

## 05. Romanticism I.

(A possible, if simplified dating for the Romantic period in England: 1798 – *Lyrical Ballads* published, to 1832 – death of Walter Scott.)

The period was shaped to a great extent by the unrest caused by the French Revolution of 1789, by its ideals which attracted many liberal thinkers in England, and also by its violent aftermath which horrified many, including many former supporters of the Revolution, and by the Napoleonic wars which were one of the outcomes of the Revolution years in France. The result of Napoleon's defeat in 1815 at Waterloo was just as troublesome because it brought the renewed rise of political despotism throughout Europe. Even in England the rights of citizens were restricted and political life suppressed. This was the period of the Regency when King George III was declared insane and power was in the hands of Prince Regent, who then became King George IV in 1820. It is the latter part of the so-called Georgian Era (covering the reign of King George I, II, III, and IV; 1714 to the 1830's), of which the Augustan Age is a part (first half of the 18<sup>th</sup> century).

At the same time by the beginning of the 19<sup>th</sup> century many other changes were going on in the English society. The Industrial Revolution was already on its way, creating a growing number of factories; industrialized towns were attracting larger and larger numbers of poor people, including women and children, who worked in terrible conditions for very small wages and lived in terrible conditions in slums. Elsewhere the use of new machines caused unemployment, aggravating the plight of the poor even more. This created a rising disparity between social classes of the English society: the owners prospered, the workers suffered. The laborers were denied political representation or even the possibility to form trade unions; they could only gather in illegal protest meetings, as was the one in Manchester in August 1819 which ended tragically, and came to be called the Peterloo Massacre (the workers protested against high unemployment and poverty, and also demanded universal manhood suffrage).

This is also the period of the beginning of the women's rights movement, marked particularly by the publication of Mary Wollstonecraft's book *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman* (1792) in which she argued that women were intellectually equal to men and in which she demanded more rights for them. In the 19<sup>th</sup> century women had virtually no legal rights, they had a very limited access to education and very limited possibilities for economic independence. When the Reform Act of 1832 changed the system of political representation in the Parliament to distribute representation more evenly and to extend the right of vote, it also confirmed the exclusion of women from voting by defining the voter as male. Moreover, about half of the middle class men and almost all working class men were still outside the right to vote; nevertheless, the Act was accepted as an act of true reform and progress.

The term "Victorian Age" is often applied to the 19<sup>th</sup> century, and especially its second half, reflecting the very long reign of Queen Victoria (reigned 1837-1901). "Victorian" does not overlap with "Romantic"; it suggests, rather, a period of both prosperity, England's continued status as an imperialist superpower, political and social reform and strong social norms (which were particularly restrictive on women). The Victorian society also had an averted side: the poor for whom life was very difficult—as for example the workers who suffered in the changes caused by the Industrial Revolution or those who were the victims of the so-called Hungry Years in the 1840's, particularly the Great Famine in Ireland.

In literature two major trends are developing in this period: Romanticism and social realism.

## Romanticism

The term itself was invented in retrospect, not by the first Romantic authors themselves. They, however, knew that they were pioneering a new kind of literature and consciously theorized about it. The founders of Romanticism in England, and also one of the first and most influential spokesmen of literary Romanticism in the European context, were William Wordsworth and Samuel Taylor Coleridge, followed later by a “second generation” of Romantic poets: Percy Bysshe Shelley, George Gordon, lord Byron and John Keats. Their ideas also found counterpart in some of the fiction produced in the period, especially the historical and the Gothic novel.

There was something like a Romantic manifesto, although it was not written in the form of a manifesto: it was the publication of a collection of poems by two poet-friends, **William Wordsworth** and **Samuel Taylor Coleridge**, called *Lyrical Ballads* (1798), and more particularly Wordsworth’s Preface to the second edition in 1800. In the Preface Wordsworth renounces the 18<sup>th</sup> century ideals of literature: the idea that poetry is the artful and ordered imitation of Nature that should teach and delight the reader. In contrast to this, Wordsworth understands poetry as “the spontaneous overflow of powerful feelings.” In the Preface to *Lyrical Ballads* he gives the following definition:

Poetry is the spontaneous overflow of powerful feelings: it takes its origin from emotion recollected in tranquility: the emotion is contemplated till by a species of reaction the tranquility 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.

In other words, Wordsworth and the Romantics hold that the source of art is in the person of the artist, not in the outer world (Nature), and that poetry does not imitate but it expresses the emotion of the poet. As a practical outcome of this change of view, we see in the Romantic period the rise of a particular poetic form: the lyric poem written in the first person. This has of course always existed but for the Romantic poets it is particularly characteristic. And, while previously in such cases the speaker of the poem would follow the conventions of the genre (eg., a lover in an Elizabethan sonnet), now the poetic speaker is an individual voice, sometimes with characteristics or circumstances that are recognizable in the poet as a real person: individual, subjective experience becomes the new subject matter of lyrical poetry.

