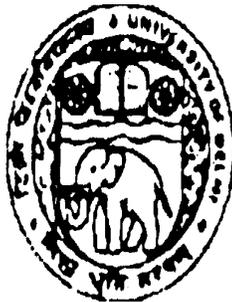


Graduate Course

Paper VI : English Literature - 3

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DEFINING ROMANTICISM

Romanticism has proved as hard to define as to be rid of. The age of partisanship having passed, it seems appropriate now to look at it dispassionately, yet without losing sight of its peculiar relevance to our own cultural situation. Neither the nineteenth century view (Romanticism as a vast act of liberation after the confinements of the eighteenth century), nor the modernist view (Romanticism as an orgy of subjective destructiveness after the orderliness of the Enlightenment) really stands up to close scrutiny. Contrary to many critics of the modernist period,¹ Romantic art is characteristically as solid in construction, as well-shaped, objectified and energetic as that of the eighteenth century.² Contrary to neo-Romantic critics, Romantic art does not have a monopoly of organic form, passion, seriousness or 'the true voice of feeling'.³ No definition of Romanticism has yet been offered, indeed, which cannot, apparently, be discredited by a host of counter-examples: the characteristics usually thought of as specifically Romantic (subjectivity, nature-worship, distrust of rationalism, hunger for wholeness, pantheism) can all be found in much work that certainly is not Romantic, yet are often absent from much that indisputably is.

Because of such difficulties, some critics have suggested that there is no such thing as Romanticism at all.⁴ This view - what we could call the pedantic - cannot, it seems to me, be taken seriously. Romanticism exists, or existed; even if we discredit false notions of it, we are surely obliged to admit that there is or was something which caused these effects, something which needs to be clarified and explained, not explained away. With this in mind, some critics accept that, although we cannot define Romanticism very clearly, we know what it is, and are entitled to go ahead with our evaluations, so long as we take the care to draw two lines across History (one before, one after Romanticism), making it clear what works we are accepting as Romantic. Thus for instance, we will call Piranesi's drawings, German *Sturm and Drang*, Young's *Night Thoughts* and Gray's 'Elegy' all pre-Romantic. The post-Romantic is more difficult to date, and the chronology varies from art-form to art-form. Music critics usually accept Brahms, Wagner and Schumann as Romantic, where literary critics - in England at least - would want to withhold the term from the poets (Browning, Tennyson, Arnold, Swinburne) contemporary with these composers, calling them simply Victorian. Art-historians tend to reserve the term Romantic for the work of the first thirty years of the nineteenth century, beginning, let us say, with Turner and Goya, and ending with Delacroix. Thereafter, as in the history of the novel, Romanticism gives way to Realism, just as Realism in turn gives way to Impressionism, Symbolism or Naturalism. This general way of proceeding - what we could call the Art-Historical - answers the problematic questions about Romanticism by ignoring them. No matter how minutely the formal structures of the work that falls inside the agreed period are examined, its real nature and significance can only be appreciated when we try to define the way in which it intrinsically differs from the work which comes before and after it. The 'feel' of the art of Wordsworth, Turner, Delacroix and Beethoven differs profoundly and significantly from that of any art that came, before it: however reductively we try to find equivalents for their individual qualities in the art of earlier periods, there will always remain the Romantic quality of the whole, and this pervasive quality cannot be properly appreciated simply by isolating the work in time and submitting it to the same kind of formal analysis as we apply to the art of the Baroque or the Classical periods, with no consideration of its 'Romantic' properties.

According to another way of dealing with the problem of Romanticism - what we could call the typological - Romanticism is a state of mind, a kind of artistic temperament, the opposite of which is the Classical. This dichotomy is a by-product of the great age of German art-history, and follows the typological dichotomies of Heinrich Wölfflin (*Barock and Classical*).⁵ What is generally today thought of as characteristically Romantic, in fact, is what Wölfflin called *Barock*, and we can use the two terms interchangeably. Thus, Rubens could be described as Romantic, Van Dyck as Classical; Shakespeare as Romantic, Ben Jonson as Classical; and so on. Alternatively, *Barock* (or Romanticism) can be seen as appearing historically in alternation with its temperamental or typological opposite, according to the needs of man at the time. The classic exposition of this kind of view is Worringer's *Abstraction und Einfühlung*,⁶

¹ Geoffrey Thurley, *The Romantic Predicament* (Macmillan, 1983).

though his theory is so complicated by questions of compensation that it is dangerous to apply it outside the areas chosen by Worringer himself. ('Cool' abstraction, for instance, could be conceived as evidence of the Classical temper; on the other hand it could be seen as Romantic, in so far as it is understood by Worringer as a symptom of fear and insecurity in man.) As applied to Romanticism itself, this view of things inverts the error of the art-historical view. If the art-historical view ignores the intrinsic properties of Romanticism by concentrating all its attention on chronology, the typological view ignores the historical dimension of Romanticism by concentrating attention exclusively on certain qualities Romanticism seems to share with the art of other periods. We could grant, for the sake of argument, that Rubens had certain qualities which appealed to Romantic artists and, even, were 'typically' Romantic. But such a view still fails to explain the deep and decisive differences which exist between the art of Rubens and that of his Romantic disciple, Eugene Delacroix, who might, for the sake of argument, be granted to be typologically similar. What was to be explained by the typological argument is thus precisely what remains unexplained.

The most intellectually respectable attempt to define Romanticism - the epistemological - focuses attention on its theory of mind and traces to German Idealist reaction against the Enlightenment-empiricist attempts to reduce the mind to a passive collector of mental traces the quintessentially Romantic conception of Imagination as creative force overmastering the bounds of sensory experience and creating horizons and values transcending mere associationism. Like all the theories I have considered already, this view contains a certain amount of truth and cannot be wholly discounted. Yet by itself it explains little. Poets and artists plunder their philosophers fairly randomly, and there is little evidence that Kant offered the Romantics more accommodating models than Spinoza or Plato. Much of the great Romantic poetry apparently owes nothing to the Transcendentalist critique of mind; nor is there anything especially Romantic in Transcendentalism itself, though there can appear to be, when, as in Emerson, for instance, it is given a Wordsworthian coloration. Rational to the point of neurosis, Kant himself would appear to be the very negation of the spirit of Romanticism, and his fruitful disagreement with Hume has no real implications for the artist or the believer in deeper-than-rational drives in man. Kantian man is as colourless an abstraction as ever limped out of the pages of a moralist's textbook, and it is hard to see the essential relationship between Transcendentalist theories of mind and the art of Romanticism. This is not to deny that there is a certain structural analogy between Kant's Transcendental Ego and Blake's Poetic Genius, for instance, nor that certain poets (notably Coleridge) exploited aspects of the Kantian critique for their own purposes. Essentially, the Kantian theory of mind affords no more sustenance for the particular hungers of modern man than those of Hume. Value gets into empiricism, as into Transcendentalism, and neither philosophical tradition is intrinsically more charitable to poetry and the human needs poets believed they were providing for. An outstanding proof of this is Kierkegaard's essentially Romantic rejection of the super-Transcendentalist, Hegel. The Romantic conception of the Imagination as redeeming and spiritually uplifting force is quite alien and irrelevant to Kantian Idealism, and owes its origins to a complex of causes both more limited and more remote. The more remote cause I have already touched on: the ancient conception of poetry as spiritual power greater than Reason. The closer-at-hand cause is the social and historical situation in which the Romantics found themselves, and out of the conflict with which they made their art. By concentrating attention too exclusively upon the (undoubted) similarities between Romantic views of the Imagination and Transcendentalist theories of mind, the epistemological view also fails to comprehend the extent to which both Transcendentalism and Romanticism are symptomatic. Once again, the real nature of the Romanticism is neglected.

What we need is an approach which accepts the historical actuality of Romanticism and understands that to analyse Romantic art in its forms and intentions is to explain its historical situation, and vice versa. Such an approach must, I believe, in part accept a sociological element in criticism. The errors of the various views I have considered above stem from their attempts to deal with art in isolation from the general cultural and historical situation in which it is always grounded. This is not to say that I endorse what one might call an archaeological sociology of literature, treating the work of art as the archaeologist treats the stones, broken stelae and fragmentary zephyrs of Troy or Mycenae, as clues to a reality other than themselves. As symptomatic structures, works of art preserve certain homologies with the social and economic structures of their time, and are important sources of information about human history: every

work of art is, *inter alia*, an important social document, and it is foolish to think that it can be somehow 'above' such things. On the other hand, art can be seen as something we understand better by its being approached through a prior consideration of the facts surrounding its birth. But whether he accepts art as being explained by the historical facts, or as, on the contrary, itself throwing light on history, the sociologist of literature is guilty of reductivism unless he accepts that the work of art is a source of experience otherwise unattainable and that this experience is its real value. The criticism which fails to take the 'aesthetic' experience generated by the work of art as its first object ignores precisely that quality in virtue of which the work is to be valued. This does not mean that we can ignore the socio-historical facts in our interpretation of the work of art. If we are primarily concerned with the work's 'aesthetic' identity (the source of the identifying experience it offers), we are still obliged to acknowledge that this identity is only to be grasped through the contingent properties which constitute it. That is, though we must study not the *background* of works of art but their formal intentions, we must see that these formal intentions only came into existence in collaboration with time and the historical process. Once the forms come into existence, they pursue their own quasi-autonomous existence, but they are never really autonomous. They can only be enjoyed when they are understood, and they can only be understood when their relationship to the society that produced them is understood.

In the case of Romanticism; it is generally acknowledged that Romantic art is related in some way to the French and Industrial revolutions. The violence of the one set of facts 'explains' or parallels the irruptive nature of the other. We tend to associate - even if we ignore the association in our actual criticism - the despair, the excitement, the solitude and the frequent irrationality of Romantic art with the emergence of the new society out of the ruins of *l'ancien regime*. There is general acceptance, too, of the psychological and societal phenomena variously categorised as symptoms of alienation. A sense that we are living in a 'destitute time', to use Hölderlin's phrase, permeates both the art and the criticism of the Romantic age. It would be foolish to try to deny that this general, imprecise *mélange* of stresses and preoccupations is characteristic of 'Romantic' art and thought. What we must not do is attempt to derive the art and thought (the superstructural features in general) from any precisely defined base. No writer has ever been able to establish any such derivations or generations: the attempt to establish patterns of cause-and-effect between the art of the Romantic period and the various political and historical processes that lie behind and within them must be abandoned as theoretically unsound, yielding merely circular fulfillments of the theorist's own requirements.

