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The Pleasures of Poetry

It is difficult to get very far, when pursuing Romantic poetry, without coming across references to pleasure – whether it is William Wordsworth explaining to readers of *Lyrical Ballads* that the purpose of poetry is ‘to produce excitement in coexistence with an overbalance of pleasure’ (Wu, 503), or John Keats describing the activity of writing to his friend, Charles Dilke:

Talking of Pleasure, this moment I was writing with one hand, and with the other holding to my Mouth a Nectarine – good god how fine – It went down soft pulpy, slushy, oozy – all its delicious embonpoint melted down my throat like a large beatified Strawberry.

(Keats, *Letters*, II, 179)

In early nineteenth-century Britain, it seems, the very thought of poetry was able to stimulate the most enjoyable ideas. For Samuel Taylor Coleridge, the test of a good poem was the pleasure it generated for readers. When he looked back on his school-days, trying to account for his longstanding love of literature, Coleridge recognized that ‘not the poem which we have *read*, but that to which we *return*, with the greatest pleasure, possesses the genuine power, and claims the name of *essential poetry*’ (*Biographia Literaria*, I, 23).

Poetry, for its great begetters in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries, was firmly associated with pleasure, from the conception of a new poem to the continuing attraction of the old. And what’s more, it was a pleasure to be shared and multiplied, experienced and revisited – something

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intensified, not wearied, by familiarity. For readers encountering Romantic poetry for the first time, therefore, the prospect is enticing, while those returning for the umpteenth do so with the assurance of deep delights in store. This book attempts to introduce new readers to the pleasures of Romantic poetry, but it also hopes to encourage those who already know the poems to return to them with renewed enthusiasm.

The emphasis on poetic enjoyment is evident in many works of the Romantic period, from Samuel Rogers's popular poem of 1792, *The Pleasures of Memory*, to Thomas Campbell's *The Pleasures of Hope*, published in 1809. Though little read today, the very titles of these poems reflect Romantic tastes and attitudes, and in particular, the readiness with which contemporary eyes turned fondly towards the past or gazed ahead into a brighter future. The impulse might be personal or political, and often, during this tumultuous period of history, private concerns had public dimensions – and vice versa, as we shall see. The vividness with which memories, moments and expectations were caught and conveyed in literature means that readers two centuries later can still enter the period, responding to enduring human situations and ethical concerns as well as to issues relating to the specific events in the decades immediately preceding and succeeding 1800.

Romantic poems often acknowledged the complementary satisfactions of the anticipated and the remembered, looking forward to moments of consummate pleasure, or back on experiences of life-changing significance. Keats recreated the intensity of anticipation in 'The Eve of St Agnes', as he presented both Madeline, the isolated young woman, praying for 'visions of delight' as she retires for the night, and 'burning Porphyro', the young man who hides in her bedroom, growing 'faint' with excitement as he watches her undress (47, 159, 224; O'Neill and Mahoney, 423–36). Keats was equally adept at conjuring up a sense of loss in the aftermath of powerful experience, as the pale knight in 'La Belle Dame Sans Merci' demonstrates, through his simple, but haunting words, 'And I awoke and found me here / On the cold hill's side' (43–4; O'Neill and Mahoney, 439). His ode, 'To Autumn', however, insistently directs attention towards the joys of the present, with its warnings against wistful longing for 'the songs of Spring', and wilfully restrained reference to 'full-grown lambs' and 'gathering swallows' (23, 30, 33; O'Neill and Mahoney, 457–8).

In 'Lines written a Few Miles above Tintern Abbey', Wordsworth was able to pay tribute to the competing attractions of past, present and future experience all at once, by pouring out the powerful feelings prompted by

returning to a favorite place. The passage of time is obvious from the opening lines ‘Five years have passed; five summers, with the length / Of five long winters!’ (1–2; O’Neill and Mahoney, 105), but at the same time, the delight of immediate physical experience is also there: ‘again I hear / These waters, rolling from their mountain-springs / With a sweet inland murmur’ (2–4). Throughout the poem, the double perspectives of present and past play together, until the final section when the speaker’s companion is welcomed into the poem, along with hopes for even greater happiness in the future. If the opening line leads readers to expect wistful recollections, ‘Tintern Abbey’ in fact draws on the evidence of enriching memories to magnify the enjoyment of new experience:

While here I stand, not only with the sense of
Present pleasure, but with pleasing thoughts
That in this moment there is life and food
For future years.

(63–6; O’Neill and Mahoney, 107)

Present pleasure was not dependent on the eyes and ears alone, but deepened by memories of earlier, intense experience and amplified by the expectation of recalling this moment in years to come. For Wordsworth, as he gazed on the landscape with grateful recognition, immediate pleasure seemed capable of infinite expansion, even of transfiguration into religious joy.

‘Lines written a few miles above Tintern Abbey’ was a poem of self-conscious revisiting, but many poems of the period conveyed a similar sense of the long-term value of particularly memorable experiences. The very existence of the poem demonstrated that a fleeting pleasure could be caught and recreated for the benefit of the poet or a future readership. In his passionate essay on the nature and purpose of his chosen art, *A Defence of Poetry*, Percy Bysshe Shelley described poetry as ‘the record of the best and happiest moments of the best and happiest minds’ (Wu, 1196). When seen out of context, such a definition might provoke charges of self-aggrandisement, but it is an illuminating statement for anyone attempting to understand the experience and motivation of Romantic poets. For Shelley, as for many of his contemporaries, the impulse to create was ‘always arising unforeseen and departing unbidden’ and so the task of finding forms for such transient moments was fraught with a sense of impending vacancy (Wu, 1196). Not only was composition urgent, but the ensuing poem was somehow inherently elegiac – a mere trace of the original imaginative experience.

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Shelley's own poetry often conveyed the compulsion to capture heightened experience, whether in short lyrics such as 'Rarely, rarely comest thou, Spirit of Delight', or in more descriptive verse that seemed hurrying to record his powerful responses to the natural world. Shelley's passionate delight in the physical landscape of Italy, with its dazzling sunlight and strong colors, so different from his native England, is brilliantly caught in 'Julian and Maddalo', a poem written in Venice in 1818, when he was visiting Lord Byron:

This ride was my delight. – I love all waste
And solitary places; where we taste
The pleasure of believing what we see
Is boundless, as we wish our souls to be:
And such was this wide ocean, and this shore
More barren than its billows; - and yet more
Than all, with a remembered friend I love
To ride as then I rode; – for the winds drove
The living spray along the sunny air
Into our faces; the blue heavens were bare,
Stripped to their depths by the awakening North;
And from the waves, sound like delight broke forth
Harmonizing with solitude, and sent
Into our hearts ærial merriment.

(14–27; Shelley, *Poems and Prose*, 89)

The sheer physical enjoyment of the ride, the warmth, the spray and the sounding waves are perfectly captured in couplets, whose regular beat matches the horses' hooves, with metrical variations to suggest the surges of speed along the beach. Such verse seems to carry readers out of their inevitably sedentary situation, transporting them to other places and others' pleasures. 'Julian and Maddalo' invites us to ride along the Adriatic shoreline with Shelley, stripped momentarily of normal concerns and abandoning thought to the bracing pleasures of the wind and sky. The ride is over soon enough, and the verse slows accordingly to match the return 'Homeward, which always makes the spirit tame', but still the intense experience is there on the page, in words that have lasted longer than the traces left by the horse's hooves on the Italian sand.

The capacity of the human spirit to expand in response to natural beauty and powerful sensory experience ('what we see / Is boundless, as we wish our souls to be') is a recurrent theme in Shelley's work – and Romantic poetry more widely. What now seems commonplace was an idea new to the late eighteenth century – that getting out and about in beautiful scenery

was good for physical, mental and moral health. Suddenly people were setting off on tours seeking not just historic sites, great houses, art galleries or classical remains, but also breathtaking views of waterfalls and wooded valleys, lofty hills and rocky shores. Nor were soul-expanding sights confined to what had come to be known in the period as 'sublime landscapes' – vast mountains, stormy seas, cliffs and crags. Wordsworth recorded the leap in his heart caused by something as simple as a rainbow, which affected him as strongly in adulthood as it had when he was a boy:

My Heart Leaps up when I behold
A rainbow in the sky
So was it when my life began
So is it now I am a man
So be it when I shall grow old
Or let me die!
(‘The Rainbow’, 1–6, Wu, 528)

The survival of instinctive, childhood impulses into maturity affirmed Wordsworth’s sense of himself and many of his poems seemed to give thanks for the world and his place within it. They not only recorded special moments of personal meaning, which made internal pledges of continuity, but also offered the possibility of connection to his readers, who might be similarly uplifted by the verse.