If poetry is “the spontaneous overflow of powerful feelings,” then it follows that it surpasses “rules.” The act of poetic creation is spontaneous, immediate, powerful, passionate: poetry is not written according to any theoretical rules. Wordsworth does also talk of rational reflection in the poetic process; he says that in composing poetry the poet works with “emotions recollected in tranquility,” so poetry is not just an immediate expression of passion—but the original impetus, the spark is in that powerful, spontaneous feeling. Some of the Romantic authors and thinkers went so far as to suggest that poetry is created unconsciously, by inspiration, not by art and editing and rewriting; in reality they, too, also edited and reworked their verses. It would be more precise to say, then, that the ideal was a unity of feeling and reason, but in a different way than in Classicism: the goal would not be a balance of restraints, as in Classicism, but a new kind of unity or synthesis, not a compromise.

The Romantic high view of the self also goes hand in hand with the high view of the artist’s calling. The poet is the new prophet, a divine voice, as it were, and art is the means of redemption for humanity. Coleridge created a new theory of the concept of imagination; he distinguishes between “imagination” and “fancy”—fancy is the mere mechanical combination of ideas, of images, while imagination is the creative power, like divine creation: it is of the same nature as

God's creative power, differing only in degree and in how it operates. Imagination works on two levels, the primary imagination (the faculty of perception) and the secondary imagination, the essentially aesthetic imagination, which dissolves and re-arranges and recreates. And if imagination is this essentially divine power, then it follows that poetry is the means of redemption, a recreation of the sacred. This aesthetic imagination is the ability to transform and recreate the ordinary perception of the world into an organic, meaningful whole.

This idea of unity, of organic whole is essential for Romantic thinking, and hence we also have the symbol as the main trope of Romanticism: not allegory, not metaphor, but symbol, a literary figure which states not that A represents B (allegory) or that A is B (metaphor) but a figure without one clear interpretation, an image which is left open for many interpretations and an image which also suggests a higher meaning. The symbol pivots on the premise of a possible fundamental unity between the self and nature, the self and the world. In contrast to the scientific and mechanistic way of understanding the world in the Enlightenment, Romantic thinkers see the world as an organic whole, even a living entity, in which correspondence and mutual participation occurs; hence there can be a correspondence between an aspect of nature or a natural phenomenon and human emotions, and an experience of nature can become a moment that sheds light on some inner state of feeling or some subjective experience of the poet, or a connection can be made between a poetic image taken from nature and some higher meaning that the imagination discovers in that. We will see a prime example of the symbol is S.T. Coleridge's poem *Rime of the Ancient Mariner*.

Connected to this view of the universe as an organic whole is the new Romantic emphasis on nature. Natural setting and landscape become an important subject of Romantic poetry. It is not just the natural scene itself that is of interest to the Romantic poet; rather, it is the connection between the natural scene and an emotional experience. Often, a Romantic poet would describe, for example, a changing natural scene or an aspect of a natural scene, and this would serve as a setting and a bridge to a meditation on the poet's emotional experience or crisis and its resolution.

Besides the focus on nature, the Romantics, and especially William Wordsworth, also had a special interest in the ordinary, the humble, the commonplace: ordinary people, things, circumstances. Poetry can give us a "freshness of sensation" (Coleridge's term), it can help us see the everyday with a new sense of wonder and appreciation. The Romantics introduced low characters as subjects of poetry, and saw something pure and elevated in things "humble" and "common." In the 18<sup>th</sup> century, these would be associated with the pastoral, and that was the lowest literary form in the Classicist hierarchy of the arts. Now these are elevated into a status of something admirable and desirable, even the highest subject of poetry for Wordsworth: the lowly cottager, the gypsy, the madwoman. In his Preface, Wordsworth speaks explicitly of choosing "incidents and situations from common life" and of using language "really spoken by men." Thus, with the appreciation for the ordinary, there comes a new appreciation for simple language. (A focus on the everyday does not mean, however, that the Romantic writers had low ambitions for their art; quite the contrary: they made bold claims and pioneered, consciously and purposefully, a new vision of art.) Wordsworth even claims in the Preface, again contrary to Classicism, that there can be no "essential difference between the language of prose and metrical composition."

