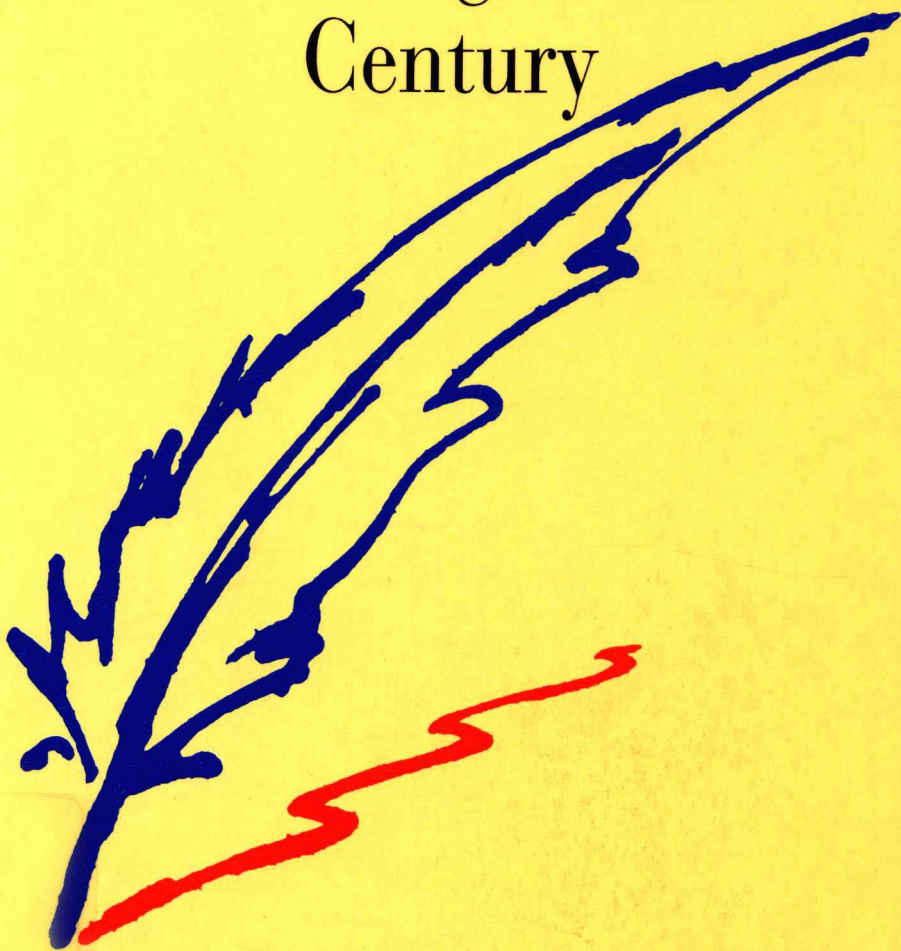


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Pre-Romanticism in English Poetry of the Eighteenth Century

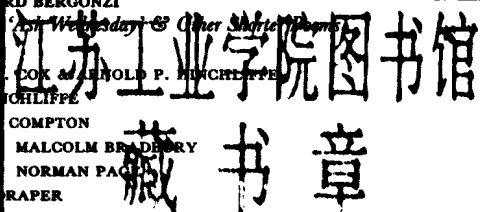


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Pre-Romanticism in English Poetry of the Eighteenth Century

The Poetic Art and Significance
of Thomson, Gray, Collins,
Goldsmith, Cowper & Crabbe

A CASEBOOK

EDITED BY

J. R. WATSON

M
MACMILLAN

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First published 1989

Published by
MACMILLAN EDUCATION LTD
Houndmills, Basingstoke, Hampshire RG21 2XS
and London

Companies and representatives
throughout the world

Typeset by Wessex Typesetters
(Division of The Eastern Press Ltd)
Frome, Somerset

Printed in Hong Kong

British Library Cataloguing in Publication Data
Pre-romanticism in English poetry of the
eighteenth century: the poetic art and
significance of Thomson, Gray, Collins,
Goldsmith, Cowper & Crabbe : a casebook.
—(Casebooks).

1. Poetry in English, 1800-1900 – Critical
studies

I. Watson, J. R. (John Richard), 1934-

II. Series

821'.7'09

ISBN 0-333-39638-3

ISBN 0-333-39639-1 Pbk

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GENERAL EDITOR'S PREFACE

The Casebook series, launched in 1968, has become a well-regarded library of critical studies. The central concern of the series remains the 'single-author' volume, but suggestions from the academic community have led to an extension of the original plan, to include occasional volumes on such general themes as literary 'schools' and genres.