Delight in the immediate world is a key-note of Romantic poetry. Travelling often prompted composition, as poets sought words to convey remarkable landscapes, buildings and people to British audiences: *Childe Harold’s Pilgrimage*, for example, appealed strongly to people for whom the Continent had long been cut off by years of war. Byron’s own trip to Portugal and Spain and then onwards to Albania and Turkey furnished him with a wealth of material for the first two Cantos of *Childe Harold* published in 1812, which he followed up in 1816 and 1818, with reflections drawn from his travels in Switzerland and Italy. Fascination with exotic places fanned the fashion for Orientalism, which is as evident in Coleridge’s ‘Kubla Khan’, Southey’s *Thalaba*, Byron’s *Eastern Tales*, or Moore’s *Lalla Rookh*, as it is in the flamboyant Royal Pavilion at Brighton, commissioned by the Prince Regent. Places remote from Britain offered both imaginative freedom and a relatively safe space in which domestic matters could be addressed under the guise of fantasy. At the same time, texts set in distant lands often reflected serious philosophical, sociological and cultural interests, inherited from the comparative approaches of the Enlightenment. The early nineteenth-century

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boom in travel literature, botany and international history meant that poets had rich resources for their narratives, which they often handled with considerable care.

Much Romantic literature, however, dealt with more familiar subject matter. John Clare, born and brought up in a Northamptonshire village, found endless variety in the surrounding fields and hedgerows and so his poems recorded the birds, animals and plants he had known all his life. Robert Burns published his first book of poetry when struggling to make a living as a farmer in Ayrshire, a situation reflected in poems that featured his friends, dogs, sheep, and local community. Mary Robinson, on the other hand, whose colorful existence as an actress and companion of men in high places meant a life spent largely in cities was equally inspired by the ‘busy sounds / Of summer morning in the sultry smoke / Of noisy London’ (‘A London Summer Morning’, 1–3; Wu, 249). It didn’t seem to matter where poets lived or at what level of society, as long as they shared the urge to record their best moments and possessed sufficient skill to do so convincingly. One of the best-selling poems of the age was Robert Bloomfield’s *The Farmer’s Boy*, an unassuming account of work as a farm labourer, which rapidly ran to six editions, selling some 27,000 copies within two years of its publication in 1800 (St Clair, 582).

Despite the contemporary vogue for sensational Gothic fiction, poetry did not seem to need much in the way of extraordinary stimulation to please an audience, as William Cowper demonstrated in *The Task*, with its domestic descriptions of everything from weather-vanes to window-boxes. In its wonderful account of the pleasures of sitting alone at twilight, watching the fireplace, Cowper introduced one of the major literary topics of the Romantic age:

Me oft has fancy ludicrous and wild
Soothed with a waking dream of houses, tow’rs,
Trees, churches, and strange visages expressed
In the red cinders, while with poring eye
I gazed, myself creating what I saw.

(*The Task*, IV, 286–290; Wu, 20)

The plain language was well suited to the homely scene and, though simple enough to speak to anyone, demonstrated just how rich an imaginative life was open to those who allowed their minds to wander freely. In his gently self-teasing recollection, Cowper was introducing a concern which would exercise all the major poets of the period, by revealing that he was ‘creating’

what he saw in the cinders, rather than merely reflecting a fixed external object. As M.H. Abrams argued in a wide-ranging analysis that dominated many critical readings during the second half of the twentieth century, the Romantic mind was more like a lamp than a mirror, shedding its own light on the outside world, rather than being merely reflective. In the Romantic period, the most everyday experience could therefore prove to be the stuff of art: Anna Barbauld was even able to transform the ‘dreaded Washing-Day’ into poetry (‘Washing Day’, 8; Barbauld, *Poems*, 133).

There was a strong tendency nevertheless to emphasise the benefits of natural surroundings, especially for growing minds and bodies. Barbauld’s sense of the world being big with creative possibility, for example, is abundantly evident in a poem urging an unborn child towards birth:

Haste, little captive, burst thy prison doors!
Launch on the living world and spring to light!
Nature for thee displays her various stores,
Opens her thousand inlets of delight.
(‘To a little invisible Being who is expected
soon to become visible’, 29–32;
Barbauld, *Poems*, 131–2)

Confident that the natural world was overflowing with delight, Barbauld imagined countless blessings in store for the new baby. Her poem did not probe neonatal psychology as fully as Wordsworth would in *The Prelude*, where the infant mind is considered at length as ‘creator and receiver both, / Working but in alliance with the works / Which it beholds’ (II, 273–5, *William Wordsworth*, 325). Her poem nevertheless reveals a willingness that began to emerge in the later eighteenth century to seek positive natural influences for children’s rapidly developing minds.

Coleridge similarly looked forward to seeing his baby son grow up in a beautiful rural environment, writing in ‘Frost at Midnight’:

thou, my babe! shalt wander like a breeze
By lakes and sandy shores, beneath the crags
Of ancient mountain and beneath the clouds
(54–56; O’Neill and Mahoney, 223)

In such surroundings, a child must surely thrive spiritually and physically; and Coleridge, conscious that his own youth had been blighted by years at a London boarding school, felt confident in predicting that for his son, ‘all seasons’ would ‘be sweet’ (65).

Though familiar enough to modern readers, the tendency to see children as innocent beings, full of creative potential, is another defining characteristic of Romantic poetry, reflecting the influence of eighteenth-century educational theory. The Genevan philosopher, Jean-Jacques Rousseau, had emphasized the benefits of a natural upbringing in his well-known work, *Émile, ou l'Éducation*, 1762, which built on British empirical theories about the effects of sensory experience and habits of association on intellectual development. Coleridge himself was so impressed with the ideas of the Yorkshire psychologist, David Hartley, that he named his son – the baby in ‘Frost at Midnight’ – after him. The poem addresses little Hartley Coleridge, while also paying tribute to David Hartley’s theory that healthy minds developed from positive associations established in early life, which led eventually to strong faith in God. The ‘secret ministry of frost’, though sometimes read in more sinister terms, can helpfully be understood as a quiet, but active, natural force, through which the ‘Great Universal Teacher’ touches those open to his all-embracing love.

Coleridge’s eager anticipation of future blessings for his baby, however, is based in reflection on his own, less happy education, ‘in the great city, pent ‘mid cloisters dim’ (52). A boyhood deprived of physical beauty and freedom seemed to have produced to an adult with a mind, restless and self-punishing, as portrayed in the opening depiction of the sleepless speaker, and confirmed abundantly in Coleridge’s notebooks and letters. Where Cowper had extolled the pleasures of gazing alone into the fireplace, Coleridge virtually rewrote the lines from *The Task* in ‘Frost at Midnight’ to show a much less contented response to dying embers:

The thin blue flame
Lies on my low-burnt fire, and quivers not;
Only that film, which fluttered on the grate,
Still flutters there, the sole unquiet thing.
Methinks, its motion in this hush of nature
Gives it dim sympathies with me who live,
Making it a companionable form,
Whose puny flaps and freaks the idling Spirit
By its own moods interprets, every where
Echo or mirror seeking of itself,
And makes a toy of Thought.

(13–23)

Coleridge was just as adept as Cowper at finding subjects for poetry in everyday domestic experience, but instead of peaceful, creative, day-dreaming, ‘Frost at Midnight’ shows a sleepless, isolated spirit, interpreting the film

on the grate as an image of himself, ‘the sole, unquiet thing’. Despite the apparent emptiness of the late night scene, however, Coleridge still manages a vivid imaginative ascent by pursuing the associated memory of watching the fireplace at school, and using his own troubled experience as the pathway to somewhere far better for his child. The poem is as transformative as the frost on the ‘eave-drops’, because it reveals just how much is going on in the quiet confines of home. Whatever the speaker’s fears over the consequences of negative childhood experience, the poem was in itself a testament to Coleridge’s powerful imagination and remarkable ability to recreate some of his inner life for readers.