Such 'correlations' of history and art are useful only if regarded as symptomatic, as defining properties of art and literature themselves in need of a clarification and understanding. No literature is to be explained by postulation of prior historical, economic or political event. At the same time, the art is itself made up of these events and processes: it is no less than a predicament. The purpose of the following pages is to clarify the nature of the various elements of the predicament that is Romanticism. Certain of these elements have, as I have mentioned above, accurately been outlined and identified: an emphasis upon individuality rather than collectivity, a certain ontological and teleological anxiety - such qualities can genuinely be located within Romantic works, and validly be called specifically Romantic. But these qualities are in turn part of general predicament, and it is with this predicament that we must be concerned in our efforts to understand Romanticism. Obviously nothing less than a description of the total state of affairs - cultural, linguistic, political, societal, economic, philosophical, religious - is really sufficient to accomplish this understanding. Equally obviously, no critic- least of all the present one- is capable of providing such a description. Such a description, moreover, would embrace not only the art and literature generally thought of as Romantic, but all the subsequent art, both the realist fiction that dominates the later nineteenth century, and the modernist art that, apparently, reacts against this realism in the twentieth. Realism falls within the Romantic territory; an archaeological sociology of literature, treating the work of art as the archaeologist treats the stones, broken stelae and fragmentary zephyrs of Troy or Mycenae, as clues to a reality other than themselves. As symptomatic structures, works of art preserve certain homologies with the social and economic structures of their time, and are important sources of information about human history: every work of art is, *inter alia*, an important social document, and it is foolish to think that it can be somehow 'above' such things. On the other hand, art can be seen as something we understand better by its being approached through a prior consideration of the facts

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This last point is particularly important, because what has become known as modernist criticism has based itself upon a rejection of Romanticism and realism supposedly implicit in the great avant garde artists of this century. If this rejection is a genuine one, then we are confronted with a reaction against the very things which, according to my view of the matter, constitute that historical predicament of which avant garde modernism is itself a symptom. It is with this problem that we must now be concerned.

(i) Modernist Dissociationism

Modernist criticism from its beginnings in the Cubist period, has always eschewed the 'positivistic' theory of the 'demon of progress in the arts';⁷ yet it has itself generally assumed the reality of a historical process. Its very basis, in fact, reflects the essentially historicistic notion of a reaction against a phase of culture felt to be decadent and anomalous. The myth of modernism derives its persuasiveness from the skill with which its first proponents exposed the fallacies of Romanticism and Realism. The Romantics assumed that poetry - where good - was 'sincere', and the product of a desire or need to 'express' personality or experience; that it is 'the expression of uttering forth of feeling', in Mill's representative phrase.⁸ If lyric poetry remained, as in Mill, 'more eminently and peculiarly poetry than any other',⁹ Realism, with its quasi-scientific theories of explanation and mimesis, became the ideal of fiction: novels were to be, like Hume's ideas', representations surpassed in force only by the reality itself. Modernist criticism has always adopted the reproving attitude to both Romantic poetry and to realist fiction suggested in T.E. Hulme's and T.S. Eliot's earlier essays, but most brilliantly articulated, perhaps, in Ortega y Gasset's little *esquisse*, *The Dehumanisation of Art*. Ortega distinguished between modern anti-realism and impersonality on the one hand, and Romantic seriousness and self-expressive realism on the other. The Romantics saw themselves as prophets - as something *more than* just artists - while the realists' concern for telling the truth about the world constituted a 'maximum aberration in the history of art'.¹⁰

Both this conviction of an importance outside the materials of their art and the preoccupation with 'reflecting' reality are also taken by the neo-modernist critics as signs of the Romantic realist heresies. The Romantics, Gabriel Josipovici argues, mistook the nature of language and the purpose of art. They believed that the purpose of poetry was to try to express '*everything*', the totality of experience, unfettered by the rules and limitations of conventions and consciousness,¹¹ and the attempt was bound, he says, to lead to self-destruction - Rimbaud's retreat into silence, Wagner's artistically suicidal *Gesammlkunstwerk*. In point of fact, Josipovici believes, language is limited by its rules and conventions, and its purpose is not to dissolve the Self into the Absolute, yet at the same time they wanted desperately to find and be *themselves* - not social beings but individual subjectivities. Such was the Romantics' dilemma and it led them (according to Josipovici) to overstress one of the twin drives of post-Renaissance art (expression) at the expense of the other (mimesis). The Realists made exactly the opposite mistake, overdoing the mimesis at the expense both of expression and of artifice, and mistaking the illusions of the imaginative worlds for the 'truth' -reality, what exists 'out there', as opposed to inside the covers of the book.

Josipovici is unfortunately too miserly with his evidence to permit any very concrete disagreement with his 'assessment' of the Romantics: he moves from Schleiermacher in full flow, wishing to dissolve into the cosmos, to Rimbaud in flight, admitting the whole venture to have been mistaken, by way of Nietzsche on Wagner, concluding with a few choice bits of Swinburne to show that the Romantics as a whole disregarded 'meaning' in their pursuit of association and 'music'. He makes no mention at all of the major Romantic poets, of either England or Germany (to say nothing of Russia and Poland), so that the assumption that the Romantic poets did not - deliberately, skillfully and professionally-get their effects through the use not the abuse of language, is never exposed to the text of serious poetry. The same is true of his treatment of Realist fiction. No evidence is offered, we are just asked to accept that the fictions of Dickens, Tolstoy, Balzac and company can be equated with the childish 'imaginings' of Proust's Marcel.¹² Whereas Dickens, George Eliot, Dostoevsky and the rest of them expected their illusions to be taken for reality, Proust knew that there was a difference between the 'imaginative' world and the reality of life. By reminding the reader of the essentially fictional nature of the text and thus of the relations between this text and the reader's own reality, the modernist writer restores the world to the reader, so that he experiences 'a joy as great as that which floods through us when, looking at long last, with Dante, into the eyes of God, we sense the entire universe bound up into one volume and understand what it is to be a man'.¹³

Yet although Mr. Josipovici is apt to be carried away (we should not, we are told, be able to *see* Velazquez's *Las Meninas* without benefit of Picasso's caricatures of it),¹⁴ he is an eloquent advocate of the modernist cause, and this cause is widespread enough to require serious criticism. Underlying Mr. Josipovici's criticism is the myth of modernism - that of the intelligent Prince Charming who breaks into

the fortress of the Western psyche, steals past the cobwebs of Realist and Romantic verisimilitude, and kisses the beguiled reader awake with the touch of his ironies. Yet underlying *this* enabling piece of mythology, in turn, there is a particular conception of language: fundamentally it is to Eliot's dissociation of sensibility theory that neomodernism is indebted. Eliot's thesis - picked to pieces and left to rot long since - is nevertheless sound enough structurally to withstand its own errors. The underlying evolution that took English poetry from metaphysical conceit and catachresis through Augustan lucidity to Romantic naturalness is accurately enough mirrored in Eliot's scenario, for all its quasi-theological implications of a state of Grace, followed by a Fall and subsequent state of sin. The poetry involved feels roughly as Eliot's theory leads us to expect. The theory can, moreover, be read along different conceptual parameters, as an alienation-theory calibrating deep changes in the Western psyche with changes in the organisation of society, or as a purely linguistic theory describing the rise of realism. Eliot had a foot in two camps of course: he was both intellectualist and modernist. And Cambridge 'intellectualist' criticism shared both Eliot's distaste for Romanticism and his modernist methodological bias; re-directing attention from the emotions and ethical contents 'expressed in' literary texts to the texts themselves and to the nature of the reader's participation in them through the act of reading, they yet hold on to a conception of literature's moral and psychic *telos*-that is, to the notion of a *work* rather than a mere *text*. Richards' pioneering examinations of the act of reading, Empson's archaeological structuralism and Leavis's attempts to structuralise the value-judgement, remain generally and decisively important in the history of modernism.

It was Eliot who crystallised modernism into a historicistic theory of language implicitly or explicitly rejecting the presuppositions of Romanticism - realism. His critical emphasis upon Dante as a fulcrum of European literature, his distaste for Romantic libertarianism in particular and for Whiggishness and 'inner light' Protestantism in general, are accompanied by the rejection of perspectival frame, humanist subjectivism and homophonic self-expression in his own verse. Eliot was at one with Cubism and the new music of Stravinsky and Schönberg in helping Western man put himself outside what were now felt to be the blinkers of self-expressive realism, and it is with the rise of just that characteristic realism that we are concerned in dealing with the Romantic predicament in general. Neo-modernism has drawn on a number of sources to expand Eliot's dissociation theory in support of the claim that the literature dominant over the two hundred years beginning with the founding of the Royal Society in 1660 and ending, say, with the First World War, had based itself upon a superficial and mistaken view of the nature of language and, therefore, of literature.

Cleanth Brooks it was who, following Eliot, first directed attention to the linguistics of the Royal Society and its role in impoverishing the language of poetry thereafter.¹⁵ It has been fashionable to do so ever since. The Trotskyite modernism of Peter Ackroyd follows Brooks and Josipovici in attributing the divorce of rhetoric and logic directly to the language-theories of Sprat and Locke.¹⁶ Ackroyd distinguishes between the old 'modernism' of the empiricists (Locke's 'new way of ideas') -which is simply the new realism-and a second modernism which has returned language to its pre-Lockean status. Again, in Ackroyd, Realists and Romantics both mistook the function of literature. They assumed that literature was made by individual men working upon individual experience through a common language to produce novels, plays and poems: they thought that books should not just *be* something; but be *about* something. In Mr. Ackroyd's version of the modernist myth, we were awakened from the tedious moralistic humanism of Baudelaire, Wordsworth, and the rest of them, by the kiss of de Sade, Kierkegaard, Nietzsche and Mallarmé. With Marcel (Proust)'s lecture to Albertine to guide him, Mr. Josipovici was able to accommodate certain Realists and show that they were really uninterested in their ostensible content, being really concerned with the illusion-reality problem. Mr. Ackroyd has no room for such right-wing revisionism. They are all swept out - Goethe, Tolstoy, Baudelaire, the lot. Even T.S. Eliot is only a genuine modernist in bits: when he talks about 'the human condition' ('each in his prison thinking only of the key') he writes 'very bad poetry indeed'.¹⁷ For following Roland Barthes's (interrogative) tip that the verb 'to write' is intransitive (though the N.E.D. says it's transitive as well), Ackroyd indicts almost every Western writer of the past two hundred years of failing to understand that the writer's task is not to produce poems, plays and novels *about* things, but simply to make a *litterature* - self-generating, referentless, purposeless.

