



## The Three Phases of Romantic Poetry

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There are three phases of Romantic poetry. All the three phases are distinct as well as they are interlinked with each other.

1. The poets of the transitional period from Neo-Classical to Romantic poetry are like Chatterton, Collins and Gray .
2. And the poets of the second generation of Romantic poetry are Blake, Wordsworth and Coleridge.
3. Last but not the least the poet of the last phases of Romantic Movement are -Shelley, Keats and Byron.

Gray, the author of the famous "Elegy" is the most scholarly and well balanced of all the early romantic poets. In his youth he was a weakling, the only one of twelve children who survived infancy ; and his loved mother, gave to his whole life the stamp of melancholy, which is noticeable in all his poems. At the famous Eton school, and again at Cambridge, he seems to have followed his own scholarly tastes rather than the curriculum, and was shocked , like Gibbon, at the general idleness and aimlessness of university life.

Gray's Letters, published in 1775 , are excellent reading, and his Journal is still a model of natural description ; but it is to a single small volume of poems that he owes his fame and his place in literature. These poems divide themselves naturally into three periods, in which we may trace the progress of Gray's emancipation from the classic rules which had so long governed English literature. In the first period he wrote several minor poems, of which the best are hi "Hymn to Adversity" and the odes "To Spring" and "On a Distant Prospect of Eton College. " These early poems reveal two suggestive things; first, the appearance of that melancholy which characterizes all the poetry of the period; and second, the study of nature, not for its won beauty or truth, but rather as a suitable background for the play of human emotions.

The second period shows the same tendencies more strongly developed. The "Elegy Written in a Country Churchyard" (1750), the most perfect poem of the age, belongs to the period. To read Milton's "II Penseroso" and Gray's "Elegy" is to see the melancholy which largely occupied English poets for more than a century. Two other well-known poems of this second period are the Pindaric odes, "The Progress of Poesy" and "The Bard." The first is strongly suggestive of Dryden's "Alexander's Feast," but show Milton's influence in a greater melody and variety of expression. "The Bard" is, in every way, more romantic and original. An old minstrel, the last of the Welsh singers, halts King Edward and his army in a wild mountain pass, and with fine poetic frenzy prophesies the terror and desolation, which must ever follow the tyrant. From its first line, " : Ruin seize thee, ruthless King!" to the end, when the old bard plunges from his lofty crag and disappears in the river's flood, the poem thrills with the fire of an ancient and noble race of men. It breaks absolutely with the classical school and proclaims a literary declaration of independence.

In the third period Gray turns momentarily from his Welsh material and reveals a new field of romantic interest in two Norse poems. "The Fatal Sisters" and "the Descent of Odin" (1761). Gray translated his material from the Latin, and though these two poems lack much of the elemental and strength and grandeur of the Norse sagas, they are remarkable for calling attention to the unused wealth of literary material that was hidden in Northern mythology. To Gray and to Percy (Who published his Northern Antiquities in 1770) is due in large measure the profound interest in the Old Norse sagas, which has continued to our own day.

Taken together, Gray's works form a most interesting commentary on the varied life of the eighteenth century. He was a scholar, familiar with all the intellectual interests of his age, and his work has much of the precision and polish of the classical school; but he shares also the reawakened interest in nature, in common man, and in mediaeval culture, and his work is generally romantic both in style and in spirit.

This "marvelous boy, to whom Keats dedicated his "Endymion", and who is celebrated in Shelley's "Adonais," is one of the saddest and most interesting figures of the romantic revival. During his childhood he haunted the old church of St. Mary Redcliffe, in Bristol, where he was fascinated by the mediaeval air of the place, and especially by one old chest, known as Canynge's coffer, containing musty documents, which has been preserved for three hundred years. With strange, uncanny intentness the child pored over these relics of the past, copying them instead of his writing book, until he could imitate not only the spelling and language but also even the handwriting of the original. Soon after the "Ossian" Forgeries appeared, Chatterton began to produce documents, apparently very old, containing mediaeval poems, legends, and family histories, centering around two characters, Thomas Rowley, priest and poet, and William Canynge, merchant of Bristol in the days of Henry VI. It seems incredible that the whole design of these mediaeval romances should have been worked out by a child of eleven, and that he could reproduce the style and the writing of Caxton's day so well that the printers were deceived; but such is the fact. More and more Rowley Papers, as they were