Another strain of Romantic poetry besides this focus on the common is its appreciation for the unusual: the supernatural, the mysterious. Some of these thinkers were also interested in the occult and esoteric, in dreams and nightmares, in horror and in death. And that is the other, darker side of Romanticism, the one expressed in the gothic novel and horror stories.

A special case to note in this respect is the Romantic concern with the solitary tragic nonconformist figure: a villain, an outlaw, a troubled, guilty or excessively proud hero, a figure that is at odds with the society. This is where Milton's figure of Satan from *Paradise Lost* surfaces as one of the inspirations, together with other similar characters from mythology (Prometheus) or

history (Napoleon) or biblical history (Cain). We find these characters especially in the poetry of Byron and Shelley. This emphasis on the solitary character is perhaps an expression of the more general emphasis on the individual that we see growing in this period, which is the result of the new philosophical concept of the human mind as the creator of its perceived world.

The Romantics also understood the individual as a self constantly longing for the infinite. While the Enlightenment thinkers advocated modesty and acceptance of limitations (remember Locke and Pope: to be content with what is, to accept the fact that we cannot know everything and concentrate simply on what we need to live morally), Romantic thinkers accept human limitations only as the background for man's natural desire to overcome them and to reach the infinite, the transcendent, the inaccessible. This kind of longing is characteristic of much of Romantic writing, and this is also what creates the interest in, and sympathy for the solitary tragic hero.

It is in this dark aspect, but not only there, that Romanticism builds upon the previous development of aesthetic theory. The 18<sup>th</sup> century saw the rise of aesthetics as a new discipline, although the term was not so much in use by then; the word of the period was "taste". New categories of taste, or new aesthetic categories were defined then: the beautiful, the sublime, the picturesque, the novel. The first distinction between the beautiful and the sublime was articulated, famously, by Edmund Burke in his *Philosophical Enquiry into the Origin of Our Ideas of the Sublime and Beautiful* (1757). It is especially the "sublime" that accounts for a significant part of Romantic sensibility; the sublime as a category which describes a combination of pleasure and fear, or seen from a different perspective, also a desire to overcome limits. A sublime feeling can be produced by experiencing the beauty of a natural site which is also threatening: climbing a high mountain, standing by a cataract, overseeing a vast vista. By extension, a sublime feeling can arise when the mind is confronted with a vast or transcendental idea of something, or when the self experiences a longing after something greater and transcendent.

### **William Wordsworth (1770-1850)**

Wordsworth grew up in the north of England and after he didn't finish his university education in Cambridge, he spent some time in France, just after the French Revolution. In France he got excited about the revolutionary ideals and also fell in love with a French woman from a Catholic royalist family and had a baby with her. Then he returned to England, suffering first from the separation and later also from his disillusionment with the Revolution. Gradually he and his French lover drifted apart and no longer wished to be married. Wordsworth broke down, suffering deeply from despair and guilt; eventually he recovered and re-established "a saving intercourse with my true self." He lived with his sister in the southwest of England where he became friends with another important Romantic poet, Samuel Taylor Coleridge. When Wordsworth moved to the Lake District, married a friend of his sister's and settled down, Coleridge moved to the Lake District also, and consequently these two poet friends and their followers have come to be called the **Lake Poets**. Wordsworth and Coleridge together published a collection of poems called *Lyrical Ballads* (1798) which other writers and critics immediately recognized as creating a distinctly new poetic style. Their friendship and poetic partnership, however, weakened over time; in 1810 they had a major quarrel and it took about twenty years before they were reconciled. In the meantime, Wordsworth experienced other difficult things in his life: his brother died tragically, two of his five children died at the age of three and five, and his sister's health gradually deteriorated.

**Wordsworths' home, Dove Cottage in Grasmere, Cumbria**

<https://wordsworth.org.uk/wordsworth/the-place/>



Included in *Lyrical Ballads*, and one of his most famous poems, is one called “Lines Composed a Few Miles Above Tintern Abbey” in which the poet, after five years, revisits a place by the river Wye, and reflects on how he himself has changed, how his perception and experience of nature has changed over these years and he reflects on how his “fair friend” (his sister) experiences it now and on how she will remember this experience in the future. Although his former passionate experience of natural beauty has transformed into a calmer, more mature one, Nature is still his highest guide and inspiration:

Therefore am I still  
A lover of the meadows and the woods  
And mountains; and of all that we behold  
From this green earth; of all the mighty world  
Of eye, and ear,—both what they half create,  
And what perceive; well pleased to recognise  
In nature and the language of the sense  
The anchor of my purest thoughts, the nurse,  
The guide, the guardian of my heart, and soul  
Of all my moral being.