Coleridge’s interest in the relationship between childhood and adult well-being was intensified by becoming a father in 1796, but it also deepened through his conversations with Wordsworth during the same period. His new friend and writing companion had enjoyed just the kind of ideal, unrestricted, rural childhood that Coleridge imagined for his son, as acknowledged in Wordsworth’s remarkable autobiographical poem, *The Prelude*. Here, Wordsworth showed that though his faith in the long-term benefits of the natural world, gratefully acknowledged in ‘Tintern Abbey’, had been sorely tested in the difficult years following the Revolution in France, it had eventually been proved beyond doubt. Wordsworth’s long poem recalls the hopeful mood of the early Revolution, when the extreme social injustices of French society were swept away and a new age of liberty, equality and fraternity seemed to be dawning. The ensuing bloodshed, power-struggle and war, however, rapidly destroyed the hopes of the young British idealist, whose personal turmoil was intensified by a passionate relationship and subsequently, an enforced separation from Annette Vallon, the young French woman whom he left behind in France with their baby. Wordsworth, forced to return to England, suffered political disillusionment and private disintegration. When he turned, a few years later, to ponder over his psychological recovery, he began to identify moments from his earliest years, which had somehow provided lifelines in the chaos of his adult experiences. ‘There are in our existence spots of time’, he wrote in *The Prelude*, through whose lasting impact on the memory,

our minds
Are nourished and invisibly repaired;
A virtue by which pleasure is enhanced,
That penetrates, enables us to mount
When high, more high, and lifts us up when fallen.

(XI, 258, 264–268; *William
Wordsworth*, 491)

Such moments, crucial to healthy imaginative development, were ‘most conspicuous’ in early childhood memories (XI, 277).

The Prelude not only analyzes the growth of the mind, but also recreates many of Wordsworth’s own memories in passages of breath-taking descriptive verse, effectively proving its own point. The vivid accounts of wandering among the fells, skating with friends, playing cards or rowing out onto a star-lit lake are told with such energy that readers cannot doubt the poet’s assessment,

happy time
It was, indeed, for all of us; to me
It was a time of rapture
(I, 456–8;
William Wordsworth, 313)

For Wordsworth, as for many of his contemporaries, there was no sharp distinction between the physical and the psychological. Mental experience was largely dependent on physical experience – on the sensory data that poured into the receptive mind from birth. To talk of poetry as a kind of pleasure, then, meant something physical and emotional as well as intellectual, and it is helpful for a modern readership to remember the fullness of experience embodied in the word. The poet who could write of minds being ‘nourished’ and ‘repaired’ was not imagining an abstract, spiritual entity, but an essential part of the whole human being. Wordsworth’s language may be more restrained than Keats’s ‘soft, pulpy, slushy, oozy’ celebration of literary pleasure, but his understanding of poetry was just as firmly rooted in the senses.

If the idea of ‘rapture’ in *The Prelude* was largely associated with childhood, however, many other poems of the period celebrated the ecstasies that might occur a little later on. The visionary pursuit of the Poet-protagonist in Shelley’s ‘Alastor’, for example, reaches an explicitly erotic climax when the ‘veiled maid’ of his dream eventually reveals

her outspread arms, now bare,
Her dark locks floating in the breath of night,
Her beamy bending eyes, her parted lips
Outstretched, and pale, and quivering eagerly.
(177–80; O’Neill and
Mahoney, 325)

In ‘The Eve of St Agnes’, Keats explored raptures both imaginary and real, as Madeline not only dreams of her lover and but also wakes to find

Porphyro, 'Ethereal, flush'd, and like a throbbing star' and more than ready to melt 'into her dream' (318–20; O'Neill and Mahoney, 434–5).

Often the creative and the sexual impulses were closely allied, as Robert Burns admitted when he described the motivation behind his first composition – a love song inspired by Nelly, the girl he had worked beside in the harvest field. In his 'Epistle to Davie', the '*Pleasures of the Heart*' are far more important than thoughts of wealth or worldly power, and Burns pays tribute to the inspiration of his 'darling Jean!' (*Poems and Songs*, I, 68). It was perhaps not the thought of an individual woman so much as sexual experience that proved so stimulating to Burns's creative spirit, however, as one of other poems in the same volume celebrated a rapturous evening with Annie, 'I kiss'd her owre and owre again, / Among the rigs o' barley' (*Poems and Songs*, I, 14). Burns continued to express the pleasures of the heart in poems that often combined love and laughter, satire and sentiment. If many of his songs, such as the famous 'Red, Red Rose', delighted those nurturing tender feelings in the drawing room, others entertained people in Clubs and taverns with more explicit suggestions about what might please a lady.

Burns's variety as a love poet was matched only by Byron, who was just as ready to see both the funny and intensely serious sides of youthful passion – at least by the time he wrote *Don Juan*. In the opening Canto, young Juan may be presented as a comical figure as he wanders 'by the glassy brooks / Thinking unutterable things', but the narrator's later comment on the unsurpassed sweetness of 'first and passionate love' still carries emotional conviction (I, 713–4, 1010; Wu, 958, 990). This is a poem that can switch from farce to tragedy in a matter of stanzas, its digressive, conversational narration flexible enough to capture the full range of human experience. Juan's first love for Donna Julia is passionate enough, albeit treated very differently from the idyllic episode with Haidée in Canto II. Since the physical nature of the relationship is emphasised so frankly, it seems entirely fitting that its demise should also be brought about by the uncontrollable body:

'And oh! if e'er I should forget, I swear –
But that's impossible, and cannot be –
Sooner shall this blue ocean melt to air,
Sooner shall earth resolve itself to sea,
Than I resign thine image, oh! my fair!
Or think of any thing excepting thee;
A mind diseased no remedy can physic –'
(Here the ship gave a lurch, and he grew seasick.)

‘Sooner shall heaven kiss earth’ – (Here he fell sicker)
 ‘Oh Julia, what is every other woe? –
 (For God’s sake let me have a glass of liquor,
 Pedro, Battista, help me down below!)
 Julia, my love! – you rascal, Pedro, quicker –
 Oh Julia! – this cursed vessel pitches so –
 Beloved Julia, hear me still beseeching!’
 (Here he grew inarticulate with reaching.)
 (II, 145–60; Wu, 992)

Byron was only too aware of how rapidly the pleasures of the flesh could turn to pain, but it was ironies such as this that drove his own fecund imagination. As Juan succumbs to the pains of his first voyage, his creator revels in the cleverness of his poem, its brilliant dramatic comedy and escalating rhymes combining to prompt laughter rather than tears, when love disappears overboard.

Painful Pleasures

Byron knew that pleasurable poetry was not dependent on cheerful subjects and his work, like that of many other fine poets in the Romantic period, also dealt with memories of loss, sadness, despair or disappointment. Indeed, ‘the joy of grief’ became a critical touchstone in the later eighteenth-century, following the extraordinary, international success of James Macpherson’s ancient, isolated, and deeply despondent bard, Ossian. According to some Enlightenment thinkers, including David Hume, sad recollections were generally more pleasurable than happy ones, because of the mind’s natural tendency to compare the past with the present. While a bad memory might prompt gratitude for current well-being, thoughts of happier times now gone were likely to produce more melancholy reflections. To gaze back obsessively on ‘the times of old’, was to emphasise the uncongenial nature of the present, or to deny any hope for a better future. The enormous international popularity of Ossian, however, suggests that many late eighteenth-century readers were deriving deep pleasure from the poems of an old man, left with nothing but memories of a better world now gone. Ossianic gloom appealed partly because it was seen to affect those overflowing with sensibility – the widely admired capacity for fine feeling. Readers moved to tears by an affecting lament were readers possessed of a soul. With the mid-eighteenth-century

cult of feeling, poems that dwelled on graveyards, darkness and ruin became very popular, and so the pleasures of memory seemed closely allied to the pleasures of melancholy.

During the Romantic period, however, many of the prevailing cultural trends were questioned, complicated or even rejected, and although the taste for ruins and melancholy was by no means forgotten, the forms it assumed were rather different. Ruined castles and abbeys, no longer necessarily sites for meditations on the transience of human life or vanished societies, were now seized as settings for exciting Gothic narratives, with room for supernatural elements difficult to accommodate in more realistic, modern situations. Poems such as Coleridge's 'Christabel', Scott's *The Lay of the Last Minstrel* or Keats's 'The Eve of St Agnes' all included medieval architecture to create an otherworldly atmosphere, in which anything seemed possible. Darkness and gloom often seemed the most congenial conditions for imaginative freedom, so even a tale filled with terrors offered pleasurable reading, if well told.