Now, the reason why the Realist writers all went so badly wrong, we are told, was that they followed Locke and the empiricists in misapprehending the function of language. Sprat had insisted that 'Words ... are to be stamped in the image of things; they are to be plain and they are to be transparent. They are to reflect "things".¹⁸ (Transparent *and* reflecting? Windows and mirrors? This sort of confusion doesn't occur in the empiricists.) Locke, for his part, demands recognition of the fact that 'Words are man-made and derived from natural objects', so that language is 'the result of an artificial contract'.¹⁹ (Can a contract be other than artificial? It is another revealingly slack phrase.) From these ideas, Ackroyd argues, arose the notion of 'autonomous meaning'. Inventing 'meaning' for language, the empiricists (and rationalists, for their mathematically orientated semantics proceeded empiricism here) robbed language of its autonomy and so paved the way for the Humanist literature of the following two centuries: the Humanists assumed that poems and novels were bag-like things holding contents, because the empiricists had argued that words were glass-like things showing meanings: 'the banishment of language as autonomous and as an object of knowledge makes way for the primacy of Man'²⁰.

This anti-humanism is clearly in line with Eliot's Anglicanism and Josipovici's (implicit) Catholicism. In each case there is a distaste for scientific liberalism and a suggestion both that the Romantic-Realist tradition somehow *chose* its predicament, and that the basis of their choice was Protestant wilfulness - the hell-for-leather drive towards Truth. As it is, we have been landed with a literature of contents, fostered by a linguistics of 'meaning'. Now such a view, condemning Romanticism and Realism as being too concerned with certain ethical and psycho-spiritual contents to understand the true function of literature, makes certain assumptions as to the nature of the language and the possible role of language within the modern period. But it makes equally important assumptions about literature and the role of language in the *old* world - the world before the vitiating influence of the empiricists and the experimental scientists of the Royal Society robbed the Word of its 'sacramental status'.²¹ The neo-modernist position assumes, in fact, a certain pre-Lockean language (autonomous, an 'object of study in its own right', sacramental) and postulates a pre-empiricist literature (self-sufficient, referent-less, content less). Are these assumptions justified?

THE VINDICATION OF PLEASURE

The question of what poetry is and what kind of value it possesses can be answered by an examination of the products of the poet's activity (of poems, that is to say) or by an inquiry into how the poet operates. Instead of asking "What is poetry?" we can ask "What is a poet?" This latter question will often lead to the former, and critics have quite frequently approached the whole problem of the nature and value of poetry through a study of the psychology of poetic creation. In his famous preface to the second edition of *Lyrical Ballads* Wordsworth proceeds to give his view of what poetry is and wherein its value lies by asking first "What is a poet? To whom does he address himself? And what language is to be expected from him" Poetry is an activity as well as a species of art object, and the basic critical questions can be approached by looking at the activity as well as by examining the product. This kind of critical inquiry will be discussed in a later chapter, for it raises questions of its own which are quite distinct from these we have so far been considering. Wordsworth, the first important English poet to explain, defend, and define poetry by asking how it was produced, thus belongs with those modern critics who are chiefly concerned with the process of creation, and he will be discussed with them. Nevertheless, it is worth taking out of their context at this point some of his generalizations about the nature of poetry which are comparable to those we have quoted from Dryden and Johnson.

"Truth general and operative "

We have noted Aristotle's distinction between the universal and the particular, Sidney's un-Aristotelian interpretation of this, Dryden's insistence that poetry is an imitation of human nature, and Dr. Johnson's emphasis on the *general* nature of that imitation. We have raised, too, the question whether poetry, if it is a representation of human nature, pleases us because it illustrates what we already know, and so recognize, or by giving us a new illumination, or by somehow doing both simultaneously. We have noted Johnson's remark about a passage in Gray's "Elegy" ("I have never seen the notions in any other place; yet he that reads them here persuades himself that he has always felt them") and compared Keats statement that poetry strikes us as "almost a Remembrance." Let us put beside these the following quotation from Wordsworth's preface:

Aristotle, I have been told, has said, that Poetry is the most philosophic of all writings: it is so: its object is truth, not individual and local, but general, and operative; not standing upon external testimony, but carried alive into the heart by passion; truth which is its own testimony, which gives competence and confidence to the tribunal to which it appeals, and receives them from the same tribunal. Poetry is" the image of man and nature. The obstacles which stand in the way of the fidelity of the Biographer and Historian, and of their consequent utility, are incalculably greater than those which are to be encountered by the Poet who comprehends the dignity of his art. The Poet writes under one restriction only, namely, the necessity of giving immediate pleasure to a human being possessed of that information which may be expected from him, not as a lawyer, a physician, a mariner, an astronomer, or a natural philosopher, but as a Man. Except this one restriction, there is no object standing between the Poet and the image of things; between this, and the Biographer and Historian, there are a thousand.

The distinction that Wordsworth makes between truth "individual and local" and truth "general and operative" is similar to Aristotle's distinction between historical and poetic truth, and it is linked also to the question of recognition. Poetic truth for Wordsworth is "operative"- it works on us, it carries its own conviction with it, so that we cannot but acknowledge it as true. "Individual and local" truth does not carry its own conviction: before we could be sure that a historian or a biographer were telling the truth we should have to know what his sources were and how honestly he used them. The poet's truth is general in the sense that it needs no authentication to be recognized as true; it does not "stand upon external testimony" but is "carried alive into the heart by passion" and is thus its own testimony. Our hearts recognize it as true - not necessarily because we have known it before, but because the psychological

structure of our minds assents to it; it makes contact somehow with the basic mental laws which determine human perception and emotion. The reaction is thus not literal recognition, but it is recognition in a profounder sense. Again, it is reminiscent of Keats' later phrase "almost a Remembrance."

The mind of man and the workings of nature

Wordsworth is thus here tying up a number of concepts which had previously exercised critics; his point of view is not strictly Aristotelian, though it has elements in common with Aristotle (Wordsworth and Aristotle would certainly not have agreed, for example, on the nature and value of passion); and he attempts to probe deeper than either Dryden or Johnson into the reasons why general representation of human nature pleases us. It must be general and *operative*, it must carry its own passionate conviction with it, and the pleasure we derive from it comes from our having our basic psychological structure touched and illuminated. Wordsworth goes further: he believed that our psychological structure is paralleled in the workings of the universe as a whole, and one reason why the poet is able to express truths which are general and operative is that he is "a man pleased with his own passions and volitions, and who rejoices more than other men in the spirit of life that is in him; delighting to contemplate similar volitions and passions as manifested in the goings-on of the Universe, and habitually impelled to create them where he does not find them." That is why the poet gives pleasure "to a human being possessed of that information which may be expected from him, not as a lawyer, a physician, a mariner, an astronomer, or a natural philosopher, but as a Man." The function of poetry, and its value, lies in its giving this kind of pleasure:

Nor let this necessity of producing immediate pleasure be considered as a degradation of the Poet's art. It is far otherwise. It is an acknowledgement of the beauty of the universe, an acknowledgement the more sincere, because not formal, but indirect; it is a task light and easy to him who looks at the world in the spirit of love: further, it is a homage paid to the native and naked dignity of man, to the grand elementary principle of pleasure, by which he knows, and feels and lives, and moves. We have no sympathy but what is propagated by pleasure: I would not be misunderstood; but wherever we sympathise with pain, it will be found that the sympathy is produced and carried on by subtle combinations with pleasure. We have no knowledge, that is, no general principles drawn from the contemplation of particular facts, but what has been built up by pleasure, and exists in us by pleasure alone. The Man of science, the Chemist and Mathematician, whatever difficulties and disgusts they may have had to struggle with, know and feel this. However painful may be the objects with which the Anatomist's knowledge is connected, he feels that his knowledge is pleasure: and where he has no pleasure he has no knowledge. What then does the Poet? He considers man and the objects that surround him as acting and re-acting upon each other, so as to produce an infinite complexity of pain and pleasure; he considers man in his own nature and in his ordinary life as contemplating this with a certain quantity of immediate knowledge, with certain convictions, intuitions, and deductions, which from habit acquire the quality of intuitions; he considers him as looking upon this complex scene of ideas and sensations, and finding everywhere objects that immediately excite in him sympathies which, from the necessities of his nature, are accompanied by an over-balance of enjoyment.

To this knowledge which all men carry about with them, and to these sympathies in which, without any other discipline than that of our daily life, we are fitted to take delight, the Poet principally directs his attention. He considers man and nature as essentially adapted to each other, and the mind of man as naturally the mirror of the fairest and most interesting properties of nature. And thus the Poet, prompted by this feeling of pleasure, which accompanies him through the whole course of his studies, converses with general nature, with affections akin to those, which, through labour and length of time, the Man of science has raised up in himself, by conversing with those particular parts of nature which are the objects of his studies. The knowledge both of the Poet and the Man of science is pleasure; but the knowledge of the one cleaves to us as a necessary part of our existence, our natural and unalienable inheritance, the other is a personal and individual acquisition, slow to come to us, and by no habitual and direct sympathy connecting us with our fellow-beings. The Man of science seeks truth as a remote and unknown benefactor; he cherishes and loves it in his solitude: the Poet singing a song in which all human beings join with him, rejoices in the presence of truth as our visible friend and hourly companion. Poetry is the

breath and finer spirit of all knowledge; it is the impassioned expression which is in the countenance of all Science. Emphatically may it be said of the Poet, as Shakespeare hath said of man, 'that he looks before and after.' He is the rock of defence for human nature; an upholder and preserver, carrying everywhere with him relationship and love, in spite of difference of soil and climate, of language and manners, of laws and customs: in spite of things silently gone out of mind, and things violently destroyed; 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. The objects of the Poet's thoughts are everywhere; though the eyes and senses of man are, it is true, his favourite guides, yet he will follow wheresoever he can find an atmosphere of sensation in which to move his wings. Poetry is the first and last of all knowledge – it is as immortal as the heart of man. If the labours of Men of science should ever create any material revolution, direct or indirect, in our condition, and in the impressions which we habitually receive, the Poet will sleep then no more than at present; he will be ready to follow the steps of the Man of science, not only in those general indirect effects, but he will be at his side, carrying sensation in the midst of the objects of the science itself. The remotest discoveries of the Chemist, the Botanist, or Mineralogist, will be as proper objects of the Poet's art as any upon which it can be employed, if the time should ever come when these things shall be familiar to us, and the relations under which they are contemplated by the followers of these respective sciences shall be manifestly and palpably material to us as enjoying and suffering beings. If the time should ever come when what is now called science, thus familiarised to men, shall be ready to put on, as it were, a form of flesh and blood, the Poet will lend his divine spirit to aid the transfiguration, and will welcome the Being thus produced, as a dear and genuine inmate of the household of man....