Each volume in the central category deals either with one well-known and influential work by an individual author, or with closely related works by one writer. The main section consists of critical readings, mostly modern, collected from books and journals. A selection of reviews and comments by the author's contemporaries is also included, and sometimes comment from the author himself. The Editor's Introduction charts the reputation of the work or works from the first appearance to the present time.

Volumes in the 'general themes' category are variable in structure but follow the basic purpose of the series in presenting an integrated selection of readings, with an Introduction which explores the theme and discusses the literary and critical issues involved.

A single volume can represent no more than a small selection of critical opinions. Some critics are excluded for reasons of space, and it is hoped that readers will pursue the suggestions for further reading in the Select Bibliography. Other contributions are severed from their original context, to which some readers may wish to turn. Indeed, if they take a hint from the critics represented here, they certainly will.

A. E. DYSON

INTRODUCTION

Matthew Arnold [*] described the eighteenth century as 'our excellent and indispensable eighteenth century'. There is a patronising air about this, as though the eighteenth century had been something rather dull but somehow necessary before arriving at the nineteenth. It was for Arnold 'the age of prose and reason', and its poetry was 'the poetry of the builders of an age of prose and reason'. If we look more closely at the eighteenth century, this rather sweeping *de haut en bas* survey seems too simple; yet it is important to understand why Arnold should have made it. He had been subjected in his youth to the influence of Wordsworth; he viewed the eighteenth century, as most nineteenth-century critics did, across the great divide of the romantic period. From that point of view, the eighteenth century appeared to be interesting merely as a necessary prelude to the romantics: just as politically it was waiting for a time of revolution, so in literature it was chiefly remarkable for its anticipation of greater things. This view was a long time a-dying: as late as 1925, Logan Pearsall Smith[*] was writing of 'this Age of Reason, with its bewigged platitudes, its shallow criticism, and its intolerably didactic verse'.

A century after Arnold, we probably see things rather differently; we are inclined to approach previous ages more problematically, and to see the evidence of one particular cultural phenomenon as concealing another. Michel Foucault, for example, has shown that the 'age of reason' was peculiarly conscious of madness, confining it and being secretly anxious about it.¹ In painting and poetry, and in the newly-rising novel, the viewer and reader become aware that the ubiquitous parade of good sense, and the denunciations of aberration or religious enthusiasm, are themselves indications of a profound insecurity. It was, on the face of it, an insecurity that was tightly controlled; even in *The Dunciad*, Pope's grotesque imaginings are harnessed to the chariot of goodness and light. Yet the presence in the poem of extraordinary and grotesque language and imagery means that, as readers, we listen to a sound that is recognisably

[*] An asterisk within square brackets in this Introduction indicates reference to critical material included in the relevant section of the Casebook. Numbered references to material or writers cited relate to the Notes at the end of the Introduction.

that of anguish and despair, of a soul in rage against the failures of the time. In Pope's language, or the imagery of Swift, there is an eighteenth-century sensibility which needs to be heard, just as there is in Gray. Cleanth Brooks's intriguing observation[*] that Gray's *Elegy* is in some respects like T. S. Eliot's *The Waste Land* raises interesting questions, not only about its poetic procedures, but also about its essential dissatisfaction with the current values of society. Beneath its elegant tone, there is the same energy and anger that we find in Pope and Swift, or in Hogarth.

We may discern something like a 'romantic' element in these poems, existing side by side with what A. R. Humphreys called 'the Augustan ethos of normal life'.² It is found elsewhere in the eighteenth century in the cult of sensibility and the love of nature. Throughout the century, in fact, there are signs of what was later to become known as romantic feeling, existing alongside the intellectualism of the Enlightenment. If the Enlightenment was clearing away superstition and religious intolerance in one direction, pre-romanticism was invoking a spirit of wonder and of the prophetic inspiration from another; especially as it was found in the sublime, and in the human response to the natural world. In the twilight of Lady Winchilsea's 'A Nocturnal Reverie' (published 1713), for example,

a sedate content the spirit feels,
And no fierce light disturbs, whilst it reveals,
But silent musings urge the mind to seek
Something too high for syllables to speak;

The sense of the 'something' here is a feeling after a kind of experience which even Wordsworth, writing at the end of the century (in 'Tintern Abbey', 1798), was still finding difficult to express; indeed, he uses the same word as Lady Winchilsea, feeling a 'something':

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:

...