From a radical perspective, too, the ruins of monumental buildings might be a cause for celebration as much as sorrow. The great castle of the Bastille in Paris roused passionate feelings across the Channel, long before the start of the French Revolution. In the fifth book of *The Task*, published in 1785, for example, Cowper included an impassioned apostrophe:

Ye horrid tow'rs, th'abode of broken hearts,
Ye dungeons and ye cages of despair,
That monarchs have supplied from age to age
With music such as suits their sov'reign ears,
The sighs and groans of miserable men!
There's not an English heart that would not leap
To hear that ye were fall'n at last

(*Task*, V, 384–90)

Though Cowper's prediction turned out to be more sweeping than actual events warranted, it is indicative of a growing desire to banish the practices of unenlightened ages and with them the symbols of inhumanity.

If aspects of the past seemed less than admirable, symbols of their distance from the present had strong appeal. In his best known meditation on ruin, Shelley offered contrasting perspectives on the eighteenth-century fascination with ruin and despair. For in the sonnet, 'Ozymandias', the defiant words of an ancient Egyptian king, 'Look on my works, ye mighty, and despair!', are shown to have taken on a new, ironic resonance over centuries of gradual erosion in the desert (11; Wu, 1080). If the words

commissioned for the pedestal of the great statue were once meant to subdue any rival contenders for power, their survival next to its broken remains, 'vast and trunkless legs' (2) and a 'shattered visage' (4), half buried in sand, prompts reflections rather different from those expected by Ozymandias.

Shelley's sonnet, with its image of the 'colossal wreck' (13), may encourage melancholy thoughts on the brevity of human life and the inevitable decay of all things, but it also points readers towards an alternative view. The detail of the sculptor's clear understanding of his master, still evident in what is left of the statue – the 'frown / And wrinkled lip, and sneer of cold command' (4–5) – shows that even during the king's life, there were those less delighted than he was by his power. The choice of 'mock' for the sculptor's activity suggests not only straightforward artistic imitation of the king's expression, but also ideas of ridicule and falseness. For the clear-sighted artist, the command to create a permanent image of unjust power might indeed be a cause for despair. And yet, the sonnet reveals that ancient tyranny has eventually been overthrown merely through the passage of time, an idea close to Shelley's heart as he pondered the possibility of bloodless social reform in the aftermath of the French Revolution and Napoleonic wars. These ideas informed his ambitious poetic drama, *Prometheus Unbound*, which depicted the necessary and inevitable overthrow of tyranny, and was composed among the ruins of the Baths of Caracalla, in Rome. With such a context in mind, the words on the statue of Ozymandias remain unchanged, though their meaning is utterly transformed. For those with radical sympathies, the despair of 'the mighty' might well be the spring of hope.

Both 'Ozymandias' and *Prometheus Unbound* drew inspiration from the magnificent ruins of the ancient world, but the Romantic period also saw more domestic explorations of ruin and consolation. In 'The Ruined Cottage', for example, Wordsworth presented an image of a simple home, now emptied of life and crumbling away beneath the weeds. Change and decay are by no means celebrated in this poem, though its treatment of ruin was every bit as innovative as Shelley's in 'Ozymandias'. 'The Ruined Cottage' offered a very different kind of radicalism, which sought to reveal as great a significance in the ruins of something small as in the fall of mighty castles and dynasties. It remained unpublished for several years after its original composition in the 1790s, but when it did appear in 1814, it formed the opening book of Wordsworth's major poem, *The Excursion*.

Wordsworth's poem relates the tale of the last tenant, a young woman called Margaret, who had struggled to support her two young children after being deserted by their father, but eventually, once both have fallen

ill and died, gave up hope and followed them to an early grave. The structure of the poem, which is largely told by the elderly pedlar whom the young speaker meets at the site of the ruin, enables Wordsworth to dramatise the natural response of a sympathetic listener, hearing the story for the first time. However, he was also presenting the very different perspective of the older man, whose memory has been tempered by a sense of deep tranquillity fostered over the many years since Margaret's death. Though the old man recounts the story of her short life with great affection and sympathy, he admonishes his young companion towards the end of the poem, saying, 'My Friend, enough to sorrow have you given, / The purposes of wisdom ask no more' (508–9; O'Neill and Mahoney, 121). This is a very different attitude from that of 'Ozymandias' to the ideas of despair associated with physical ruin, but it is also offering alternative perspectives on death and decay. In 'The Ruined Cottage', 'what we feel of sorrow and despair / From ruin and from change' (520–1) are countered by the view of the elderly pedlar, whose larger perspective acts as a guide to the poem's speaker, and therefore the reader.

The pedlar's wisdom is never explained in 'The Ruined Cottage', but his words are left for readers to contemplate, along with the closing description of the 'calm, oblivious tendencies / Of nature' (504). In the 'Ode: Intimations of Immortality', however, Wordsworth offered a conclusion that helps to illuminate the pedlar's tranquillity,

We will grieve not, rather find
Strength in what remains behind
In the primal sympathy
Which having been must ever be,
In the soothing thoughts that spring
Out of human suffering
In the faith that looks through death,
In years that bring the philosophic mind.
(182–9; O'Neill and
Mahoney, 168)

The faith that is capable of looking 'through death' tempers grief and seeks comfort both from what remains and what is remembered.

The very need to include the pedlar's restraining voice in 'The Ruined Cottage', however, shows that Wordsworth knew only too well the natural impulse to grieve as well as its tendency towards despair. Indeed, in many poems of the period, including several by Wordsworth, the sense of loss

seems almost too powerful for consolation. Still the struggle to find order deepens the emotional charge and the complexity of a poem. Byron, grappling with the lacerating sense of separation from his beloved half-sister, Augusta Leigh, with whom he had had a scandalous affair, still clung to the thought of her unconditional love: 'Though human, thou didst not deceive me, / Though woman, thou didst not forsake' ('Stanzas to Augusta', 25–6; O'Neill and Mahoney, 245). In 'Bright Star', Keats, stricken with memories of nursing his younger brother through his final illness and conscious of the likelihood of meeting a similar fate himself, nevertheless took comfort from human love and imagined living for ever, 'pillow'd upon my fair love's ripening breast' (10; O'Neill and Mahoney, 458). Even when the 'deep distress' caused by the death of Wordsworth's shipwrecked brother, John, found such memorable expression in 'Elegiac Stanzas, suggested by a Picture of Peele Castle in a Storm', Wordsworth, too, still resisted utter despair, though his consolation was of a very different kind: 'Not without hope we suffer and we mourn.' (60; O'Neill and Mahoney, 172).

All too often, however, hope seemed to vanish altogether: neither Cowper's 'The Castaway', surrounded by overwhelming waves, nor the speaker of Charlotte Smith's sonnet, 'Written on the Seashore' offer any suggestion of recovery. Byron's 'Darkness' even went so far as to imagine the fate of the entire human race, should the 'bright sun' be extinguished, the earth turned into a 'lump of death – a chaos of hard clay' (72; Wu, 895). So bleak and absolute was Byron's vision, that no one is left to describe the world's death throes, since the last starving, emaciated human beings are shown dying of horror at each other's 'mutual hideousness' (67). Although Byron's cataclysmic dream exceeded the bounds of human experience, his poem was only an extreme version of the dark moods that seemed to descend on many contemporary writers. In Burns's 'Despondency: An Ode', the view backwards with its 'sick'ning Scenes' was just as dismal as the way ahead, which promised nothing but 'dim declining *Age*' and descent into the '*closing tomb!*' (8, 70, 14; *Poems and Songs*, I, 233–4).

'Despondency', 'Melancholy', and 'Dejection' inspired numerous Romantic lyrics, odes and sonnets, none more searing than Coleridge's desolate articulation:

A grief without pang, void, dark, and drear,
A stifled, drowsy, unimpassioned grief,
Which finds no natural outlet, no relief.

('Dejection', 21–3; O'Neill
and Mahoney, 236)

The very act of writing the poem, however, did seem to offer some ‘outlet’, making its own existence, if not an embodiment of pleasure, at least a form of pain relief. According to Shelley’s *A Defence of Poetry*, the process of composition is in itself elegiac, as we have seen, because it means that the visionary moment is already fading. When the inspiration for a poem was intense misery, however, its retreat was something to welcome rather than lament.