"Relationship and love "

This passionate statement carries us as far from Aristotle as from Sidney. Aristotle, it is true, had spoken of the "peculiar pleasure" of each kind of poetry, but he was far from raising pleasure to a moral principle in the universe. And though there is some relation between Sidney's notion of "moving" and Wordsworth's "carried alive into the heart by passion," there is nothing in common between Sidney's view that the poet creates an ideal world so persuasively that the reader wishes to imitate it in his own behavior and Wordsworth's description of the poet as paying "homage to the native and naked dignity of man." Nor is Wordsworth's view of pleasure any more closely related to Dryden's view of the delight which poetry should give or to Dr. Johnson's notion of pleasing. For Wordsworth it is neither the edifying nature of the poet's world, nor the accuracy of his psychological observations, nor the smoothness and agreeableness of his versification, which gives pleasure: it is his ability to body forth in concrete and sensuous terms those basic principles illustrated alike in the mind of man and the workings of nature. The poet "considers man and nature¹ as essentially adopted to each other, and the mind of man as naturally the mirror of the fairest and most interesting properties of nature." Further, "Poetry is the breath and finer spirit of all knowledge; it is the impassioned expression which is in the countenance of all Science." The poet "is the rock of defence for human nature; an upholder and preserver, carrying everywhere with him relationship and love." "The Poet binds together by passion and knowledge the vast empire of human society... he will follow wheresoever he can find an atmosphere of sensation in which to move his wings." He talks of the poet "carrying sensation into the midst of the objects of the science itself." The poet relates men to each other and to the world of external nature through an account of illustrative situations sensuously apprehended and concretely described, and in doing so both demonstrates and increases the pleasure which lies at the heart of all activity, human and natural. The poet can follow after the particular discoveries of the scientist and relate them to the world of basic human and natural values in a spirit of "relationship and love."

The modern reader may at times feel a certain impatience with Wordsworth's way of putting things. What, he may ask, are those "fairest and most interesting properties of nature" of which the mind of man is a mirror? What is meant by saying that the poet is "the rock of defence for human nature" and how does the poet "bind together the vast empire of human society"? The answer to these questions can be obtained by putting Wordsworth's theories side by side with his practice, by reading his preface in the light of his

¹ "*Nature*" being used here, of course, not in Dryden's or Pope's sense, to mean human nature or common sense, but in the modern sense of the non-human physical world and of the universe as a whole.

achievement in his best and most characteristic poems. The "fairest and most interesting properties of nature" are not the most beautiful and most picturesque aspects of natural scenery, but those aspects of the physical world which, when they react on the sensitive mind of the poet, produce, either immediately or, more profoundly, in subsequent recollection, an awareness of some of the basic laws of the human mind, laws which derive from the essential structure of the mind and personality and which are in turn part of the larger pattern of the structure of the universe. These sudden and passionate glimpses into human nature begin with sensation, the sensation of one whose physical senses are peculiarly alert, and proceed through involuntary recollection through conscious meditation and introspection to achieve the final and full awareness which is recorded in the poem. As for the poet being the "rock of defence for human nature," this would seem to mean that the poet, in virtue of his achievement of this kind of awareness, redeems man from triviality and from selfishness by demonstrating the importance of sympathy and the relation of the individual experience to the sum of life. And the poet "binds together the vast empire of human society" by revealing the common psychological laws which underlie all sensation and all sensitivity, and revealing it not by abstract discussion but by showing through the persuasive concrete illustration - which may be drawn from the experience of a humble or even half-witted person, a shepherd, a leech-gatherer, or an idiot boy - the primary laws of human nature. The poet thus reveals the relationship of men both to each other and to the external world.

For Wordsworth, "relationship" is the keyword, rather than "general" or "universal". He is not concerned with Aristotelian probability, in either its psychological or its formal interpretation, but with correspondences and sympathies concretely and passionately illustrated. Further, passion for him is not acquired by stylistic devices but arises from the nature of the poet's perception of his subject, and of the subject itself. The essential quality of the poet's utterance does not depend on its being in verse rather than prose (he would agree with Sidney there) and he is not convincing when he goes on to argue, later in the essay, that by "superadding" meter he gives an additional charm to poetry. From his presentation of his theory one might imagine that for the true poet expression takes care of itself. If only the poet has the right kind of perception, what he has to say will be poetry. This is very different from Pope's "what oft was thought but ne'er so well expressed" (or at least from the popular understanding of the phrase) and, odd though it may seem at first sight, if anything somewhat more closely akin to Johnson's position. Wordsworth could not have taken exception to anybody's praising a poem, as Johnson did Gray's "Elegy," because "it abounds with images which find a mirror in every mind, and with sentiments to which every bosom returns an echo." It is true, he would have interpreted these phrases differently, but he would have agreed that true poetry strikes an immediate response in the reader - provided, at least, that the reader had had sufficient experience of true poetry to have had his perceptions educated or redeemed from corruption.

The poet "is a man speaking to man," wrote Wordsworth in an earlier part of the preface, and Dryden and Johnson would have immediately agreed. They would not have agreed, however, with Wordsworth's view of the relation of man to the natural world or with his stress on the primary importance of that relationship and the significance of the pleasure with which its recognition was accompanied. Wordsworth removes the instruction from the "instruction and delight" formula of many seventeenth and eighteenth century critics, but saves himself from falling into a simple hedonistic theory by insisting on the moral dignity of pleasure and its universal significance in man and nature. He resolves the Platonic dilemma in a quite new way. Poetry is not an imitation of an imitation, but a concrete and sensuous illustration of both a fact and a relationship which provides pleasure and at the same time shows the universal importance of pleasure. It does not debase men by nourishing their passions, for passions are not debasing but a means of knowledge. Passion, sensation, and pleasure are, under the proper conditions, good and helpful things, conducive to knowledge and to love. It is an answer curiously Platonic in tone though so un-Platonic in its assumptions.

FORM AND THE IMAGINATION

WORDSWORTH was clear enough in expressing his view of what the poet did and why what he did was valuable, but he was not clear on the question of how the poet's aim affected his way of writing and of how a poem, as an individual work of literary art, differs from other forms of expression. The metrical element in poetry he tended to regard as an optional adornment, and as for the question of poetic diction, his famous pronouncement there seemed to boil down simply to asserting that since poetry concerns itself with grand elemental facts about man and nature, the poet should avoid "transitory and accidental ornaments" and use simple and elemental language. The old problem of the relation of form and content was thus still unresolved. While not maintaining, as Pope and Dr. Johnson would have, that a poem is the handling of a paraphraseable content in skillful and pleasing versification, and insisting on the uniqueness of the poet's kind of perception, he did not make clear how that unique perception inevitably sought its uniquely appropriate form - indeed, he seemed to be content to regard the form as in greater or less degree suitable rather than uniquely appropriate. For Sidney, it will be recalled, poetry was the creation of an ideal world, but that ideal world had to be presented in a persuasive manner so that the reader would be moved to imitate it: thus though Sidney made a clear difference between form and content he assigned a definite role to each. Similarly, Dryden insisted that the poet present "a just and lively image of human nature," and if the justness was a matter of content or plot, the liveliness could only be guaranteed by the proper kind of style or form. For Wordsworth the vitality of the poet's perception seemed to guarantee both its own justness and liveliness, and the whole form-content problem is left in the air.

*Coleridge's inquiry into the peculiar
qualities of a poem*

In attempting to remedy this defect in Wordsworth's argument, Coleridge put the philosophical inquiry into the nature and value of poetry on an entirely new footing.

Unfortunately, Coleridge conducted his argument in an elaborate and ambitiously conceived chain of reasoning which embraced all his general philosophical principles and proceeded through a series of what, to the inexperienced reader, often appear the most casual digressions. He never summed up his view of the nature and value of poetry in a brief and cogent essay, but wound into his argument in a manner which, though brilliant and exciting to the careful and sympathetic reader, is disconcerting to anybody who wants to get at his argument quickly, or to expound and illustrate it briefly. The nearest we can get to a single short essay summing up his view of poetry is the famous fourteenth chapter of his *Biographia Literaria* (published in 1817) and the succinct and somewhat cryptic paragraph on the imagination in chapter thirteen; but in both these discussions we miss a great deal if we have not followed carefully the previous winding argument. With this warning, therefore, we proceed to quote from the fourteenth chapter of the *Biographia*:

The office of philosophical *disquisition* consists in just *distinction*; while it is the privilege of the philosopher to preserve himself constantly aware that distinction is not division. In order to obtain adequate notions of any truth we must intellectually separate its distinguishable parts: and this is the technical *process* of philosophy. But having so done, we must then restore them in our conceptions to the unity, in which they actually co-exist; and this is the *result* of philosophy. A poem contains the same elements as a prose composition; the difference therefore must consist in a different combination of them, in consequence of a different object being proposed. According to the difference of the object will be the difference of the combination. It is possible, that the object may be merely to facilitate the recollection of any given facts or observations by artificial arrangements; and the composition will be a poem, merely because it is distinguished from prose by metre, or by rhyme, or by both conjointly. In this, the lowest sense, a man might attribute the name a poem to the well-known enumeration of the days in the several months;

"Thirty days hath September

April, June, and November," &c.

and others of the same class and purpose. And as a particular pleasure is found in anticipating the recurrence of sounds and quantities, all compositions that have this charm superadded, whatever be their contents, *may* be entitled poems.

So much for the superficial *form*. A difference of objects and contents supplies an additional ground of distinction. The immediate purpose may be the communication of truths, either of truth absolute and demonstrable, as in works of science; or of facts experienced and recorded, as in history. Pleasure, and that of the highest and most permanent kind, may *result* from the *attainment* of the end; but it is not itself the immediate purpose; and though truth, either moral or intellectual, ought to be the *ultimate* end, yet this will distinguish the character of the author, not the class to which the work belongs. Blest indeed is that state of society, in which the immediate purpose would be baffled by the perversion of the proper ultimate end...

But the communication of pleasure may be the immediate object of a work not metrically composed; and that object may have been in a high degree attained, as in novels and romances. Would then the mere superaddition of metre, with or without rhyme, entitled *these* to the name of poems? The answer is, that nothing can permanently please, which does not contain in itself the reason why it is so, and not otherwise. If metre be superadded, all other parts must be made consonant with it. They must be such, as to justify the perpetual and distinct attention to each part, which an exact correspondent recurrence of accent and sound is calculated to excite. The final definition, then, so deduced, may be thus worded.

A poem is that species of composition, which is opposed to works of science, by proposing for its *immediate* object pleasure, not truth; and from all other species (having *this* object in common with it) it is discriminated by proposing to itself such delight from the *whole*, as is compatible with a distinct gratification from each component *part*.