called, were produced by Chatterton, apparently from the archives of the old church; in reality from his own imagination, delighting a large circle of readers, and deceiving all but Gray and a few scholars who recognized the occasional misuse of fifteenth-century English words. All this work was carefully finished, and bore the unmistakable stamp of literary genius. Reading now his "Ella" or the "Ballad of Charite," or the long poem in ballad style called "Bristowe Tragedie," it is hard to realize that it is a boy's work. At seventeen years of age Chatterton went for a literary career to London, where he soon afterwards took poison and killed himself in a fit of childish despondency, brought on poverty and hunger.

William Collins, the friend and disciple of Thomson, was of a delicate, nervous temperament, like Cowper; and over him also brooded the awful shadow of insanity. His first work, *Oriental Eclogues* (1742), is romantic in feeling, but is written in the prevailing mechanical couplets. All his later work is romantic in both thought and expression. His "Ode on the Popular Superstitions of the Highlands" (1750) is an interesting event in the romantic revival, for it introduced a new world, of witches, pygmies, fairies, and medieval kings, for the imagination to play in. Collins's best-known poems are the odes "To Simplicity," "To Fear", "To the Passions," the little unnamed lyric beginning "How sleep the brave", and the exquisite "Ode to Evening." In reading the latter, one is scarcely aware that the lines are so delicately balanced that they have no need of rhyme to accentuate their melody. Collins was the forerunner of the Romantic poets. He was a transitional poet along with Thomas Gray.

Of all the romantic poets of the eighteenth century, Blake is the most independent and the most original. In his earliest work, written when he was scarcely more than a child, he seems to go back to the Elizabethan song writers for his models; but for the greater part of his life he was the poet of inspiration alone, following no man's lead, and obeying no voice but that which he heard in his own mystic soul. Though the most extraordinary literary genius of his age, he had practically no influence upon it. Indeed, we hardly yet understand this poet of pure fancy, this mystic, and this transcendental madman, who remained to the end of his busy life an incomprehensible child.

The *Poetical Sketches*, published in 1783, is a collection of Blake's earliest poetry, much of it written in boyhood. It contains much crude and incoherent work, but also a few lyrics of striking originality. Two later and better-known volumes are *Songs of Innocence* and *Songs of Experience*, reflecting two widely different views of the human soul. As in all his works, there is an abundance of apparently worthless stuff in these songs; but, in the language of miners, it is all "pay dirt"; it shows gleams of golden grains that await our sifting, and now and then we find a nugget unexpectedly.

Swinburne calls Blake the only poet of supreme and simple poetic genius of the eighteenth century, "the one man of the age fit, on all accounts, to rank with the old great masters." The praise is doubtless extravagant, and the criticism somewhat intemperate; but when we have read "The Evening Star", "Memory", "Night", "Love", "To the Muses", "Spring", "Summer", "The Tiger", "The Lamb", "The Clod and the Pebble", we may possibly

share Swinburne's enthusiasm. Certainly, in these three volumes we have some of the most perfect and the most original songs in our language.

Of Blake's longer poems, his titanic prophecies and apocalyptic splendors, it is impossible to write justly in such a brief work as this. Outwardly they suggest a huge chaff pile and the scattered grains of wheat hardly warrant the labor of winnowing. The curious reader will get an idea of Blake's amazing mysticism by dipping into any of the works of his middle life, *Urizen*, *Gates of Paradise*, *Marriage of Heaven and Hell*, *America*, *The French Revolution*, or *The Vision of the Daughters of Albion*. His latest works, like *Jerusalem* and *Milton*, are too obscure to have any literary value. To read any of these works casually is to call the author a madman. He was the first romantic poet and gave the romanticism a new dimension. He also paved the way for Pre-Raphaelite poets.