In Coleridge’s poem, the situation is further complicated because the feelings of dejection are inseparable from a sense of waning creative power:

But now afflictions bow me down to earth:
Nor care I that they rob me of my mirth;
 But oh! Each visitation
Suspends what nature gave me at my birth,
My shaping spirit of Imagination.

(82–6)

The ode, accordingly, goes some way to answering its own self-defeating tendencies by existing on the page. Though written in the present tense, the dramatic shifts within ‘Dejection’ also convey a sense of movement through time, which combine with the strong rhymes to make readers feel by the end of the poem that the worst is in the past, that some order has been restored.

Even when the poem was less explicitly concerned with artistic failure, however, the creation of memorable lines from the experience of misery still constituted a challenge to despair, not just because it signaled that the dire crisis was over, but because it implied some hope of finding a sympathetic reader. The continuing taste for melancholy, most obvious in the overnight success of Byron’s *Childe Harold* in 1812, suggests a readership hungry for expressions of powerful feeling. Whether this can be attributed to the restrictive codes of polite society, provoking reactions among those who felt their lives were regulated by others, or whether it reflects the experience of a society afflicted for so many years by war, economic hardship and anxieties about foreign invasion, is difficult to ascertain. Those who grew up in the 1790s and 1810s, however, were subject to both the personal restrictions imposed by society and the various distresses that major international conflict invariably bring. Jane Austen conveys contemporary experience very effectively in *Persuasion*, a post-Waterloo novel, in which the heroine’s freedom is severely circumscribed by her social circle, her wide knowledge of poetry a consequence of years of solitary anxiety following her broken engagement to a naval officer.

The preponderance of Romantic poems apparently written in dark moods certainly indicates a readership sympathetic to emotional expressionism. For those suffering from feelings of depression, some comfort might be drawn from finding their own experiences mirrored so memorably, or some diversion found in poems with more uplifting subjects. Those in better heart were equally ready to share the delights described by an accomplished poet, or to be moved to compassion by heartfelt confessions of misery. Poems that spoke of inner feelings seemed to offer a direct connection to others, enabling readers to find emotional closeness and a better understanding of their own hearts. In an age before film, television or radio, the discovery of private, individual experience beyond that of immediate friends and family could only come through literature, and so the emotion embodied in Romantic poetry was revelatory. Poems offered a means to like-minded strangers who could become virtual friends, linked as they were by shared emotions and experiences.

The clarity with which the best poems articulated states of mind also means that they still speak to readers of today, irrespective of changes in society and life-styles. Burns was especially gifted at conveying what seem utterly convincing expressions of personal sorrow in forms that were essentially for sharing. Songs such as ‘Auld Lang Syne’ have linked audiences around the world and across centuries, inviting individuals to extend their hands in friendship, as they recall their ‘auld acquaintance’. Even songs embodying particular emotional situations, such as ‘The Banks and Braes of Bonny Doon’, ‘A Red, Red Rose’ or ‘Ae Fond Kiss’, were still able to speak to wider audiences because of their forms and language:

Had we never lov'd sae kindly,
 Had we never lov'd sae blindly!
 Never met – or never parted,
 We had ne'er been broken-hearted!
 ('Ae Fond Kiss', 13–16; Burns,
Poems and Songs, II, 592)

Sentiments such as these were easily understood by listeners everywhere, irrespective of their own accents or situations. Burns drew on the oral traditions of rural Scotland, and what he learned from local song-writing helped him to find ways of making the deeply personal fit for a reading, listening, singing, public. Anyone can recognize the experiences captured in Burns's songs, and so sympathetic readers share and contribute to the

collective well of feeling. Paradoxically, poems of loss, regret or severance often turned into poems of companionship, as painful feelings were performed for sympathetic audiences.

Byron, too, had the facility for drawing on his own experience and distilling it into stanzas of lasting beauty. 'So we'll go no more a-roving', for example, appears to have had its origins in the post-Carnival exhaustion Byron felt in Venice in 1817, after a string of parties excessive even by his own standards. As he explained to his friend and fellow poet, Thomas Moore, 'I am on the invalid regimen myself. The Carnival – that is, the latter part of it – and sitting up late o' nights, had knocked me up a little. But it is over, and it is now Lent, with all its Abstinence and Sacred Music' (Wu, 932). Rather than turn his mind to the purifying trials of Lent, however, the lyric Byron included in the letter to Moore was a perfectly crafted expression of what he had been feeling:

So we'll go no more a-roving
So late into the night,
Though the heart be still as loving,
And the moon be still as bright.

For the sword outwears its sheath,
And the soul wears out the breast,
And the heart must pause to breathe,
And love itself have rest.

Though the night was made for loving,
And the day returns too soon,
Yet we'll go no more a-roving
By the light of the moon.

(1–12; Wu, 932)

When read independently of the letter which explains the circumstances giving rise to its creation, however, the poem seems to embrace far more than the waning of erotic energy. It seems rather a wistful expression of involuntary but unavoidable ending, of deep pleasure no longer to be enjoyed, for reasons that cannot be fathomed. The 'we' has an inclusiveness that takes the words beyond the individual moment, beyond the private conversation of friends or lovers, opening the feeling to anyone who cares to listen. But it is the kind of poem that resists analysis, because the language is so simple, the images, so immediately recognizable. It is simply there, speaking its truth to readers of all ages.

What is very noticeable in Byron's lyric, however, as in so many Romantic poems, is the satisfying nature of the rhythm. Though the poem is premised on desire and loss, the strong meter and alternation of longer and shorter lines are so perfectly suited to their meaning that the overall reading experience is very powerful. As Wordsworth pointed out in the Preface to *Lyrical Ballads*, 'words metrically arranged' were inherently pleasing, and crucial to the success of a poem (Wu, 503). He was well aware that certain subjects ran the risk of alienating readers, for any 'images and feelings' that 'might have an undue proportion of pain connected with them', were in danger of taking readers 'beyond the bounds of pleasure' (Wu, 503). This was why meter was so important, because the 'co-presence of something regular', especially of a rhythm familiar to the mind when in a less highly charged emotional state, had 'great efficacy in tempering and restraining the passion by an intertexture of ordinary feeling' (Wu, 503). In other words, the most painful ideas could be handled by an accomplished poet, providing that the meter was carefully chosen to avoid excess.

Though fully alert to the regulating powers of poetic rhythm, Wordsworth also recognized, at the same time, that meter could work very differently, to enhance, rather than subdue feeling. Since readers were conditioned by earlier literary experience, they were likely to respond more powerfully to particular rhythms and therefore to the meaning of the poem: 'in the feeling, whether cheerful or melancholy, which he has been accustomed to connect with that particular movement of meter, there will be found something which will greatly contribute to impart passion to the words' (Wu, 503). Wordsworth understood that different rhythms spoke to different emotional needs and moods, so a rapid meter could add to the urgency of a poem, while a slower pace might deepen its reflections.

Such insights from a practising poet are enormously helpful when trying to understand the powerful effects achieved by apparently simple lyrics. For whether the rhythm of a poem such as 'So we'll go no more a-roving' is understood to be tempering painful feelings, or adding immeasurably to the lyric's emotional depth, may depend largely on the attitude and experience of the individual reader. In either case, however, Wordsworth's belief in the essential pleasure of metrical arrangement is fully borne out. The Preface to *Lyrical Ballads* emphasized the emotional effects of poetry, but the sympathy of readers depended as much on the rightness of the rhythm as on the subject matter: a poem had to be in sympathy with its own sense through form and meter. For even lyrics capable of striking the most painful corresponding chords in a reader's imagination could

provide an ‘overbalance of pleasure’ through the beauty of their own acoustic balance and well-made imagery.

Wordsworth himself was often at his best when treating the most upsetting subjects, bringing his distinctive voice to bear on tales of human suffering. In ‘Michael’, for example, the dreadful blows sustained by the elderly Grasmere shepherd and his wife are conveyed in metrical language as strong and pared down as the way of life celebrated in the poem:

The Shepherd ended here; and Luke stoop'd down
And as his Father had requested, laid
The first stone of the Sheep-fold; at the sight
The Old Man's grief broke from him; to his heart
He press'd his son, he kissed him and wept –
And to the House together they return'd.