Controversy is not seldom excited in consequence of the disputants attaching each a different meaning to the same word; and in few instances has this been more striking, than in disputes concerning the present subject. If a man chooses to call every composition a poem, which is rhyme, or measure, or both, I must leave his opinion uncontroverted. The distinction is at least competent to characterize the writer's intention. If it were subjoined, that the whole is likewise entertaining or affecting, as a tale, or as a series of interesting reflections, I of course admit this as another fit ingredient of a poem, and an additional merit. But if the definition sought for be that of a *legitimate* poem, I answer, it must be done, the parts of which mutually support and explain each other; all in their proportion harmonizing with, and supporting the purpose and known influences of metrical arrangement. The philosophic critics of all ages coincide with the ultimate judgement of all countries, in equally denying the praises of a just poem, on the one hand, to a series of striking lines or distiches, each of which, absorbing the whole attention of the reader to itself, disjoins it from its context, and makes it a separate whole, instead of an harmonizing part; and on the other hand, to an unsustained composition, from which the reader collects rapidly the general result, unattracted by the component parts. The reader should be carried forward, not merely or chiefly by the mechanical impulse of curiosity, or by a restless desire to arrive at the final solution; but by the pleasurable activity of mind excited by the attractions of the journey itself. Like the motion of a serpent, which the Egyptians made the emblem of intellectual power; or like the path of sound through the air; at every step he pauses and half recedes, and from the retrogressive movement collects the force which again carries him onward. "Praecipitandus est *liber* spiritus" ["the *free* spirit must be hastened along"], says Petronius Arbiter most happily. The epithet, *liber*, here balances the preceding verb; and it is not easy to conceive more meaning condensed in fewer words.

What Coleridge is inquiring into here are the differentiating qualities of poetry and the *raison d'etre* of these differentiating qualities. Philosophy begins by making just distinctions and ends by discovering how these distinguished characteristics form a unity among themselves. How does a poem differ from other ways of handling language? What is the point of its so differing? How are these point's of difference

justified by the function and nature ("object and contents") of a poem? This is what might be called the ontological approach: let us look at this phenomenon and see what it *is* and then see if we can account for what it is in terms of what it does. Sidney talked about what poetry might be made to do; Dryden of what it should do: Wordsworth of what went on in the poet's mind: but Coleridge, using Aristotle's method though not looking in quite the same way at quite the same phenomena, restores philosophical responsibility to the esthetic inquiry.

"A poem contains the same elements as a prose composition." Both use words. The difference between a poem and a prose composition cannot, then, lie in the medium, for each employs the same medium, words. It must therefore "consist in a different combination of them, in consequence of a different object being proposed." A poem combines words differently, because it is seeking to do something different. Of course, all it may be seeking to do may be to facilitate memory. You may take a piece of prose and cast it into rhymed and metrical form in order to remember it better. And rhyming tags of that kind, with their recurring "sounds and quantities," yield a particular pleasure too, though not of a very high order. If one wants to give the name of poem to a composition of this kind, there is no reason why one should not. It is a question of semantics, as we would put it today. But we should note that, though such rhyming tags have the charm of meter and rhyme, meter and rhyme have been "superadded" (Coleridge is ironically using Wordsworth's term); they do not arise from the nature of the content but have been imposed on it in order to make it more easily memorized.

The "superficial form," the externalities, provide however no profound logical reason for distinguishing between different ways of handling language. "A difference of object and contents supplies an additional ground of distinction." The philosopher will seek to differentiate between two ways of handling language by asking what each seeks to achieve and how that aim determines its nature. The immediate purpose may be the communication of truth, or the communication of pleasure (we may get a profound pleasure from reading a work of science or history), but, Coleridge insists, one must distinguish between the ultimate and the immediate end. Similarly, if the immediate aim be the communication of pleasure, truth may nevertheless be the ultimate end, and while in an ideal society nothing that was not truth could yield pleasure, in society as it has always existed a literary work might communicate pleasure without having any concern with "truth, either moral or intellectual." The proper kinds of distinction between different kinds of writing can thus be most logically discussed in terms of the difference in the immediate aim, or function, of each. The immediate aim of poetry is to give pleasure.

Clearly this is not going far enough. "The communication of pleasure may be the immediate object of a work not metrically composed"- in novels, for example. Do we make these into poems simply by superadding meter with or without rhyme? To which Coleridge replies by emphasizing a very important principle: you cannot derive true and permanent pleasure out of any feature of a work which does not arise naturally from the total nature of that work. To "superadd" meter is to provide merely a superficial decorative charm. "Nothing can permanently please, which does not contain in itself the reason why it is so, and not otherwise. If meter be superadded, all other parts must be made consonant with it." Rhyme and meter involve "an exact correspondent recurrence of accent and sound" which in turn "are calculated to excite" a "perpetual and distinct attention to each part." A poem, therefore, must be an organic unity in the sense that, while we note and appreciate each part, to which the regular recurrence of accent and sound draws attention, our pleasure in the whole develops cumulatively out of such appreciation, which is at the same time pleasurable in itself and conducive to an awareness of the total pattern of the complete poem.

Thus a poem differs from a work of scientific prose in having as its immediate object pleasure and not truth, and it differs from other kinds of writing which have pleasure and not truth as their immediate object by the fact that in a poem the pleasure we take from the whole work is compatible with and even led up to by the pleasure we take in each component part. You can if you like, Coleridge repeats, call anything in rhyme or in meter or in both a poem, but a *legitimate* poem is a composition in which the rhyme and the meter bear an organic relation to the total work; in it "the parts mutually support and explain each other, all in their proportion harmonizing with, and supporting the purpose and known influences of metrical arrangement." A true poem is neither a striking series of lines or verses, each complete in itself and bearing no necessary relation to the rest of the work, nor the kind of loosely knit

work where we gather the general gist from the conclusion without having been led into the unique reality of the work by the component parts as they unfolded. The differentiating quality of a poem is thus its special kind of form, and it is this which provides both its function and its justification. What sort of a justification is this?

"Poems" and "poetry"

Before we investigate this question any further, we might interrupt the argument to note that, unlike Sidney and some of the other critics we have been discussing, Coleridge is not here talking about imaginative literature in general, but about poems. Is Coleridge's view of what constitutes a poem the unrelated to any larger view of the nature of imaginative literature? Does Coleridge's contribution to critical theory consist simply of the notion that in a "legitimate" poem the relation between the parts and the whole is so intimate, so "organic," that a total harmony of expression results, and form, and content become different aspects of the same thing? That, indeed, is what many modern critics have made of Coleridge's position, as we shall see; but in fact Coleridge's view was much more comprehensive than this. The clue to Coleridge's general theory is to be found in a distinction he proceeds to make immediately after his definition of a legitimate poem. It is a distinction between "a poem" and "poetry".

But if this should be admitted as a satisfactory character of a poem, we have still to seek for a definition of poetry. The writings of PLATO, and Bishop TAYLOR, and the "Theoria Sacra" of BURNET, furnish undeniable proofs that poetry of the highest kind may exist without metre, and even without the contra-distinguishing objects of a poem. The first chapter of Isaiah (indeed a very large portion of the whole book) is poetry in the most emphatic sense; yet it would be not less irrational than strange to assert, that pleasure, and not truth, was the immediate object of the prophet. In short, whatever *specific* import we attach to the word, poetry, there will be found involved in it, as a necessary consequence, that a poem of any length neither can be, or ought to be, all poetry. Yet if an harmonious whole is to be produced, the remaining parts must be preserved *in keeping* with the poetry; and this can be no otherwise effected than by such a studied selection and artificial arrangement, as will partake of *one*, though not a *peculiar* property of poetry. And this again can be no other than the property of exciting a more continuous and equal attention than the language of prose aims at, whether colloquial or written.

My own conclusions on the nature of poetry, in the strictest use of the word, have been in part anticipated in the preceding disquisition on the fancy and imagination.* What a poetry? is so nearly the same question with, what is a poet? that the answer to the one is involved in the solution of the other. For it is a distinction resulting from the poetic genius itself, which sustains and modifies the images, thoughts, and emotions of the poet's own mind.

The poet, described in *ideal* perfection, brings the whole soul of man into activity, with the subordination of its faculties to each other, according to their relative worth and dignity. He diffuses a tone and spirit of unity, that blends, and (as it were) *fuses*, each into each, by that synthetic and magical power, to which we have exclusively appropriated the name of imagination. This power, first put in action by the will and understanding, and retained under their irremissive, though gentle and unnoticed, control (*laxis effertur hahenis*) reveals itself in the balance or reconciliation of opposite or discordant qualities: of sameness, with difference; of the general, with the concrete; the idea, with the image; the individual, with the representative; the sense of novelty and freshness, with old and familiar objects; a more than usual state of emotion, with more than usual order; judgement ever awake and steady self-possession, with enthusiasm and feeling profound or vehement; and while it blends and harmonizes the natural and the artificial, still subordinates art to nature; the manner to the matter; and our admiration of the poet or our sympathy with the poetry. "Doubtless," as Sir John Davies observes of the soul (and his words may with slight alteration be applied, and even more appropriately, to the poetic IMAGINATION)

*The IMAGINATION then, I consider either as primary, or secondary. The primary IMAGINATION I hold to be the living Power and prime Agent of all human Perception, and as a repetition in the finite mind of the eternal act of creation in the infinite I AM. The secondary Imagination I consider as an echo of the former, co-existing with the conscious will, yet still as identical with the primary in the *kind* of its agency, and differing only in *degree*, and in the *mode* of its operation. It dissolves, diffuses, dissipates, in order to re-create; or where this process is rendered

impossible, yet still at all events it struggles to idealize and to unify. It is essentially *vital*, even as all objects (as objects) are essentially fixed and dead.

Fancy, on the contrary, has no other counters to play with, but fixities and definites. The Fancy is indeed no other than a mode of Memory emancipated from the order of time and space; while it is blended with, and modified by that empirical phenomenon of the will, which we express by the word CHOICE. But equally with the ordinary memory the Fancy must receive all its materials readymade from the law of association.- *Biographia Literaria*, Chapter XIII.

"Doubtless this could not be, but that she turns
Bodies to spirit by sublimation strange,
As fire converts to fire the things it burns.
As we our food into our nature change.
From their gross matter she abstracts their forms.
And draws a kind of quintessence from things;
Which to her proper nature she transforms.
To bear them light on her celestial wings.
Thus does she, when from individual states
She doth abstract the universal kinds;
Which then re-clothed in divers names and fates
Steal access through our senses to our minds."

Finally, GOOD SENSE is the BODY of poetic genius, FANCY its DRAPERY, MOTION its LIFE, and IMAGINATION the SOUL that is everywhere, and in each; and forms all into one graceful and intelligent whole.