When Keats said that the poetical character of which he was a member was distinguished from "the Wordsworthian or egotistical sublime,"<sup>1</sup> and when he accused Wordsworth of brooding and peacocking over the speculations "engendered in the whim of an Egotist,"<sup>2</sup> to say the least, he was not being fair to the elder poet. And when one evokes Keats's concept of Negative Capability, which he believed Shakespeare possessed "So enormously,"<sup>3</sup> it is possible to assume too hastily that as writers Wordsworth and Shakespeare were chasing different quarry. The modes of these two writers - Shakespeare and Wordsworth were indeed different, but the end they had in view was the same. Every writer, as Henry James observed, has his eye glued to the aperture of his own choice, but what each one of them is looking at is the same or different aspect of the same thing. Be that as it may, the fact remains that it is now a matter of widely accepted belief that Wordsworth is a deeply subjective or even an egotistical writer; that everything in him began and ended in his own personal experience the assumption being that it is not so in the case of other writers. What is important however, is what one does with one's experience. That makes all the difference. Wordsworth is misunderstood on two points. First, the nature of the experience he talks of is not properly understood; secondly his continual dwelling on it is mistaken for his gloating on a point of personal distinction. The habit to take on write for a subjective artist talking continually of his personal experience, and the other for an objective and impersonal writer who has nothing to do with anything personal not only does not help, it positively hinders proper appreciating and enjoyment of his work. It creates a prejudice, which hampers critical judgment. To the extent a writer's experience is aesthetic it partakes of certain common characteristics which make all writers members of the same community. In the last analysis, to dwell too much on differences of individual authors does not avail. Criticism should be concerned more with the metaphysic that recognizes the substantial unity or sameness of all writers in spite of their individual differences. For all writers, after all, are working in order to achieve the same goal -the aesthetic apprehension of reality and the imparting of aesthetic pleasure by means of their creative work. That different writers employ different means to achieve the end they have in view is important, very important indeed up to a certain point, but is finally of no consequence. The end they have in

view justifies the adoption of different means. As Wordsworth himself said, "upon the accuracy with which similitude in dissimilitude, and dissimilitude in similitude" among different writers "are perceived, depend our taste and moral feelings, without which even comparison and analysis, which are the chief tools of the critic, are not likely to yield any positive result. In their absence, such tools are used, to borrow Wordsworth's Word for botanizing over the writers' grave ("A Poet's Epitaph")

Samuel Taylor Coleridge was one of the leading romantic poets of the first generation. He was the famous poet of this period and gave his best contribution to the Romantic Moment. Along with William Wordsworth he started a new genre of literature and discarded the Neo Classical theory of poetry.

"A grief without a pang, void, dark and drear,  
A stifled , drowsy, inimpassioned grief,  
Which finds no natural outlet, no relief,  
In words , or sigh, or tear ,"<sup>4</sup>

In the wonderful "Ode to Dejection, "from which the above fragment is taken, we have a single strong impression of Coleridge's whole life, a sad, broken, tragic life, in marked contrast with the peaceful existence of his friend Wordsworth, For himself , during the greater part of his life , the poet had only grief and remorse as his portion; but for everybody else, for the audiences that were charmed by the brilliancy of his literary lectures, for the friends who gathered about him to be inspired by his ideals and conversation, and for all his readers who found unending delight in the little volume which holds his poetry, he had and still has a cheering message, full of beauty and hope and inspiration. Such is Coleridge, a man of grief who makes the worlds glad.

### Reference

1. *Letters of John Keats, edited by Robert Gittings (London: Oxford University Press, 1970) p. 157*
2. *Ibid p. 60*
3. *Ibid p. 43*
4. *Ode to Dejection, S.T. Coleridge edited by J.M. Hart in Athenaeum Press (1909).*