(428–33; O'Neill and Mahoney, 139)

The regularity of the iambic pentameter is varied by the long vowel sounds, which create spondees to slow the lines appropriately – ‘first stone’, ‘Sheep-fold’, ‘Old Man’s’ ‘grief broke’. These are not lines that can be hurried through, as the reader is halted by words that match the emotion being conveyed. The most demonstrative line, in terms of emotional expression, ‘He press’d his son, he kissed him and wept’ (432), is also the only line in this passage where the regular meter breaks down, as if not quite able to carry on to a tenth syllable. Moments such as this certainly threaten to carry readers ‘beyond the bounds of pleasure’, but the emotion is at once matched and brought under control by the measured pace of Wordsworth’s poetry.

Wordsworth regarded poetry as a way of paying ‘homage to the native and naked dignity of man’ (Preface to *Lyrical Ballads*, Wu, 527) – in other words, to the essential qualities of human nature that could be discerned more easily once the more distracting surfaces of life had been stripped away. The human condition was full of pain and suffering, but it was ultimately part of a ‘grand, elementary principle of pleasure’ (Wu, 527) and the key to this apparent paradox was sympathy. ‘Wherever we sympathise with pain’, Wordsworth suggested, ‘it will be found that the sympathy is produced and carried on by subtle combinations with pleasure’ (Preface to *Lyrical Ballads*, 1802, Gill, 68). The stimulation of compassion, often quickest in response to images of suffering and distress, was itself positive, and so even the saddest stories, if sufficiently well-told in the best language and surest rhythm, gave rise to powerful pleasure. The ‘pleasures of

memory' then, were not necessarily self-soothing reflections on earlier enjoyments, but might also encompass the most harrowing tales, drawn from the past and yet capable of exciting powerful emotions in readers of a later age.

Public and Private

When the second, enlarged edition of *Lyrical Ballads* was published in 1800, Wordsworth sent a copy to one of the leading politicians of the day, Charles James Fox, because he was so concerned about the plight of people in contemporary Britain and hoped that his poems might provoke 'profitable sympathies in many kind and good hearts' (Wordsworth, *Letters*, I, 313). In order to balance the economic hardships caused by prolonged warfare, high taxation, a repressive social system and widespread movement of people towards expanding towns and the armed forces, Wordsworth was offering an increase in 'profitable sympathies'. As an entry in the national ledger, poems may have looked somewhat out of place, but the tone of Wordsworth's letter, like the Preface which had been added to the new edition of *Lyrical Ballads*, could hardly have been more serious. Poetry, by opening the eyes of readers to the feelings of their fellow men and to their own complicated psychological experience, had its special contribution to make to the well-being of the nation.

For modern readers to make sense of Romantic poetry, it is therefore helpful to understand something of the convictions held by its creators, which are often set out quite clearly in their various prefaces, essays and letters. All the poets whose work is discussed in the chapters that follow were very able men and women, many of whom were driven by a strong sense of commitment to society. That they chose to write poetry was rarely a sign of a leisurely life-style: for many, publishing poems was essential to their livelihood, while for those in more privileged circumstances, writing poetry was often part of a general desire to improve the world in which they lived. Anyone who has been lucky enough to see Shelley's gold teething rattle in an exhibition will be aware that his own background was hardly impoverished, but this does not diminish his tireless efforts to expose the injustices of his age, nor his lifelong commitment to the bloodless revolution that might bring about equal rights for all. William Blake, on the other hand, worked hard to earn a living as an engraver, but his poems were similarly radical, often compelled by what he saw in modern

London, with its ‘youthful harlots’ and child labourers, crying ‘weep weep weep weep’ (‘London’, 14, ‘The Chimney Sweeper’, 3; O’Neill and Mahoney, 28, 38).

While a humanitarian purpose is obvious in poems written about the Slave Trade or the condition of young chimney sweeps, however, it may be less easily visible to readers of later generations in the more personal poems of the period. And yet, contemporary philosophical ideals about sympathy meant that any poem able to awaken a sympathetic response in readers was also contributing to the wider world. To read or write about ‘Dejection’ was not necessarily to retreat from society, because ‘fellow feeling’ was coming to be seen as foundational to morality. To sympathize with another’s situation, as the Scottish moral philosopher, Adam Smith, had argued influentially in 1759, in *A Theory of Moral Sentiments*, was the first step towards developing a moral conscience and sense of justice. It was by putting ourselves in the place of others and, conversely, by imagining how our own actions might be perceived by an impartial spectator, that we learned to behave in a morally acceptable way. As Burns put it memorably, in ‘To a Louse’, ‘O wad some Pow’r the giftie gie us / *To see oursel as others see us!*’ (43–4; *Poems and Songs*, I, 194). And hence what may now seem to be the rather grand claims made by poets in the period for the moral significance of the imagination.

Shelley, for example, was unequivocal about the ethical dimension of his art, arguing eloquently that:

The great secret of morals is love, or a going out of our own nature, and an identification of ourselves with the beautiful which exists in thought, action, or person not our own. A man to be greatly good, must imagine intensely and comprehensively; he must put himself in the place of another and of many others; the pains and pleasures of his species must become his own. The great instrument of moral good is the imagination – and poetry administers to the effect by acting upon the cause.

(*A Defence of Poetry*, Wu, 1190)

This line of reasoning, which draws on New Testament and Platonic ideals of love as well as eighteenth-century moral philosophy, makes poetry central to moral action because of its association with the imagination. In Shelley’s essay, goodness depends on sympathy and the related ability to identify with the feelings of others. The capacity of poems to make the ‘pains and pleasures of his species’ part of an individual’s felt experience has, accordingly, a profound effect on his own attitudes and behavior – and therefore on the lives of those around.

Shelley followed the philosophical arguments of both David Hume and Adam Smith in regarding feeling as fundamental to human action, developing their insights in relation to poetry. Since imaginative literature had a unique capacity to affect the emotions and extend the range of its readers' understanding beyond their own personal experience, Shelley believed that it had a vital role to play in the progress of society. Unlike systems of moral philosophy, however, Shelley argued that poetry 'awakens and enlarges the mind itself', so that a great poem, such as *Paradise Lost*, worked not through any overt didactic message, but by exciting 'the sympathy of succeeding generations of mankind' (*A Defence of Poetry*, Wu, 1190, 1192). As one of the chief means through which the sympathetic imagination could be developed, poetry was crucial to the nation - not only at the moment of publication, but for centuries to come.

In the Preface to *Lyrical Ballads*, Wordsworth, too, wrote passionately about poetry's capacity to awaken hearts to the feelings of fellow men and women, thereby creating sympathetic connections between contemporary strangers, and across the generations: 'the Poet binds together by passion and knowledge the vast empire of human society, as it is spread over the whole earth, and over all time' (Preface to *Lyrical Ballads*, 1802, Gill, 69). Although the language of 'empire' might sound unappealing to modern ears, Wordsworth was using the term metaphorically to convey an image of universal brotherhood sustained by poetry. Many of his own poems revealed the profound human emotions experienced by the kind of people of whom contemporary poetry-readers might not generally have taken much notice: a homeless woman, an elderly traveller, a shepherd, or the mother of a disabled child. Through being given unexpected insights into their powerful feelings, a reader's capacity for sympathetic understanding might be greatly magnified. This was why the poet could be described as 'the rock of defence of human nature; an upholder and preserver, carrying everywhere with him relationship and love' (Preface to *Lyrical Ballads*, 1802, Gill, 69).

According to Wordsworth, the ideal poet acknowledged the beauty of the universe, a task 'light and easy to him who looks at the world in the spirit of love' (Wu, 527). In fact, as numerous contemporary letters and journals testify, the business of writing poetry was often neither light nor very easy, but Wordsworth was attempting to convey the heady, almost intoxicating, pleasure of discovering and communicating affinities with the rest of the world. The poet, in Wordsworth's exhilarating

celebration, was presented ‘singing a song in which all human beings join with him’ (Preface to *Lyrical Ballads*, 1802, Gill, 68) and so to question his account would seem almost a refusal of friendship. As with Shelley, Wordsworth’s is a poet’s prose, bent on creating for himself a sympathetic audience of readers.