This is not an easy argument to follow, and it has puzzled many commentators. Shawcross, in his standard edition of the *Biographia*, comments: "It is doubtful whether the distinction [between 'poem' and 'poetry'], as here drawn, makes for clearness, or indeed whether it can be fairly drawn at all. Coleridge gives no real justification of the bold statement that 'a poem of any length neither can be or ought to be, all poetry,' and instead of reaching a clear definition of poetry he contents himself with a description of the *poet*, which in its turn resolves into an enumeration of the characteristics of the Imagination." But there is a logic in Coleridge's development of the argument, and if we can follow it, it becomes clear why a definition of poetry turns into a description of the poet which in turn becomes a discussion of Imagination. Poetry for Coleridge is a wider category than that of "poem"; that is, poetry is a kind of activity which can be engaged in by painters or philosophers or scientists and is not confined to those who employ metrical language, or even to those who employ language of any kind. Poetry, in this larger sense, brings "the whole soul of man" into activity, with each faculty playing its proper part according to its "relative worth and dignity." This takes place whenever the "secondary imagination" comes into operation. We can only understand what poetry in this larger sense really is, if we appreciate the way in which the human faculties are employed together in its production. Thus Coleridge (like Wordsworth in his method, though differing from him in premises and conclusions) defines poetry through an account of how the poet works; the poet works through the exercise of his Imagination. Whenever the synthesizing, the integrating, powers of what Coleridge calls the secondary imagination are at work, bringing all aspects of a subject into a complex unity, then poetry in this larger sense results. Poetry in the narrower sense - that is, a *poem* - may well use the same elements as a work of poetry in the larger sense (the first chapter of the book of Isaiah, for example) but it differs from the work of poetry in the larger sense by combining its elements in a different way, "in consequence of a different object being proposed." That different object is the immediate communication of pleasure. But since a poem is also a poetry, the communication of pleasure

may be its immediate object but is not its whole function. A poem is distinguished from the other arts (which also have as their immediate object the communication of pleasure) by the fact that its medium is language; it is distinguished from works of literature that are not poems "by proposing to itself such delight from the *whole*, as is compatible with a distinct gratification from each component part." But though a poem is to be distinguished from science, from the non-literary arts, and from other kinds of literature, and its uniqueness can be seen only when we have made, these distinctions, it is, like other kinds of poetry (in the larger sense), a product of the secondary imagination, of the "esemplastic power," the unifying power which enables all the faculties to be brought into play simultaneously, each playing its proper part, to produce a complex synthesis of comprehension. And that, course, is a significant part of its function.

It might have been easier for the reader if Coleridge had first defined Imagination, then discussed the various kinds of activities which can be undertaken by the "secondary imagination," which would involve a discussion of "poetry" in the wider sense he gives the term, and only then gone on to discuss a "poem," which, however much it requires to be distinguished from things that are not poems, must also be seen as one kind of "poetry" in this larger sense. The reasons why he preferred a more circuitous method of approach are bound up with his whole purpose in writing the *Biographia Literaria*, and it would take us too far afield to discuss them here. Suffice it to note that for Coleridge "poetry" is a wider category than "poem" and is to be explained in terms of the way the imagination functions.

The imagination

Coleridge begins, then, with the imagination, which in its primary manifestation is the great ordering principle-or rather, an agency which enables us both to discriminate and to order, to separate and to synthesize, and thus makes perception possible (for without it we should have only a collection of meaningless sense data). If the act of creation is conceived as being essentially and perpetually the bringing of order out of chaos, destroying chaos by making its parts intelligible by the assertion of the identity of the designer, as it were, then the primary imagination is essentially creative and "a repetition in the finite mind of the eternal act of creation in the infinite I AM."

The secondary imagination is the conscious human use of this power. When we employ our primary imagination in the very act of perception we are not doing so with our conscious will but are exercising the basic faculty of our awareness of ourselves and the external world; the secondary imagination is more conscious and less elemental, but it does not differ in kind from the primary. It projects and creates new harmonies of meaning. The employment of the secondary imagination is, in the larger sense, a poetic activity, and we can see why Coleridge is led from a discussion of a poem to a discussion of the poet's activity when we realize that for him the poet belongs to the larger company to those who are distinguished by the activity of their imagination. A poem is always the work of a poet, of a man employing the secondary imagination and so achieving the harmony of meaning, the reconciliation of opposites and so on, which Coleridge so stresses; but a poem is also a specific work of art produced by a special handling of language. The harmony and reconciliation resulting from the special kind of creative awareness achieved by the exercise of the imagination cannot operate over an extended composition: one could not sustain that blending and balance, that reconciliation "of sameness, with difference; of the general, with the concrete; the idea, with the image; the individual, with the representative; the sense of novelty and freshness, with old and familiar objects" and so on, for an indefinite period. In a long poem, therefore, which would not be all poetry, a style appropriate to poetry though not the peculiar property of poetry should be used throughout: the style to choose should be one which has "the property of exciting a more continuous and equal attention than the language of prose aims at, whether colloquial or written." Thus we come back to the definition of a "legitimate" poem as a work "the parts of which mutually support and explain each other; all in their proportion harmonizing with, and supporting the purpose and known influences of metrical arrangement." Rhyme and meter are appropriate to a poem considered in the larger sense of poetry, because they are means (though not the only means) of achieving harmonization, reconciliation of opposites, and so forth, which, as we have seen, are objects of poetry in its widest imaginative meaning, being a means of achieving poetry, and also capable of being used on their own, as

it were, without necessarily producing or being produced by poetry, they can appropriately be employed in long works both in the parts that are poetry and in the parts that are not.

The immediate object of a poem is pleasure, not truth; the immediate object of poetry in the larger sense may be truth (as in the case of the first chapter of Isaiah) or it may be pleasure. The criterion of a poem *qua* poem is the degree to which it provides immediate pleasure by "proposing to itself such delight from each component *part*." This special kind of unity, which makes rhyme and meter no mere ornaments but an essential part of the cumulative achievement, is both pleasing and valuable. But the pleasure lies in the poem's special qualities as a poem while its value derives from its qualities as poetry. Ideally, the good **poet** always achieves the special kind of pleasure to be derived from a poem by using language in the appropriate way, and that use of language, in producing a work which pleases by proposing to itself such delight from the whole as is compatible with a distinct gratification from each component part, is also the means of diffusing "a tone and spirit of unity, that blends, and (as it *were*) *fuses*, each into each, by that synthetic and magical power, to which we have exclusively appropriated the name of imagination." Ideally, that is to say, the qualities which make a poem a "legitimate" poem at the same time result from and illustrate the working of the imagination. And the working of the imagination, which is the achievement of poetry, at its highest and most ideal organizes into a harmony and employs simultaneously all the faculties together: "The poet, described in *ideal* perfection, brings the whole soul of man into activity, with the subordination of its faculties to each other, according to their relative worth and dignity." The ideal poet in producing a poem is also using his imagination and producing poetry of the highest kind. The value of a poem, then, must derive partly from its qualities as poetry (so that its value would be that it achieves and communicates that great imaginative synthesis which is both valuable in itself and a special kind of awareness or insight).

Unity and form

The notion of organic unity is common to Coleridge's view of poetry in the larger sense and of a poem as a special handling of language. "Nothing can permanently please, which does not contain in itself the reason why it is so, and not otherwise," he remarked in discussing the place of rhyme and meter in a poem. Nothing that is "superadded," merely stuck on for ornament or decoration, can really please in a poem: every one of its characteristics must *grow out* of its whole nature and be an integral part of it. (It is true that in a long poem, which for Coleridge "neither can be, or ought to be, all poetry" a "harmonious whole" is produced by keeping the non-poetic parts in the same general style and tone as the rest and thus it can hardly be said that all characteristics of the whole poem develop organically from its essential nature). This is related to Coleridge's distinction between imagination and fancy. The former is more fitted to achieve true unity of expression: "it dissolves, diffuses, dissipates, in order to re-create...It is essentially *vital*..." But fancy "has no other counters to play with but fixities and definites." Fancy constructs surface decorations out of new combinations of memories and perceptions, while the imagination "generates and produces a form of its own." The operation of the imagination can be compared to organic or biological growth and the forms it produces are organic forms, developing under its "shaping and modifying power" which is contrasted with "the aggressive and associative power" of the fancy. The imagination enables the poet to achieve design which is described not in mechanistic but in biological terms, not a fitting together of a number of separable parts but a flowering forth of central unity.

These biological metaphors are used by Coleridge when discussing the nature and function of the imagination rather than in describing the structure of a poem, and thus belong more properly to his definition of "poetry" than to that of "a poem". They help him to describe that unifying and harmonizing activity which is the essence of the poetic process in the larger sense. But it is not difficult to see a connection between this and his definition of a "legitimate" poem. His objection to mere "superadding," his insistence that nothing which does not contain in itself the reason why it is so and not otherwise, which form part of his definition of a "legitimate" poem, are, on a lower level, the same thing as his emphasis on the imagination as "essentially vital." as a faculty which "generates and produces a form of its own" and whose rules "are themselves the very powers of growth and production." The general activity of the imagination which he calls poetry, and the particular structure of the words which he calls a poem, are related not only in that the latter (if successful) is a special case of the former, but also in that the kind of

pleasure produced by a poem derives from an ordering of language comparable to that larger ordering and harmonizing of "opposite or discordant qualities" which is the great function of the secondary imagination.

We remarked earlier that for Coleridge the differentiating quality of a poem is its special kind of form, and it is this which provides both its functions and its justification; and we asked "What sort of a justification is this?" To an answer that question we had to follow Coleridge into his difficult discussion of the difference between poetry and a poem, which in turn led us to his view of the nature and function of the imagination. The question has, we hope, been answered in the process of this further discussion. To see all that a poem is, on Coleridge's view, one must take into account both the special characteristics of a poem and the general nature of poetic activity. The latter (which embraces more than the writing of poems) is bound up with the imagination, and on the creative, unifying, and regenerative powers of the imagination the case must finally rest. Form may yield pleasure and pleasure may itself be valuable; but true organic form is an achievement of the imagination and as such (at least ideally) "brings the whole soul of man into activity." It is in the last analysis through his new definition of the imagination that Coleridge is able to escape completely from Plato's dilemma.

POLITICAL EXPERIENCE

We can only speculate on Wordsworth's political beliefs before 1792 - in *The Prelude* he attributes his awakening to a French soldier, Beaupuy - (see below). But there is some evidence of his association with liberals at Cambridge which must be mentioned briefly at this point, since it seems rather unlikely that he would have visited France in 1790 and again in 1791-2 if he had no sympathy with what was going on there.