Notice that the poem is written in blank verse; that was a medium which Wordsworth felt allowed sufficient space for a free poetic expression. Notice also the simple language, the absence of difficult metaphors and images, the lack of stylistic figures. Note also what the poem is about: about “emotions recollected in tranquility,” to use Wordsworth’s expression.

Wordsworth’s most ambitious poem is the long poem *The Prelude, or the Growth of the Poet’s Mind* which he wrote over the course of many years and which was published only after his death, in 1850. It is a philosophical lyrical poem, a literary theoretical statement, concerned with the growth of a poet’s mind, and more specifically, based on Wordsworth’s own personal experience, Consisting of 14 books, it is called *The Prelude* because Wordsworth originally intended it as a prelude, an introduction to a large poem he was planning but never finished. In *The Prelude* Wordsworth tells of his childhood, his education in Cambridge, his experience of London, his years in France, but steers all these details toward showing how they contributed to his sense of his calling as a poet and how they shaped his poetic mind; indeed, it is the imaginative mind, the “mind of man,” that is at the center of this poem and its journey, the means of redemption of mankind. Here are a few closing lines, addressing the future prospects of humanity, which will inevitably fall again and yet there will be the promise of regeneration through the legacy of the poet’s inspiration:

Prophets of Nature, we to them will speak  
A lasting inspiration, sanctified  
By reason, blest by faith: what we have loved  
Others will love, and we will teach them how,  
Instruct them how the mind of Man becomes  
A thousand times more beautiful than the earth  
On which he dwells, above this Frame of things  
(Which ’mid all revolutions in the hopes  
And fears of Men doth still remain unchanged)

In beauty exalted, as it is itself  
Of quality and fabric more divine.

Another very famous excerpt from *The Prelude* is the story of Wordsworth's crossing of the Alps with a friend. They hike through the Simplon Pass, hoping for a major experience, and are disappointed when a local man tells them that they have already crossed the Alps without even realizing it. Wordsworth writes about the disappointment but then inserts a passage about the imagination, contrasting the disappointment with a statement on the inherent longing of the human soul for something infinite, transcendent: we can never be content for the soul always yearns for something ever greater. Then he concludes with a famous reflection on the sublime wild landscape. Notice the correspondence of the sublime experience of the imagination and the sublime landscape.

Imagination— here the Power so called  
Through sad incompetence of human speech,  
That awful Power rose from the mind's abyss  
Like an unfathered vapour that enwraps,  
At once, some lonely traveller. I was lost;  
Halted without an effort to break through;  
But to my conscious soul I now can say—  
“I recognise thy glory”: in such strength  
Of usurpation, when the light of sense  
Goes out, but with a flash that has revealed  
The invisible world, doth greatness make abode,  
There harbours; whether we be young or old,  
Our destiny, our being's heart and home,  
Is with infinitude, and only there;  
With hope it is, hope that can never die,  
Effort, and expectation, and desire,  
And something evermore about to be.

The melancholy slackening that ensued  
Upon those tidings by the peasant given  
Was soon dislodged. Downwards we hurried fast,  
And, with the half-shaped road which we had missed,  
Entered a narrow chasm. The brook and road  
Were fellow-travellers in this gloomy strait,  
And with them did we journey several hours  
At a slow pace. The immeasurable height  
Of woods decaying, never to be decayed,  
The stationary blasts of waterfalls,  
And in the narrow rent at every turn  
Winds thwarting winds, bewildered and forlorn,  
The torrents shooting from the clear blue sky,  
The rocks that muttered close upon our ears,  
Black drizzling crags that spake by the way-side

As if a voice were in them, the sick sight  
And giddy prospect of the raving stream,  
The unfettered clouds and region of the Heavens,  
Tumult and peace, the darkness and the light—  
Were all like workings of one mind, the features  
Of the same face, blossoms upon one tree;  
Characters of the great Apocalypse,  
The types and symbols of Eternity,  
Of first, and last, and midst, and without end.

### **Samuel Taylor Coleridge (1772-1834)**

spent most of his childhood in London and then studied in Cambridge, struggling with recklessness, despair and debt. As a young man he and a poet friend Robert Southey planned to establish a commune in Pennsylvania, a plan they never executed. He met Wordsworth in 1795 and was greatly impressed with him as a poet, they became friends and lived close to each other. Together they also spent some time in Germany where Coleridge went to study Kant and other German philosophers; that was before the Coleridges and the Wordsworths settled in the Lake District. The close friendship between the two poets ended with a bitter break; Coleridge was suffering from being unhappy in his marriage and also from extreme bouts of pain caused by rheumatism; this pain he treated by taking opium. He became heavily addicted to opium, suffering both from the addiction itself and from the feelings of guilt, remorse and hopelessness it created in him. Things improved a few years after his break with Wordsworth (1810) when Coleridge was in London and a medical doctor helped him to decrease his addiction to a “manageable” degree, and Coleridge was able to resume writing. He produced an influential collection of reflections on poetry, poets and poetic creation called *Biographia Litteraria* (1817); it is in this book that he works out his theory of fancy and imagination, and primary and secondary imagination.