Not all human beings of the period *were* prepared to join in, however. Byron, for one, did not find Wordsworth’s enthusiasm for the inner life of the ‘low and rustic’ especially appealing, though he did admit to the emotional impulse behind poetry (‘it is the lava of the imagination whose eruption prevents an earthquake’ (Byron, *Letters and Journals*, III, 179). An origin in the passions did not necessarily mean that the resulting poem worked only on the feelings, however, and for Byron, the pleasure of poetry was as much intellectual and rational. His own impulses were often satirical, driven by a desire to expose cant or puncture his more self-satisfied contemporaries with the corrective force of wit and laughter. In his exuberant modern epic, *Don Juan*, the relationship between the modern poet and society is accordingly presented in very different tones from those adopted by Wordsworth or Shelley:

He was a man who had seen many changes,
And always changed as true as any needle;
His polar star being one which rather ranges,
And not the fix’d – he knew the way to wheedle:
So vile, he ‘scaped the doom which oft avenges;
And being fluent (save indeed when fee’d ill),
He lied with such a fervour of intention –
There was no doubt he earn’d his laureate pension.
(*Don Juan*, III, 633–40)

Although Byron was primarily making fun of the current Poet Laureate, Robert Southey, a frequent target of his satire, the more general point about poets adapting to the times and tastes of those who buy their work provides a less idealized image of ‘the poet’ than that presented by Wordsworth or Shelley.

Throughout *Don Juan*, Byron reflected on the nature of poetry and its connection to contemporary events, lacing his poem with references to well known figures of his day and giving the protagonist an international field for his adventures. Juan is born in Seville, but is subsequently shipwrecked on a Greek island, sold into slavery in Turkey, engaged in battle at the siege of Ismail, before ending up among the fashionable circles of modern

London. Once his hero is moving in English society, Byron has the perfect opportunity for caustic comment on the contemporary literary scene:

He saw ten thousand living authors pass,
 That being about their average numeral;
 Also the eighty 'greatest living poets,'
 As every paltry magazine can show *its*.

(XI, 429–32)

The poem then considers Byron's own fall from his pre-eminent position as 'The grand Napoleon of rhyme' (440), before running through the various contenders for the title of 'greatest living poet'.

Despite the sceptical tone of many of his literary references, however, Byron was still placing poetry at the heart of modern society and emphasizing its importance through his uncompromising observations. *Don Juan* might debunk the high-flown language of the Lake poets, Wordsworth, Coleridge and Southey, but Byron was still making ambitious claims of his own for the lasting importance of great literature. His description of the poet in Canto III, for example, builds up to a mini-defence of his own art, which, like that of Wordsworth or Shelley, points to its capacity to connect strangers:

But words are things, and a small drop of ink,
 Falling like dew, upon a thought, produces
 That which makes thousands, perhaps millions, think;
 'Tis strange, the shortest letter which man uses
 Instead of speech, may form a lasting link
 Of ages;

(*Don Juan*, III, 793–8)

Byron's emphasis – underlined by the rhymes – was on poetry's capacity to make people think rather than feel, but he was still making just as large a claim for literature as that made by any of his contemporaries. The apparently whimsical meditation on ink, for example, develops a theme that is introduced at the very opening of the poem – that of the dependence of great men on accomplished writers. As Byron points out, lasting glory is conferred not so much by remarkable actions as by 'the historian's style':

The present century was growing blind
 To the great Marlborough's skill in giving knocks,
 Until his late Life by Archdeacon Coxe.

(*Don Juan*, III, 814–6)

The Duke of Marlborough had been the hero of the early eighteenth century, whose great palace had been built by Queen Anne in honor of his victories over the French at Blenheim, but his memory, somewhat eclipsed by the more recent successes of Nelson and Wellington, had suddenly been revived in the year that *Don Juan* was written, in a new biography by Coxe. This is just the same point as that made in the opening Canto, where Byron lists numerous military leaders from the previous century, once famous enough to give their names to inns and buildings, but now slipping from memory. The speed with which heroes turn into has-beens is rammed home by his jibe at the Prince Regent's preference for the army, which seems to threaten even Nelson with obscurity:

Nelson was once Britannia's god of war,
And still should be so, but the tide is turned;
There's no more to be said of Trafalgar –
'Tis with our hero quietly inurned
Because the army's grown more popular,
At which the naval people are concerned,
Besides, the prince is all for land-service,
Forgetting Duncan, Nelson, Howe, and Jervis.

(I, 25–32; Wu, 938–9)

The power of princes is equally unpredictable, however, as the next stanza shows by speculating on the 'Brave men' who must have fought in the centuries preceding the Trojan War, before concluding, 'But they shone not on poet's page, / And so have been forgotten' (I, 36–7). *Don Juan* may adopt a largely comic tone, but this does not mean it is less concerned about the role of poetry in society than the eloquent manifestos of other Romantic poets.

The relationship between individual and collective experience was a major preoccupation of the period. The world-inverting events of the later eighteenth century, from the American Declaration of Independence in 1776 to the Battle of Waterloo in 1815 combined to ensure a general awareness of living in unprecedented times. In between came war between Britain and America, the Storming of the Bastille, the execution of the French King and Queen, the outbreak of war with Revolutionary France, the rising of the United Irishmen, Napoleon's rise to power in France and conquest over much of Europe, the Act of Union between Britain and Ireland, the Abolition of the Slave Trade, the assassination of the British Prime Minister, and the Regency crisis, which followed the declaration of

George III's insanity. This was a period in which extraordinary public events were taking place with bewildering rapidity and the state and fate of Europe seemed perpetually in flux.

At such a time, when everyone knew their lives were at the mercy of larger forces, it was often unnecessary to spell out the specific circumstances of a poem, since contemporary readers were likely to be subject to the same prevailing mood. Poems that may seem to utter deeply private emotions were often, therefore, articulating the more widespread feelings that gripped many of their readers. Charles Lamb's refrain, 'All, all are gone, the old familiar faces' (Wu, 739), for example, may be primarily an expression of personal dismay, but it also reflects something of the sense of irreversible change, which spread across late eighteenth-century society, in response to shifting politics and economics, changes in land use, the growth of towns and industry, and the acute distresses associated with the long war. Clare's 'The Flitting', too, though prompted by the specific distresses associated with moving away from his native village in 1832, still articulated feelings of displacement that resonated for many.

At times, the influence of public events on private feelings is very obvious, of course, from Burns's indignation over the new legislation controlling whisky sales in 'The Author's Earnest Cry and Prayer' or Coleridge's 'Fears in Solitude', with its ominous subtitle, 'Written in April 1798. During the Alarms of an Invasion', to Shelley's outraged response to the Peterloo massacre in *The Mask of Anarchy* in 1819. Wordsworth's aim in *The Prelude* was to make sense both of his own life and the extraordinary times in which he lived; in doing so, he was offering himself up for the benefit of others – revealing his personal psychological development and his political commitments. It was not until after his death in 1850, however, that *The Prelude* was finally published, which is indicative of the difficulty faced by many Romantic poets in making their political views public. At many moments between 1790 and 1830, printing direct political opinions risked arrest for sedition or libel and so poets were forced to keep their more overtly critical comments hidden or filtered through less direct modes of expression.

Indeed, in many poems the relevance of the individual experience to wider concerns is left understated, perceptible to modern readers largely through contextual information or subtle associations within the text. The New Historicist criticism of Keats, for example, which began to transform understandings of Romantic poetry in the 1980s, drew attention to the implications of his friendship with the radical publisher and poet,

James Leigh Hunt, and revealed hitherto unnoticed political dimensions in many of the major poems. Leigh Hunt had been imprisoned for publishing literature critical of the Prince Regent and his release two years later inspired one of Keats's early sonnets. Hunt's case nevertheless brought home to writers in the 1810s that open comment on political issues could be very dangerous. More covert ways of expressing political sympathies were needed and Thomas Moore, for example, was able to draw attention to the situation in Ireland through his popular *Irish Melodies*, which were sung in elegant drawing rooms throughout the decade.

Caution over free speech was by no means a new development under the Regency, however. From the mid 1790s, when leading radical intellectuals were put on trial for Treason and the Act of Sedition made it almost impossible to publish anything that might be deemed critical of the wartime Government, poets of the period had to be careful about what they published. Rather than remaining silent, however, they often found less direct ways of making their views known. Blake, for example, expressed his opinions on the international situation, on issues such as the Rights of Women, and on the state of his own nation, but he did so in illuminated books that were not only difficult to interpret, but also very rare, since he published them himself. The thousands who read Thomas Paine's *Rights of Man* were not therefore able to share Blake's indignation over the state of the nation, and it has only been in the twentieth century, with mass publication of his work, that the revolutionary dimensions have been fully recognised.

