

Romanticism in M. H. Abrams' *A Glossary of Literary Terms* (177-179)

Here are some aspects in which **romantic** aims and achievements, in many prominent and innovative writers during the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries, differ most conspicuously from their neoclassic precursors:

- (1) The prevailing attitude favored innovation over traditionalism in the materials, forms, and style of literature. Wordsworth's preface to the second edition of *Lyrical Ballads* in 1800 was written as a poetic "manifesto," or statement of revolutionary aims, in which he denounced the upper-class subjects and the *poetic diction* of the preceding century and proposed to deal with materials from "common life" in "a selection of language really used by men." Wordsworth's serious or tragic treatment of lowly subjects in common language violated the basic neoclassic rule of *decorum*, which asserted that the serious genres should deal only with the momentous actions of royal or aristocratic characters in an appropriately elevated style. Other innovations in the period were the exploitation by Samuel Taylor Coleridge, John Keats, and others of the realm of the supernatural and of "the far away and the long ago"; the assumption by William Blake, William Wordsworth, and Percy Bysshe Shelley of the persona of a poet-prophet who writes a visionary mode of poetry; and the use of poetic *symbolism* (especially by Blake and Shelley) deriving from a worldview in which objects are charged with a significance beyond their physical qualities. "I always seek in what I see," as Shelley said, "the likeness of something beyond the present and tangible object."
- (2) In his preface to *Lyrical Ballads*, Wordsworth repeatedly declared that good poetry is "the spontaneous overflow of powerful feelings." According to this view poetry is not primarily

a mirror of men in action; on the contrary, its essential component is the poet's own feelings, while the process of composition, since it is "spontaneous," is the opposite of the artful manipulation of means to foreseen ends stressed by the neoclassic critics. (See *expressive criticism*.) Wordsworth carefully qualified this radical doctrine by describing his poetry as "emotion recollected in tranquility," and by specifying that a poet's spontaneity is the result of a prior process of deep reflection and may be followed by second thoughts and revisions. But the immediate act of composition, if a poem is to be genuine, must be spontaneous—that is, unforced, and free of what Wordsworth decried as the "artificial" rules and conventions of his neoclassic predecessors. "If poetry comes not as naturally as the leaves to a tree," Keats wrote, "it had better not come at all." The philosophical-minded Coleridge substituted for neoclassic "rules," which he describes as imposed on the poet from without, the concept of the inherent organic "laws" of the poet's *imagination*; that is, he conceives that each poetic work, like a growing plant, evolves according to its own internal principles into its final *organic form*.

- (3) To a remarkable degree external nature—the landscape, together with its flora and fauna—became a persistent subject of poetry, and was described with an accuracy and sensuous nuance unprecedented in earlier writers. It is a mistake, however, to describe the romantic poets as simply "nature poets." While many major poems by Wordsworth and Coleridge—and to a great extent by Shelley and Keats—set out from and return to an aspect or change of aspect in the landscape, the outer scene is not presented for its own sake but only as a stimulus for the poet to engage in the most characteristic human activity, that of thinking. Representative romantic works are in fact poems of feelingful meditation which, though often stimulated by a natural phenomenon, are concerned with central human experiences and problems.

Wordsworth asserted, in what he called a "Prospectus" to his major poems, that it is "the Mind of Man" which is "My haunt, and the main region of my song."

- (4) Neoclassic poetry was about other people, but much of romantic poetry invited the reader to identify the protagonists with the poets themselves, either directly, as in Wordsworth's *Prelude* (1805; revised 1850) and a number of romantic lyric poems (see lyric), or in altered but recognizable form, as in Lord Byron's *Childe Harold* (1812-18). In prose we find a parallel vogue in the revealingly personal essays of Charles Lamb and William Hazlitt and in a number of spiritual and intellectual autobiographies: Thomas De Quincey's *Confessions of an English Opium Eater* (1822), Coleridge's *Biographia Literaria* (1817), and Thomas Carlyle's fictionalized self-representation in *Sartor Resartus* (1833-34). And whether romantic subjects were the poets themselves or other people, they were no longer represented as part of an organized society but, typically, as solitary figures engaged in a long, and sometimes infinitely elusive, quest; often they were also social nonconformists or outcasts. Many important romantic works had as protagonist the isolated rebel, whether for good or ill: Prometheus, Cain, the Wandering Jew, the Satanic hero-villain, or the great outlaw.
- (5) What seemed to a number of political liberals the infinite social promise of the French Revolution in the early 1790s, fostered the sense in writers of the early Romantic Period that theirs was a great age of new beginnings and high possibilities. Many writers viewed a human being as endowed with limitless aspiration toward the infinite good envisioned by the faculty of imagination. "Our destiny," Wordsworth says in a visionary moment in *The Prelude*, "our being's heart and home, / Is with infinitude, and only there," and our desire is for "something evermore about to be." "Less than everything," Blake announced, "cannot satisfy man." Humanity's

undaunted aspirations beyond its assigned limits, which to the neoclassic moralist had been its tragic error of generic "pride," now became humanity's glory and a mode of triumph, even in failure, over the pettiness of circumstance. In a parallel way, the typical neoclassic judgment that the highest art is the perfect achievement of limited aims gave way to a dissatisfaction with rules and inherited restrictions. According to a number of romantic writers, the highest art consists in an endeavor beyond finite human possibility; as a result, neoclassical satisfaction in the perfectly accomplished, because limited, enterprise was replaced in writers such as Blake, Wordsworth, Coleridge, and Shelley, by a preference for the glory of the imperfect, in which the artist's very failure attests the grandeur of his aim. Also, Romantic writers once more entered into competition with their greatest predecessors in audacious long poems in the most exacting genres: Wordsworth's *Prelude* (a rereading, at epic length and in the form of a spiritual autobiography, of central themes of John Milton's *Paradise Lost*); Blake's visionary and prophetic epics; Shelley's *Prometheus Unbound* (emulating Greek drama); Keats' Miltonic epic *Hyperion*; and Byron's ironic conspectus of modern European civilization, *Don Juan*.

Sublime: _____