Among Coleridge’s poems the most famous are “Kubla Khan,” a poem about a Chinese ruler, and as Coleridge himself claimed, a genuine “vision” that came to him when he was sleeping and of which he was able to capture only a fragment afterwards. Another famous poem of his is a ballad, Gothic in tone, called “Christabel,” about the innocent Christabel and the demonic Geraldina. Perhaps the most famous poem by Coleridge is another ballad, “**The Rime of the Ancient Mariner,**” describing the journey of an old sailor and his confession of his evil act: during a stormy sea voyage the ship is carried to an area of ice and gets stuck until a beautiful shining white albatross comes flying, bringing with it the south wind, and the ice starts to crack, the ship can move to open water. They are surrounded by fog. The albatross follows them but the narrator shoots it, for no particular reason. Other sailors first reproach him because they believe it was the albatross that helped them get out of the ice, but then when the fog clears they approve of the shooting because they start to think that the albatross did not help them get to open water but only brought the fog. The ship gets stranded in ugly menacing shallows and the sailors are dying. Then another ship appears in the distance. That ship does not come to save them, though, on its board is Death and Life-in-Death and they make all the sailors die one by one, except the “ancient mariner” whom all the other sailors curse with their dying looks. The old sailor is redeemed only when he able to see the colorful water snakes that swim around the ship as beautiful creatures and when he blesses them; only then is his curse removed: the curse is represented by the dead body of the albatross that the other sailors hung around his neck and which now finally falls to the ground.

We can read the albatross as an example of the Romantic symbol: it can be interpreted as an image of Christ but it also becomes an image of the mariner's guilt after he kills it, it hangs around his neck as a cross (another interpretation) until it finally falls down when the mariner overcomes his spite and malice with a love for all things created, and so becomes a symbol of his redemption. This is what the Romantic writers tried to achieve in their symbols: a complexity of meaning which is at once unique and subjective and at the same expressive of some universal or higher, transcendental idea.

Alone, alone, all, all alone,  
Alone on a wide wide sea!  
And never a saint took pity on  
My soul in agony.

The many men, so beautiful!  
And they all dead did lie:  
And a thousand thousand slimy things  
Lived on; and so did I.

I looked upon the rotting sea,  
And drew my eyes away;  
I looked upon the rotting deck,  
And there the dead men lay.

I looked to heaven, and tried to pray;  
But or ever a prayer had gusht,  
A wicked whisper came, and made  
My heart as dry as dust.

(...)

Beyond the shadow of the ship,  
I watched the water-snakes:  
They moved in tracks of shining white,  
And when they reared, the elfish light  
Fell off in hoary flakes.

Within the shadow of the ship  
I watched their rich attire:  
Blue, glossy green, and velvet black,  
They coiled and swam; and every track  
Was a flash of golden fire.

O happy living things! no tongue  
Their beauty might declare:  
A spring of love gushed from my heart,  
And I blessed them unaware:  
Sure my kind saint took pity on me,  
And I blessed them unaware.

The self-same moment I could pray;  
And from my neck so free  
The Albatross fell off, and sank  
Like lead into the sea.

The sailor concludes the story with his experience of repentance and penance and the lesson he has learned:

He prayeth best, who loveth best  
All things both great and small;  
For the dear God who loveth us,  
He made and loveth all.

The ballad is remarkable perhaps not so much for the moral that it concludes with but rather for its mythical, mysterious reflection on the possibilities for evil inherent in the human mind and on how an act of pride and malice causes tragedy, breaks up all order of living creatures and leads to loneliness.

The younger generation of Romantic poets is represented by three main figures: **George Gordon, lord Byron** (1788-1824) is the author of the influential romantic epic called *Childe Harold's Pilgrimage* (1812-1818), focusing on the inner life of its main character as he travels through Europe, focusing on emotional experiences and his sense of estrangement from the world but also on a feeling of revolt against the social and political injustice he witnesses; and the more comic poem *Don Juan* (posthum.), a Romantic picaresque novel.