Narrative poems often provided a means of addressing personal matters too sensitive for public exposure, or political views too dangerous to express directly. In *The Prelude*, for example, Wordsworth inserted the tale of 'Vaudracour and Julia' in place of autobiographical revelations about his own French lover, even though the overt sympathies he was expressing with the early days of the Revolution rendered the poem largely unpublishable at its time of composition, in the year of Trafalgar, 1805. *Tam O'Shanter* has been read by critics such as Robert Crawford as a veiled confession of Burns's extra-marital relationship with Ann Park, but in its sympathetic treatment of popular culture and comic portrayal of Satanic rites, it also possessed a distinctly radical charge when it appeared in 1791. Don Juan's succession of love affairs provided an opportunity for the observation of human relations of every kind, with illuminating comparisons between the arrangements operating in different nations. In his comic-epic, Byron was able to draw on extensive personal experience, celebrating

past pleasures or settling old scores, while also using sexual relations to expose different kinds of power and its abuse. Keats, too, included topical references to the power of money over matrimony in his apparently fanciful tale of 'Isabella', while the epic fragment, 'Hyperion' was profoundly concerned with the overthrow of an older order and the uncertain future of those witnessing the arrival of the new.

Despite the difficulties of speaking out during a long period of warfare and political turbulence, poetry also offered a voice to numerous men – and women – who might otherwise have remained in obscurity. Poetry was a way of expressing powerful feelings, as the leading practitioners of the art emphasised in their essays, but it was also a medium which allowed expression to people who were denied a university education, professional career or public office because of their gender, religion or class. This was the period in which Ann Yearsley, who had spent her formative years hard at work milking cows, was eventually able to published accomplished poems about the inequities of the Slave Trade. As with pop stars two centuries later, success of the kind enjoyed by Ann Yearsley often depended on a talent-spotting patron, but opportunities were opening up as never before. Poetry was no longer exclusively the pursuit of those with private incomes or classical educations, and with the expansion of cheaper, provincial publishing, more and more people were able to see their work in print. At the same time, the presentation of collections such as John Clare's as the work of a 'peasant poet' meant that anything in the volume could be read in relation to contemporary society: even though his talent was so individual, he was being labelled according to his class.

The later eighteenth century is often seen as the birth time of democracy and it was certainly the moment when British literature began to open doors to anyone with the ability to write poetry. The importance of poetry to those who were to become the leading Romantic writers is abundantly evident in their own verse, essays and letters, but the extent to which poetry transformed the lives of other people is often less well known. During the years between 1780 and 1825, however, people across England, Scotland, Wales and Ireland were not only reading poetry, but writing, too, and their collective achievement was remarkable. When Byron described poetry as lava, whose 'eruption prevented an earthquake', he may have been thinking of his own inner torment, but his comment also applied to the experience of hundreds of contemporary writers, for whom poetry was an outlet for intense social frustration, for political

comment and for personal expression. While this might mean that Romantic poetry is seen as a largely conservative force, diffusing the need for political change by alleviating anger over contemporary injustices, it can also be viewed as its leading proponents hoped it would be, as a vital contribution to the gradual improvement of society. For the great reforms of the nineteenth century, which extended the franchise, improved working conditions and prevented child labor may have had something to do with the gradual awakening of sympathy and renewed understanding of the common experience of all humanity that poets in the Romantic period were so keen to promote. The long-term influence of poetry is impossible to trace with any certainty and lies well beyond the scope of this book, but reading the great Romantic statements on the nature of poetry as well as the richly varied poems of the period inevitably raises such thoughts. What is incontrovertible, as should already be apparent, is that during the Romantic period, poetry represented one of the deepest pleasures of existence. And it was a pleasure that did not depend on wealth or status, but accessible to anyone who could read. Once alert to the many dimensions of Romantic poetry, readers of the twenty-first century, too, are able to participate just as fully in its pleasures.

Further Reading

Useful introductions to Romanticism include:

M.H. Abrams (ed.), *English Romantic Poets*, 2nd edn. (London: Oxford University Press, 1975); Simon Bainbridge, *Romanticism: A Sourcebook* (Basingstoke: Palgrave, 2008); Marilyn Butler, *Romantics, Rebels and Reactionaries* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1980); Stuart Curran (ed.) *The Cambridge Companion to Romanticism* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1993); Aidan Day, *Romanticism* (London: Routledge, 1996); Michael Ferber, *Romanticism: A Very Short Introduction* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010); Michael Ferber (ed.) *A Companion to European Romanticism* (Oxford: Blackwell, 2005); Anne K. Mellor, *Romanticism and Gender* (London: Routledge, 1993); Charles Mahoney (ed.), *A Companion to Romanticism* (Oxford: Wiley-Blackwell, 2011); Michael O'Neill, *Literature of the Romantic Period: A Bibliographical Guide* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1998); Murray Pittock (ed.) *The Edinburgh Companion to Scottish Romanticism* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh

University Press, 2010); Nicholas Roe (ed.) *Romanticism: An Oxford Guide* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005); Jane Stabler, *Burke to Byron, Barbauld to Baillie, 1790–1830* (Basingstoke: Palgrave, 2002); Duncan Wu, *Romanticism: A Critical Reader* (Oxford: Wiley-Blackwell, 1995).

For an excellent account of eighteenth-century poetry, including discussion of the ‘Romantic mode’ of 1700–1730, see David Fairer, *English Poetry of the Eighteenth Century 1700–1789* (Harlow: Pearson, 2003), and for a classic account of the Romantic movement, encompassing the eighteenth-century aesthetics, see M.H. Abrams, *The Mirror and the Lamp* (London: Oxford University Press, 1953).

For an influential account of aesthetic pleasures and pains, see Edmund Burke, *A Philosophical Enquiry into our Ideas of the Origin of Our Ideas of the Sublime and the Beautiful* (1757), ed. Adam Phillips (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1990). David Hume, *A Treatise of Human Nature* (1739), David Hartley, *Observations on Man* (1749) and John Locke, *An Essay upon Human Understanding* (1690) all provide important philosophical foundations for the physical basis of later eighteenth-century aesthetic thought. For the educational implications of empiricism, see John Locke, *Some Thoughts concerning Education* (1693); Jean Jacques Rousseau, *Émile, ou l’Éducation* (1762). The educational concerns of Romantic poets have been studied by Alan Richardson in *Literature, Education and Romanticism* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994); Nicholas Roe, *John Keats and the Culture of Dissent* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1997); Anne Stott, *Hannah More: The First Victorian* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2003).

Orientalism has been the subject of numerous studies following Edward Said’s seminal, if controversial study, *Orientalism* (1978; Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1985). See especially Nigel Leask, *British Romantic Writers and the East* (Cambridge: Cambridge: Oxford University Press, 1992); *Curiosity and the Aesthetics of Travel Writing 1770–1840* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002); Michael Franklin (ed.), *Sir William Jones: Selected Poetical and Prose Works* (Cardiff: University of Wales Press, 1995).

For useful introductions to some of the major poems mentioned in this chapter, and their contexts, see Drummond Bone (ed.), *The Cambridge*

Companion to Byron (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004); Gerard Carruthers (ed.) *The Edinburgh Companion to Robert Burns* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2009); Robert Crawford, *The Bard: Robert Burns A Biography* (London: Jonathan Cape, 2009); Richard Cronin, *Shelley's Poetic Thoughts* (London and Basingstoke: Macmillan, 1981); Stephen Gill, *The Prelude* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1991); (ed.), *The Cambridge Companion to William Wordsworth* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003); Jerome McGann, *Fiery Dust: Byron's Poetic Development* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1968); Timothy Morton (ed.) *The Cambridge Companion to Shelley* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006); Lucy Newlyn (ed.), *The Cambridge Companion to Coleridge* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002); Michael O'Neill (ed.) *Shelley* (Harlow: Longman, 1993); Kelvin Everest, *Coleridge's Secret Ministry* (Hassocks: Harvester, 1979); Nicholas Roe (ed.) *Keats and History* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995); Jane Stabler, *Byron: Poetics and History* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003); Earl Wasserman, *Shelley: A Critical Reading* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins, 1971); Susan Wolfson (ed.), *The Cambridge Companion to Keats* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001); Jonathan Wordsworth, *The Music of Humanity* (London: Thomas Nelson, 1969); *The Borders of Vision* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1982).