It is significant that he studied Italian at Cambridge under Agostino Isola. Isola was a Milanese liberal who had been found in possession of an English book, and therefore banished, since England had been regarded on the Continent as a 'revolutionary' country ever since 1688. Coming to England as a political refugee, he had originally worked for Thomas Gray, the poet who, as Professor of History, was responsible for modern languages in the University. Cambridge also contained a strong 'republican' group at this time, and while there is no proof that Wordsworth joined them at the University we find that he freely associated with ex-Cambridge liberals after his return from France in 1793. It seems reasonable to suppose that even before 1790 he would have learned to appreciate their attitudes towards recent history.

We have already noticed that England was considered a very advanced and progressive country by European standards. The English had removed the head of a King as early as 1649, and the Glorious Revolution of 1688 could be interpreted as an example of Rousseau's 'general will' of the people triumphing over the Divine Right of Kings. This was one of the reasons why Wordsworth and Jones were welcomed by the French in 1790-

... we bore a name

Honoured in France, the name of Englishmen,
And hospitably did they give us hail
As their forerunners in a glorious course.

Prelude 1805, vi, 409-12

Political reality in England, as we have seen, did not exactly square with this European idealization. The English liberals studied their seventeenth-century predecessors with great attention - Wordsworth frequently refers with enthusiasm to Milton and Algernon Sidney - but for them the land of the free was on the other side of the Atlantic.

The American Rebellion and "War of Independence (1775-82) were seen by the British Left as the first stages of the liberation of England. It was Tom Paine, an English radical, who encouraged the Americans to break the link with the crown and declare a republic. But support for the Americans came from a wider section of the English people than the intellectuals: the presence of discharged and wounded soldiers created a loathing of war itself on humanitarian grounds. This is seen in two characters in Wordsworth's early poems. The Female Beggar in *An Evening Walk* - the first of Wordsworth's deserted women - laments for her soldier 'Asleep on Bunker's charnel hill afar', and the Female Vagrant, having followed her husband across the Atlantic, loses him and her children and is reduced to destitution.

The Gordon Riots (1780, described by Dickens in *Barnaby Rudge*), in which the London mob sacked the houses of Catholics and released the inhabitants of Bedlam, frightened all sections of English society. (This helps to explain why so many English liberals ceased to support France when they heard that Paris had been taken over by the 'mob' in 1793.) The first stages of the French Revolution seemed to be more obviously under reasonable management and it was assumed that the French would set up some sort of parliamentary government under the control of gentlemen. When the Bastille fell in 1789 a wave of euphoria swept over Europe; William Blake, blending together millennial hopes and biblical imagery, demonstrates the emotional release provided by the success of two revolutions accomplished overseas and the hope of a third to follow in England itself:

John Purkis, *A Preface to Wordsworth* (Longman, 1982)

The morning comes, the night decays, the watchmen leave their stations;
 The grave is burst, the spices shed, the linen wrapped up;
 The bones of death, the cov'ring clay, the sinews shrunk and
 dry'd
 Reviving shake, inspiring move, breathing, awakening,
 Spring like redeemed captives when their bonds and bars are
 burst.
 Let the slave grinding at the mill run out into the field,
 Let the inchained soul, shut up in darkness and in sighing,
 Whose face has never seen a smile in thirty weary years,
 Rise and look out; his chains are loose, his dungeon doors are
 open;
 And let his wife and children return from the oppressor's
 scourge,
 The look behind at every step and believe it is a dream,
 Singing: 'The sun has left his blackness and has found a fresher
 morning,
 And the fair Moon rejoices in the clear and cloudless night;
 For Empire is no more, and now the Lion and the wolf shall
 cease.'"

Wordsworth recognized this mood of elation when he landed at Calais with Robert Jones on 13 July 1790:

'twas a time when Europe was rejoiced,
 France standing on the top of golden hours,
 And human nature seeming born again.

Prelude 1805, vi, 352-4

Everywhere on their journey through France they found the people mad with celebration, for the King had agreed to observe the new constitution:

From hour to hour the antiquated Earth
 Beat like the heart of Man; songs, garlands, mirth,
 Banners, and happy faces, far and night!

Sonnet: 'Jones, as from Calais'

This long vacation tour provided the material for the poem *Descriptive Sketches*, which concludes with a rousing cry for the spread of Liberty, presumably by means of war and revolution. But it is also important to remember that the object of the 1790 visit was really Switzerland, traditionally the land of liberty; Wordsworth never retracted his belief in the ideals of Switzerland, which helps to explain why, when France threatened Swiss independence in the late 1790s, it was necessary for him to make a decisive choice.

Wordsworth returned to France in November 1791 to find himself in 'a theatre, of which the stage/Was busy with an action far advanced' (*Prelude* 1805, ix, 93-4). The King had tried to flee the country in June 1791, and had been ignominiously brought back under guard. He was regarded as a traitor. The Revolutionary leaders in the capital were divided into two main groups - the Girondins, under Brissot, who were supported by merchants and the middle classes, and the Jacobins, under Danton, Marat and Robespierre, who were supported by the *sansculottes* (the clerks and artisans of Paris). In the newly elected Legislative Assembly, which Wordsworth visited, the Girondins led by Brissot were in control. Robespierre had to make his speeches in the Jacobin Club, as he was not eligible for election to the Assembly. Wordsworth had some idea of what going on, as he had prepared himself for this second visit by reading pamphlets, and probably had a letter of introduction to Brissot; but at first he was only sentimentally affected by the ideals of the Revolution. He stayed in Paris for a week, and spent the time looking at paintings and collecting souvenirs-a stone from the Bastille, for example; yet on his arrival in Orleans he met officers and members of Royalist clubs. This contradiction did not seem to matter, for he was as

careless as a flower

Glassed in a Green-house, or a Parlour shrub
When every bush and tree, the country through,
Is shaking to the roots.

Prelude 1805, ix, 87-90.

There was a lull in the progress of the Revolution, and for a little time Wordsworth associated with those sections of society where 'politics' were not discussed.

Yet Wordsworth tells us that he was by upbringing and inclination a natural Democrat (*Prelude* 1805, ix, 217 ff). His conversion to the wholehearted support of the Revolution was the result of his admiration for Captain Michel Beaupuy, who took upon himself Wordsworth's political education. So that, Wordsworth tells us,

When we chanc'd

One day to meet a hunger-bitten Girl,
Who crept along, fitting her languid gait
Unto a Heifer's motion, by a cord
Tied to her arm, and picking thus from the lane
Its sustenance, while the girl with her two hands
Was busy knitting, in a heartless mood
Of solitude, and at the sight my Friend
In agitation said, "Tis against *that*
Which we are fighting', I with him believed
Devoutly that a spirit was abroad
Which could not be withstood.

Prelude 1805, ix, 510 ff.

Wordsworth was so moved that he became 'a Patriot', that is, a Republican, and from that time, he says,

my heart was all

Given to the People, and my love was theirs.

Prelude 1805, ix, 124-5.

With some people this might be mere bravado, but when Wordsworth was on his way back to England he seems to have lingered in Paris far longer than was necessary, and possibly considered active participation in practical politics (*Prelude* 1805, x, 129 ff). Wordsworth sided with the Girondins, who were still in control of the Assembly, and had declared war on Austria and Prussia in April 1792 to spread the Revolution abroad. But the *sansculottes* were capable of independent action; in August they had seized the king, and in September, fearing the advancing armies might use the prisoners in the Paris prisons, they began to murder them (September Massacres). By the end of the year the country had become a republic and the king was on trial for his life; the Girondins were losing their command of the situation, and some critics have seen Wordsworth's departure from the scene at this point as evidence that he foresaw their fall from power (which took place in the summer of 1793). Certainly he hated Robespierre and the Jacobins, and his subsequent disillusionment with the course of the Revolution makes sense if he is seen as an exiled Girondin. One should always bear in mind that he never went back on his sympathy for the early stages of the Revolution, and his statement in 1821, at the height of his Toryism, when he was accused of deserting France, has its own indestructible logic: 'You have been deluded by places and persons, while I have stuck to principles. I abandoned France and her rulers when they abandoned Liberty, gave themselves up to tyranny, and endeavoured to enslave the world.'

Shortly after his arrival in England, Wordsworth found himself in an impossible moral position. England and France were now at war. For a while Wordsworth retained his loyalty to the Girondin leaders of France, though this meant that he was in England eyes a 'Jacobin', that is, a revolutionary extremist who had actually visited the infected country twice. Wordsworth, for his part, longed to hear of British defeats:

I rejoiced,
Yea, afterwards, truth most painful to record!
Exulted in the triumph of my soul
When Englishmen by thousands were o'erthrown

Prelude 1805, x, 259-62.

Provoked by a sermon issued in January 1793 entitled *The Wisdom and Goodness of God in having made both Rich and Poor*, which was an attack on the French Revolution by Richard Watson, Bishop of Llandaff Wordsworth countered with *A Letter to the Bishop of Llandaff on the Extraordinary Avowal of his Political Principles... by A Republican*. But his publisher persuaded him that it was not wise to print such an open attack on the Government.

It is ironical that Watson had at first supported the Revolution and then changed his mind. For as the Girondins fell from power and the Reign of Terror began Wordsworth felt that the ideals of the Revolution had been betrayed (*Prelude* 1805, x, 308-61). He was glad that the French had driven back the invading foreign armies, but this was no real comfort to the conflict in his mind. He still hoped that the Revolution would bring forth some good result, but could not suppress his fears:

Most melancholy at that time, O Friend!
Were my day-thoughts, my dreams were miserable;
Through months, through years, long after the last beat
Of those atrocities (I speak bare truth,
As if to thee alone in private talk)
I scarcely had one night of quiet sleep
Such ghastly visions had I of despair
And tyranny, and implements of death
And long orations which in dreams I pleaded

Before unjust Tribunals, with a voice
Labouring, a brain confounded, and a sense,
Of treachery and desertion in the place
The holiest that I knew of, my own soul.

Prelude 1805, x, 369-81

In fact he was identifying himself with his Girondins friends who were guillotined by the Jacobins in October and November 1793; although the story that Wordsworth visited France at this time to take help to the Girondins may be untrue, this is clearly what he would have wished to do if an opportunity had arisen.

In July 1794 the death of Robespierre brought a feeling of relief (*Prelude* 1805, x, 536 ff). Wordsworth returned to his former trust in France, and thought of the British Tory government as 'vermin' (*Prelude* 1805, x, 655); but when the French began to take away the liberty of other countries, wordsworth saw that there was little to choose between the French and any other conquering nation (*Prelude* 1805, x, 792ff).