### **Percy Bysshe Shelley** (1792-1822)

Shelley lived a nonconformist life and had a scandalous reputation. He was expelled from school after publicly defending atheism; at 18 he eloped with a 16 year old girl and married her. For some time they lived in Ireland where Shelley championed the cause of the oppressed Irish people. Several years later he fell in love with Mary Wollstonecraft Godwin and abandoned his first wife; he and Mary lived together in France and Italy and after Shelley's first wife committed suicide Percy and Mary got married. Three of their children died in infancy which left Mary Shelley in a state of deep depression. Amidst these turbulent events, and always short of money, Percy Bysshe Shelley wrote poetry which did not really attract any readership. Shelley was an outspoken rebel and revolutionary himself; he devoted many texts to the support of the oppressed Irish people or the poor workers in England, he attacked established religion and the church and various forms of abuse of political power. Gradually his earlier radicalism was transformed through a deep interest in Greek tragedy, Milton, and the Bible, and also in Neo-Platonism and in the skeptical philosophy of David Hume. Shelley's life ended tragically in Italy: he drowned while sailing with a friend.

His most famous work is a lyrical drama called *Prometheus Unbound* (1820), in which the mythical hero is liberated from his punishment (in contrast to Greek mythology) by the power of love, which also ushers a new vision of the world. Prometheus is one of the examples of the Romantic hero, the overreacher, the trespasser who stands proudly against all odds. Shelley draws on the story of Prometheus from Greek mythology who stole fire from heaven in order to bring it to people, and was subsequently punished by Zeus, the highest God, to be chained to a mountain

and have birds feed upon his flesh. In the Greek myth Prometheus is finally reconciled to Zeus. In Shelley's drama, it is Zeus who falls from power into the abyss of oblivion, Prometheus is liberated and triumphs over the tyranny of Zeus.

*Prometheus Unbound* probes deeper than other Shelley's poems into the problem of evil: evil is not to be eliminated only by revolution and radical reform or rejection of social institutions, but its source is in the moral conflict of man himself. Man must overcome hate and selfishness and replace it with love; only then can moral order replace chaos and tyranny.

Here is one of the well-known shorter poems by Shelley, a call to the working people of England not to allow themselves be oppressed. It is clear that Shelley's revolutionary zeal appealed to left wing circles in the 20<sup>th</sup> century. The poem was one of a number of political poems written in support of working class people after the bloody suppression of workers' rally in the Peterloo Massacre, 1819.

**Youtube:**

**Song to the Men of England by Percy Bysshe Shelley [with text] - Read by Poet Arthur L Wood  
2 min**

**<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=YUcFP50dqmQ>**

A Song: "Men of England"

Men of England, wherefore plough  
For the lords who lay ye low?  
Wherefore weave with toil and care  
The rich robes your tyrants wear?

Wherefore feed and clothe and save  
From the cradle to the grave  
Those ungrateful drones who would  
Drain your sweat—nay, drink your blood?

Wherefore, Bees of England, forge  
Many a weapon, chain, and scourge,  
That these stingless drones may spoil  
The forced produce of your toil?

Have ye leisure, comfort, calm,  
Shelter, food, love's gentle balm?  
Or what is it ye buy so dear  
With your pain and with your fear?

The seed ye sow, another reaps;  
The wealth ye find, another keeps;  
The robes ye weave, another wears;  
The arms ye forge, another bears.

Sow seed—but let no tyrant reap:  
Find wealth—let no imposter heap:



Weave robes—let not the idle wear:  
Forge arms—in your defence to bear.

Shrink to your cellars, holes, and cells—  
In hall ye deck another dwells.  
Why shake the chains ye wrought? Ye see  
The steel ye tempered glance on ye.

With plough and spade and hoe and loom  
Trace your grave and build your tomb  
And weave your winding-sheet—till fair  
England be your Sepulchre.

Another famous poem by Shelley is “Ode to the West Wind,” an invocation of the wind’s power to scatter dead leaves, to bring in storm clouds and raise the seas. The poet concludes with a desire to become the wind’s instrument:

Drive my dead thoughts over the universe  
Like withered leaves to quicken a new birth!  
And, by the incantation of this verse,

Scatter, as from an unextinguished hearth  
Ashes and sparks, my words among mankind!  
Be through my lips to unawakened Earth

The trumpet of a prophecy! O Wind,  
If Winter comes, can Spring be far behind?

### **Mary Wollstonecraft Shelley (1797-1851)**

She came from a prominent libertarian family. Her father William Godwin was a radical philosopher and reformer and her mother Mary Wollstonecraft was the famous author of a book on women’s rights, *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman* (1792). Percy Bysshe Shelley was a close friend of her father’s and a frequent visitor; that is how he and she met and fell in love. Ironically, Mary’s father William Godwin was enraged when Mary eloped with Shelley, despite his professed belief in free love.