Similarly, David Nichol Smith[*] shrewdly noted that a passage about the influence of natural scenes in a particular place in childhood was 'not Wordsworth, but Akenside', and A. S. P. Woodhouse[*] saw Collins as poised between the two worlds of

neoclassical and romantic, with an emotional involvement in the magical, the prophetic, and in 'soft primitivism'.



The present Casebook's selection draws on essays and studies which have attempted to find their way through this difficult terrain. As in plate tectonics, there are shifting movements of enormous importance, but they are not obvious or immediately accessible, and they take place in ways that are not easy to be specific about; while much depends on the point of view from which various works of art are seen. We can detect romantic elements almost anywhere (and critics such as A. O. Lovejoy have had much amusement over this);³ and we may agree with Logan Pearsall Smith[*] when he says that 'the words *romanticism* and *classicism* are used like hatchets to chop up materials of the most delicate and subtle weaving and intertexture'. Nevertheless, the history of ideas, the discovery of the development of literature and culture, depends on the preparedness of the reader to countenance such labels, and to try to make something of them. There is, for example, a reasonably defined sense of what is meant by Augustan poetry, and another sense, less clearly defined, of what is meant by romantic poetry: in between there are many signs of shifting sensibility, but no clear or obvious patterns.

Probably the most notable single landmark in the criss-cross of paths through the forest is Gray's 'The Bard' (1757), which combines a love of sublime landscape with the prophetic figure of the Welsh bard, hurling defiance at the armies of the oppressive English king. Within this poem can be found the romantic love of wild nature, the celebration of righteousness and freedom, and the central figure of the inspired prophet-poet. But in calling this poem, or any others, pre-romantic, we are falsifying its true nature and ignoring the historical situation. The problem is that, since there had not yet been a romantic movement, the poets of the eighteenth century could have not seen themselves as precursors of it. With hindsight, we can see where they were going; at the time, they must have been feeling their way forward individually and tentatively. We can only think of them as pre-romantics with the hindsight of literary historians. This has major consequences for a Casebook such as the present one, because there is no contemporary writing on pre-romanticism *as such*. There are isolated comments on specific poets and on certain poems, but nothing that corresponds to (say) *pastoral* in the seventeenth century.

Often, however, the poets clearly thought that they were doing something new, struggling to get free from the overpowering influ-

ences of the great poets who had preceded them, Spenser and Milton, and from other lesser seventeenth-century figures. The Preface to Thomson's *The Seasons* is a good example. Thomson looked at the ingenuity of some seventeenth-century poetry, and behold, it was not good. He thought it unnatural, and compared it to a town garden in a window-box, or a hanging basket:

To be able to write on a dry, barren Theme, is looked upon, by some, as the Sign of a happy, fruitful Genius – fruitful indeed! – like one of the pendant Gardens in *Cheapside*, water'd, every Morning, by the hand of the Alderman himself.

Thomson proposed to put new life into poetry by changing the subject, by writing about nature itself. Indeed, he saw the subject as inevitably leading the mind in the direction of poetry:

How gay looks the spring! how glorious the summer! how pleasing the Autumn! and how venerable the Winter! – But there is no thinking of these things without breaking out into Poetry.

The unfailing popularity of Thomson's *Seasons* throughout the eighteenth century is evidence that this view was widely held; that there was in the works of nature a quality of sublimity and grandeur that had an unquestioned affinity with poetry. To write about nature was to write naturally, although in Thomson's case it became involved with many things: the scientific, the pictorial, and (above all) the religious.

Thomson begins with Virgil and with Milton. From Virgil he learned ways of exploring and controlling his ever-changing and vast subject by discussing such things as the golden age, scientific improvements and human industry; from Milton he took the basic element of his style, that instantly recognisable blank verse:

See, where the winding Vale its lavish Stores
Irriguous, spreads. See, how the lily drinks
The latent Rill, scarce oozing thro' the Grass
Of Growth luxuriant; or the humid Bank,
In fair Profusion, decks. . . . [‘Spring’, 494–8]

Words such as ‘irriguous’ (watery) are taken straight from Milton, and so is the habit of suspension, which holds back the verbs to the end of the sentence (‘spreads’, ‘decks’). Also common is the use of personification, shown here in the way in which the lily drinks. Personification seems at first sight to be an artificial piece of poetic diction, part of the dressing up of thought which P. W. K. Stone[*] describes as an important feature of eighteenth-century language theory; but, as Hugh Blair[*] explains, its primary function is

imaginative: it gives life to things. In the hands of a sensitive exponent such as Collins, personification becomes an image-making resource of the highest quality, comparable with the allegorical paintings of a Tiepolo.