Her most famous book is *Frankenstein; or, the Modern Prometheus* (1818) which she wrote during the time she and Shelley lived in Italy and then published it anonymously in London. It became an immediate success. Personal tragedy, however, filled those years: the loss of their three children, other deaths in the family, and finally the drowning of Percy Bysshe Shelley. Mary Shelley then returned to England and continued to write her own books and edit her late husband’s poetry.

*Frankenstein* draws on both on terror literature (gothic tales) and on science. Frankenstein is a scientist, somewhat like Faustus, who desires greater knowledge. He creates an artificial human being out of a collection of body parts. It is a major scientific feat but it eventually turns against Frankenstein. The artificial being he creates is a monster. Frankenstein is horrified and frightened. The monster becomes vengeful and presses Frankenstein to create a female companion



for him but Frankenstein refuses, and the monster launches a series of murders. At the same time the monster is shown to be a being in need of sympathy; his hate and the murders he commits are the result of his alienation and isolation. He has been created to be like a human being but he is not and he is forever separated from people by his monstrosity.

*Frankenstein* is an epistolary novel. The letters are written by Robert Walton, an English Arctic explorer, to his sister back in England. During his travels Walton meets the Swiss scientist Frankenstein, befriends him and then in his letters tells Frankenstein's story to his sister. Frankenstein has come to the Arctic in pursuit of the monster and wants to destroy it but himself dies on board of Walton's ship, just as Walton is forced to give up his expedition and turn back; the monster laments Frankenstein's death and then disappears to commit suicide.

### **John Keats (1795-1821)**

also died young, like Byron and like Shelley and he, too, was an influential poet. He came from a rather lowly family; both his parents died before he was adult and he was forced to become apprentice in medicine. He quit medical practice as soon as he was able to and started to write poetry. Nevertheless, financial difficulties plagued Keats and his siblings and also prevented Keats from marrying Fanny Brawne, a girl with whom he fell desperately in love and was never able to marry. He contracted tuberculosis and went to Italy upon Percy Bysshe Shelley's invitation to recover but he died there at the age of 25, leaving behind a number of excellent poems.

His most famous poems are lyrical odes, like "Ode to Autumn":

### **Ode to Autumn**

Season of mists and mellow fruitfulness,  
Close bosom-friend of the maturing sun;  
Conspiring with him how to load and bless  
With fruit the vines that round the thatch-eves run;  
To bend with apples the moss'd cottage-trees,  
And fill all fruit with ripeness to the core;  
To swell the gourd, and plump the hazel shells  
With a sweet kernel; to set budding more,  
And still more, later flowers for the bees,  
Until they think warm days will never cease,  
For summer has o'er-brimm'd their clammy cells.

Who hath not seen thee oft amid thy store?  
Sometimes whoever seeks abroad may find  
Thee sitting careless on a granary floor,  
Thy hair soft-lifted by the winnowing wind;  
Or on a half-reap'd furrow sound asleep,  
Drows'd with the fume of poppies, while thy hook  
Spare the next swath and all its twined flowers:  
And sometimes like a gleaner thou dost keep  
Steady thy laden head across a brook;  
Or by a cyder-press, with patient look,  
Thou watchest the last oozings hours by hours.

Where are the songs of spring? Ay, Where are they?  
Think not of them, thou hast thy music too,—  
While barred clouds bloom the soft-dying day,  
And touch the stubble-plains with rosy hue;  
Then in a wailful choir the small gnats mourn  
Among the river shallows, borne aloft  
Or sinking as the light wind lives or dies;  
And full-grown lambs loud bleat from hilly bourn;  
Hedge-cricket sing; and now with treble soft  
The red-breast whistles from a garden-croft;  
And gathering swallows twitter in the skies.

**Youtube:**

**Keats's Ode to Autumn, by Keats Foundations; 2 min**

[https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=pk\\_b-gpsyHU](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=pk_b-gpsyHU)

Another famous ode is “Ode on a Grecian Urn.” Here Keats famously expressed one of the fundamental Romantic beliefs in the unity of truth and beauty, and therefore in the eternal value of art. The statement is addressed to the ancient vase itself which, as an artefact from the distant past, leads the poet to contemplate the passing of things and the permanence of artistic insight:

When old age shall this generation waste,  
Thou shalt remain, in midst of other woe  
Than ours, a friend to man, to whom thou say'st,  
Beauty is truth, truth beauty,—that is all  
Ye know on earth, and all ye need to know.