Collins uses personifications in a manner which is both visual and visionary; more often, eighteenth-century poetry is predominantly visual, as it is in the extract from Thomson quoted above ('See . . . See'), or as it is in Gray's *Elegy*. Thomson, in particular, was deeply influenced by the landscape painters of the seventeenth century in Italy – Claude Lorrain, Salvator Rosa and Gaspar Poussin – all of whom may be found in his celebrated stanza (a Spenserian stanza, as in so many eighteenth-century poems, such as James Beattie's *The Minstrel*):

Sometimes the pencil, in cool airy halls,
 Bade the gay bloom of vernal landskips rise,
 Or Autumn's varied shades imbrown the walls;
 Now the black tempest strikes the astonished eyes;
 Now down the steep the flashing torrent flies;
 The trembling sun now plays o'er ocean blue,
 And now rude mountains frown amid the skies;
 Whate'er Lorrain light-touched with softening hue,
 Or savage Rosa dashed, or learned Poussin drew.

[*The Castle of Indolence*, II, xxxviii]

Such landscape painting created a taste for a specific kind of landscape gardening in which the gardens were altered with pictorial considerations in mind; and subsequently for picturesque travel. A special development, related to the pictorial but less composed and shaped, was the prospect poem. In its surveying of open and unbounded landscape, as in Thomson's 'Spring', it became a source of pleasure in itself; but it developed interestingly in Thomson's hands to become a metaphor for the human mind. He distinguished between a bounded or partial view and an unimpeded one: in the human attempts to understand the purposes of God, there were clearly difficulties, which could be likened to an incomplete view – if God was a loving and all powerful God, why were people struck by lightning or killed in winter storms? In the end, Thomson argues, the partial sight would give way to an unbounded view, and human beings would understand everything. In the meantime they must be content not to know, and to celebrate the glories of God in the creation. They were demonstrated, for example in the sun:

great delegated Source,
 Of Light, and Life, and Grace, and Joy below!

[*'Summer*, 173–4]

14 INTRODUCTION

Thomson goes on immediately to praise a God who is beyond all understanding or sight:

How shall I then attempt to sing of Him,
Who, light himself, in uncreated Light,
Invested deep, dwells awfully retir'd
From mortal Eye, or Angel's purer Ken;
... [‘Summer’, 175–8]

The sense of wonder and mystery of God, and the sense of the poet as touched with holy or prophetic fire (from Isaiah, ch. 6) is one of the major sources of romantic feeling in the eighteenth century. We find Pope, for example, connecting Virgil and Isaiah in his *Messiah* (1712), and praying for prophetic inspiration:

O Thou my Voice inspire
Who touch'd Isaiah's hallow'd Lips with Fire! [5–6]

This God, who is in and beyond the created world, is also the God of the great hymnographers, and it is no coincidence that the first half of the eighteenth century was the greatest age of hymn writing:

Before the hills in order stood
Or earth received her frame,
From everlasting thou art God,
To endless years the same.

A thousand ages in thy sight
Are like an evening gone,
Short as the watch that ends the night
Before the rising sun.

Like Isaac Watts, Thomson also writes with great energy about the created world, but (also like Watts) he is lost in admiration when he contemplates the power behind it. One of his finest passages in ‘Summer’ is a celebration of the animating power of God –

Whose single Smile has, from the first of Time,
Fill'd, overflowing, all those Lamps of Heaven,
That beam for ever thro' the boundless Sky:
But, should he hide his Face, th'astonish'd Sun,
And all th'extinguished Stars, would loosening reel
Wide from their Spheres, and Chaos come again.
[‘Summer’, 179–84]

This loses none of its force by ending with the quotation from Shakespeare's *Othello*, if only because the last three words seem so appropriate (Thomson is returning to its original religious sense the phrase which *Othello* has used metaphorically). The opposite of

this is the condition found in Addison's hymn, 'The spacious firmament on high', quoted below in the extract from George Dekker.[*] The fact that Dekker sees this hymn as anticipating Coleridge is significant in itself. We may also point to the hymns of Charles Wesley, not only for 'Christ, whose glory fills the skies', but also because of his use of the word 'lost'. That word is associated by Wordsworth with one of his great imaginative experiences, the crossing of the Alps:

I was lost;
Halted without an effort to break through;
But to my conscious soul I now can say –
'I recognise thy glory'. [The Prelude (1850), VI, 596–9]

This is anticipated again and again by Charles Wesley at the climactic moment of some of his greatest hymns:

Till we cast our crowns before thee
Lost in wonder, love, and praise!

His love shall then be fully showed,
And man shall all be lost in God.

The sublimity and grandeur which is adumbrated here is conspicuous in eighteenth-century religious poetry. In the very age of the Enlightenment, the apprehension of the numinous and the enthusiasm of the evangelical revival, especially among the Methodists, remained as a testimony of deep feeling and emotional fervour. In the hands of one evangelical, indeed, the mystery and wonder of God was connected, not only with the sublime, but with the ordinary life of everyday: to Cowper, God not only moved in a mysterious way, but was present in the country walks around Olney. As Vincent Newey[*] has written, for Cowper, to walk with nature *is* to walk with God.

If we can detect the continuity of romantic feeling in the love of nature and in religious awe, we can also find it in the preservation of humanitarian feeling in the eighteenth century. The ideals of the French Revolution were present long before 1789; most notably, perhaps, in Rousseau, but also in the writings of Gray and Goldsmith, Fielding and Burns. Of the fall of the Bastille, Charles James Fox wrote 'How much the greatest event it is that ever happened in the world! and how much the best!' His instinctive enthusiasm was based on the same widespread hatred of captivity and injustice that had led Gray to write 'The Bard' and Goldsmith to protest about the lot of the peasantry in *The Deserted Village*. Both were angered, not only by poverty and oppression, but by the widespread sense of

injustice and corruption. The engravings of Hogarth speak of this in the same grotesque imagery that is found in Pope and the figures of Fielding's novels – the ignorant magistrates, the grasping innkeepers, the worthless and idle, the hypocritical and selfish. In eighteenth-century novels and poems, the innocent and good often suffer at the hands of those who are in power: and Crabbe's 'Peter Grimes' may be a portrait of a notably wicked man, but in painting it Crabbe is, perhaps unwittingly, describing a central eighteenth-century relationship, between the powerful-wicked and the helpless-innocent. What at first sight appears to be a poem about a psychopath turns out on closer inspection to be a poem which has a representative quality about it, a quality which perhaps accounts for its pre-eminence in Crabbe's work. Other fine poems of his, such as 'Ellen Orford' and 'Procrastination', seem to lack the strange and potent mixture of horror, loathing, anger and compassion which the reading of 'Peter Grimes' inspires. It is possible, I think, that the reason for this is to be found in the poem's almost unconscious centrality in terms of eighteenth-century society. Indeed, a few years earlier, Blake had demonstrated the same opposition between the selfish and the selfless in poems such as 'The Clod and the Pebble' and in the *Songs of Innocence and of Experience*.

The poets of the romantic period saw the evils of society with a clarity and a reforming energy which was given hope by the French Revolution; but their attitudes did not emerge from a vacuum. It is important to remember, as John Butt[*] writes, 'that this romanticism was not unprepared for'. Similarly, the romanticism of the self was only a development of what had been actively explored throughout the eighteenth century. It becomes most obvious, perhaps, in the poetry of Cowper, in which the psychodrama (to use Vincent Newey's term) unfolds with particular sharpness of line; but it is found also in Goldsmith, and Roger Lonsdale's essay[*] is a useful corrective to those who would see *The Deserted Village* as a rhetorical exercise. Lonsdale reminds the readers of Goldsmith that the poet's experience is entangled inextricably with that of Auburn: 'its innocence had been his, its destruction the ruin of his hopes, and the sympathy the villagers deserve is hardly to be distinguished from the sympathy to which the poet himself is entitled'.

The crucial emphasis in the preface to *The Deserted Village* is on the imagination. This word, which is so closely associated with Coleridge, has a complex eighteenth-century history, especially in relation to fancy (from which Coleridge happily extricated it). It is often associated, as it is in the poetry of Collins, with the mysterious workings of the poetical character; it is often associated, later in the