**William Blake (1757-1827)**

Blake was a slightly older contemporary of the Romantic poets, not directly associated with Romanticism but sharing some of the new visions and ideas. Blake is most of all a visionary, a religious visionary of his own kind, a mystic. He grew up in London in a Dissenting family and he was trained as an engraver, and in fact he was just as much a visual artist as he was a writer. Ever since his childhood Blake claimed to have religious visions; some of them he captured and worked out in his “Prophetical Books” and in his paintings and engravings: for example *The Book of Urizen*, *America: A Prophecy*, and *Europe: A Prophecy*. His book *The Marriage of Heaven and Hell* (1790-93) expresses his idea that the creative power of heaven must merge with, not defeat, the power of hell; and it is this transformation of opposites into new, higher categories which can also be found in the background of his famous collections *Songs of Innocence* (1789) and *Songs of Experience* (1794). *Songs of Innocence* is not only a representation of the innocence of childhood but also a reflection on innocence as a state of mind; contrasted to that are the songs of “experience.” The contrast is not merely a binary contrast between the poems in the two volumes (lamb x tiger,

the two poems on the chimney sweep) but also a contrast, or rather a shift in two ways of understanding the world, or as Blake himself called it, “two contrary states of the human soul.” Part of the “experience” that the poet gathers in the second collection is the experience of social oppression and restrictions but the “experienced” perspective does not mean merely a jaded resignation and disillusionment. Rather, what Blake envisions is a transformation of categories, an overcoming of opposites, a transfiguration of the fallen world, expressed in hint, perhaps, in the famous line of “The Tiger”: “a fearful symmetry.”

*The Marriage of Heaven and Hell* is again, a combination of text and images. It is an attack, at times openly satirical, at some of the narrow ideas about religion and morality. For this Blake assumes the voice of the Devil and counters, for example, the idea that the body and the soul are separate and that one is bad and the other good. Blake’s vision overcomes such binary oppositions and posits a belief in a higher good which consists in the “marriage” of opposites, such as desire and restraint, passion and reason. This marriage is not a compromise, though: they must not be reconciled but kept in their opposition because “without contraries is no progression.” For an idea of the work, here is “Plate 4” with the Devil’s commentary:

### The Voice of the Devil

All Bibles and sacred codes have been the causes of the following Errors:

1. That Man has two real existing principles; Viz: a Body & a Soul.
2. That Energy, calld Evil, is alone from the Body, & that Reason, calld Good, is alone from the Soul.
3. That God will torment Man in Eternity for following his Energies.

But the following Contraries to these are True:

1. Man has no Body distinct from his Soul; for that calld Body is a portion of Soul discern’d by the five Senses, the chief inlets of Soul in this age.
2. Energy is the only life, and is from the Body; and Reason is the bound or outward circumference of Energy.
3. Energy is Eternal Delight.

As a visual artist Blake created his own illustrations and handmade his own books, so that there existed just a few copies of them. The illustrations were etchings which he would then print on the page and color by hand; he called his books “illuminated printing” and he meant that word and picture should be interpreted together. Blake was virtually unknown in his lifetime, only towards the end of his life he had a small circle of students and admirers. Appreciation for his work developed later and today he is regarded as one of the most original voices in the history of English literature and an important early Romantic author.

### The Lamb (*Songs of Innocence*)

Little Lamb who made thee?  
Dost thou know who made thee?  
Gave thee life & bid thee feed,  
By the stream & o’er the mead;  
Gave thee clothing of delight,  
Softest clothing woolly bright;  
Gave thee such a tender voice,  
Making all the vales rejoice!

Little Lamb who made thee?  
Dost thou know who made thee?

Little Lamb I'll tell thee,  
Little Lamb I'll tell thee!  
He is calléd by thy name,  
For he calls himself a Lamb:  
He is meek & he is mild,  
He became a little child:  
I a child & thou a lamb,  
We are calléd by his name.  
Little Lamb God bless thee.  
Little Lamb God bless thee.

### **The Tyger (*Songs of Experience*)**

Tyger! Tyger! burning bright  
In the forests of the night,  
What immortal hand or eye  
Could frame thy fearful symmetry?

In what distant deeps or skies  
Burnt the fire of thine eyes?  
On what wings dare he aspire?  
What the hand, dare seize the fire?

And what shoulder, & what art,  
Could twist the sinews of thy heart?  
And when thy heart began to beat,  
What dread hand? & what dread feet?

What the hammer? what the chain?  
In what furnace was thy brain?  
What the anvil? what dread grasp  
Dare its deadly terrors clasp?

When the stars threw down their spears  
And water'd heaven with their tears,  
Did he smile his work to see?  
Did he who made the Lamb make thee?

Tyger! Tyger! burning bright  
In the forests of the night,  
What immortal hand or eye,  
Dare frame thy fearful symmetry?

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