De Selincourt, the editor of *The Prelude*, dates this phase as early as the end of 1794; after this time Wordsworth sought refuge in philosophy (see Godwin, p.74) and had to be virtually nursed back to mental and moral stability by Dorothy amid rural surroundings. Wordsworth and Coleridge were further alienated from France by Napoleon's campaigns of conquest; the subjugation of Switzerland in 1798 - Liberty suppressing Liberty - was the crowning irony which confirmed Wordsworth's group in their suspicious of Napoleon. We must of course remember that many English liberals continued to support Napoleon - see Gillray's cartoon of English liberals incensed by the naval victories of Nelson; one of these, William Hazlitt, was so amazed at the change in Wordsworth and Coleridge that he accused them later, of swinging over 'as on a pivot, to the unclean side'. But the movement to the Right took far longer than this implies; Wordsworth continued to admire Charles James Fox, the Whig Leader, although Fox was in favour of making peace with Napoleon, but after visiting France in 1802 Wordsworth could not stomach the Whigs as a party. He watched them rushing through Calais on their way to pay court to Napoleon (*Sonnet: 'Is it a reed that's shaken by the wind'*), and decided, since he regarded the French leader as a despot and a menace to free institutions, that the only course open was to support that party in England which wanted to continue the war, namely the Tories. His patriotism became inflamed (*Poems Dedicated to National Independence and Liberty*) and when Napoleon crowned himself Emperor, he shared the disgust of Beethoven, who tore out the dedication of the *Erotica* symphony. Wordsworth felt that the wheel had indeed come full circle or rather, to use his own expression, that France was like a 'dog/Returning to his vomit' (*Prelude* 1805, x, 935). He continued to support the Tories through the very difficult war years, and after 1815 seems to have felt that any popular demonstration or movement towards parliamentary reform would be the prelude to an English Revolution which would, in turn, throw up a 'Napoleon' to tyrannize over the British people.

ROUSSEAU AND THE EDUCATION OF THE SENSIBILITY

The world has not seen more than once or twice in all the course of history a literature which has exercised such prodigious influence over the minds of men, over every cast and shade of intellect, as that which emanated from Rousseau between 1749 and 1762.

MAINE. *Ancient Law*

Rousseau. Sir, is a very bad man.

DR. JOHNSON

The eighteenth century is often referred to as the Age of Reason; most people believed that the world that Newton and Locke had made *was the real world*. Later ages have tended to magnify the importance of those thinkers and poets who disagreed; there is no reason to think that the young Wordsworth would have taken any notice of them; he believed with his University that whatever Newton said, was right.

Nevertheless, he could not fail to have heard of the protest movement which originated with Jean Jacques Rousseau (1712-78). There is no evidence that Wordsworth ever studied Rousseau in a systematic way, but he would have met with his influence in France, if not well before. Rousseau's tactics in doing battle with 'Reason' were very simple; he rejected its validity altogether, and appealed to the emotions - he did *not feel* that the dictates of Reasons and science were true. As Tennyson put it a century later: 'The heart stood up and answered "I have felt".' While the *objections to this point* of view are obvious - we can be led into all manner of belief by wishful thinking - it coincided with the beginnings of a general desire to re-open the discussion which Locke had apparently concluded for good and all.

Rousseau challenged the Christian doctrine of Original Sin; he believed that man was by nature good, and that he had been corrupted by civilization; savages were uncorrupted. In European countries virtue would be found to linger in remote and rural communities. This doctrine appears in an altered form in the *Preface to Lyrical Ballads* where Wordsworth tells us that he had written about 'low and rustic life... be cause in that situation the essential passions of the heart find a better soil in which they can attain their maturity'.

Civilized man could perhaps be saved by education. In *Emile* Rousseau suggested that it might be possible to recreate a system of 'natural education'. The child is to be brought up in the country, and should learn by experience; this is far better than sitting indoors, studying books. He would not be made to read, in fact, or to perform any formal educational exercises; nor would he be crammed with useless theorizing. On the other hand, his tutor would always tell him the truth, and he would never be allowed to hear stories or fairy-tales. He would learn morality by observing people's reactions when he performed unsocial actions; but he would never be punished. These teachings clearly influenced the early books of *The Prelude* and it is worth digressing at this point to see how Wordsworth amended and yet clung to the spirit of Rousseau's ideals.

Wordsworth's views on education were remarkably ahead of his time. They were also consistent throughout his life. Whereas many otherwise 'progressive' disciples of Rousseau believed in controlling the entire environment of the child and programming its mind with carefully selected sense impressions. Wordsworth and Dorothy believed in complete freedom: 'Till a child is four years old he needs no other companions than the flowers, the grass, the cattle, the sheep that scamper away from him, when he makes a vain unexpecting chase after them, the pebbles upon the road etc' Wordsworth hated 'model children' and 'infant prodigies' (*Prelude* 1805, v 291-349); he preferred 'real children, not too wise, too learned, or too good'. His writings were later able to save a model child, the philosopher John Stuart Mill, who had been brought up on a system of intensive reading and deprived of the 'culture of the feelings'. Although Wordsworth's own children, together with Basil Montagu and Hartley Coleridge, can hardly be called unqualified successes in their later life, this does not undermine Wordsworth's ideas, which anticipate the freedom of modern infant teaching.

Allied to Wordsworth's campaign for the free child was his campaign against 'edifying children's literature'; instead of, for example, Harriet Martineau's stories designed to illustrate economic principles, he asserted the child's right to works of imagination and fairy-tales. He continually stressed the value of out-of-school freedom, writing in 1845:

[is not] too little value... set upon the occupations of children out of doors.... I do not relish the words of one of the Reporters in which he would reconcile the Parents to the expense of having their Children educated in school by remarking that the wear and tear of clothes will be less; and an equivalent thus saved in shoe-leather - Excuse this disagreement of opinion, as coming from one who spent half his boyhood in running wild among the Mountains.

It followed from Rousseau's theories that children, being nearer to nature, might 'know' more than adults, who had been miseducated. In Wordsworth's poetry we find adults 'learning' from children, and in the *Immortality Ode* the child is addressed as

Thou best Philosopher., who yet dost keep
Thy heritage, thou Eye among the blind,
That, deaf and silent, read'st the eternal deep
Haunted for ever by the eternal mind,-
Mighty Prophet! Seer blest!
On whom those truths do rest,
Which we are toiling all our lives to find.

These beliefs of Rousseau would have filtered down to Wordsworth in any case; like the cult of Feeling (see Jane Austen: *Sense and Sensibility*) they were part of the climate of opinion by the 1790s. But it is to be noted that the only doctrine of Rousseau's which Wordsworth uses *directly* after his return from France is that of 'the general will' - the 'will of the people' had produced the French Revolution, as Wordsworth explained in his *Letter to the Bishop of Llandaff*. By 1794 he seems to have had enough of undisciplined emotion and of the actions of Robespierre, Rousseau's fervent disciple; and therefore rushed to embrace a new philosophy of reason and non-violence. 'Throw away your books of chemistry,' he tells a friend, 'and read Godwin on Necessity.'

VARIETIES OF ROMANTIC THEORY: WORDSWORTH AND COLERIDGE (1953)

M.H. Abrams

A copy of the universe is not what is required of art; one of the damned things is ample.

(Rebecca West)

I have no great opinion of a definition, the celebrated remedy for the cure of this disorder... We are limited in our inquiry by the laws to which we have submitted at our setting out. (Edmund Burke)

An orientation in aesthetic theory is not an idea, or even a premise, but a habitual direction of reference; and to find that the romantic critics usually looked to the poet when they talked about the nature of poetry does not justify the assumption that they had any specific body of doctrine in common. Because of their hospitality to ideas from many sources, romantic critics in fact exhibit greater diversity in philosophical presuppositions, descriptive vocabulary, dialectical motifs, and critical judgements than the writers of any earlier period. The subject of this and the following chapter will be the rich variety of critical methods and resources exhibited by the major literary theorists of the early nineteenth century.

As a preliminary to this analysis, however, we may notice that there are a limited number of assertions about poetry which turn up so persistently, although in very different theoretical frames, that they may perhaps be called *the* romantic complex of ideas about poetry. The romantic 'movement' in England is largely a convenient fiction of the historian, but one document, Wordsworth's Preface to the *Lyrical Ballads* of 1800, written to justify on universal grounds an 'experiment' in poetic language, does have something of the aspect of a romantic manifesto. In part the Preface (together with the passages and appendix Wordsworth added in 1802) owes its special position to the fact that it presented a set of propositions about the nature and criteria of poetry which were widely adopted by Wordsworth's contemporaries, including those who were least in sympathy with what they supposed to be Wordsworth's own poetic aims. All these propositions rely upon the basic assertion, which usually serves as the definition of poetry, that:

(1) Poetry is the expression or overflowing of feeling, or emerges from a process of imagination in which feelings play the crucial part.

Statements to this effect, we know, are to be found in almost all the important critics of the period, and in more or less easy conjunction with philosophical theories as disparate as Wordsworth's sensationism and Shelley's Platonism, the organic idealism of Coleridge and the positivism of John Stuart Mill.

(2) As the vehicle of an emotional state of mind, poetry is opposed not to prose, but to unemotional assertions of fact, or 'science'.

'Much confusion', Wordsworth complained, 'has been introduced into criticism by this contradistinction of Poetry and Prose, instead of the more philosophical one of Poetry and Matter of Fact, or Science.' It had been common since antiquity to oppose poetry to history, and to base this distinction on the ground that poetry imitates some form of the universal or ideal instead of the actual event. The usual procedure of romantic critics was to substitute science for history as the opposite of poetry, and to ground the distinction on the difference between expression and description, or between emotive language and cognitive language. As one author wrote in *Blackwood's Magazine* in 1835, 'Prose is the language of intelligence, poetry of emotion.'²

(3) Poetry originated in primitive utterances of passion which, through organic causes, were naturally rhythmic and figurative.

In Wordsworth's version, 'The earliest poets of all nations generally wrote from passion excited by real events; they wrote naturally, and a man: feeling powerfully as they did, their language was daring, and

Alun R. Jones and William Tydeman. *Wordsworth : Lyrical Ballads* (Macmillan Education, 1987.)

figurative.³ Coleridge believed that poetry, as the instinctive utterance of feeling, must have seemed to early men a more natural and less remarkable language than prose; 'it was the language of passion and emotion; it is what they themselves spoke and heard in moments of exultation, indignation, etc.'⁴ Though romantic critics disagreed violently on the merits of primitive poetry, most of them accepted the hypothesis that it had its inception in passionate utterance - rather than, as Aristotle had assumed, in an instinct for imitation.⁵

(4) Poetry is competent to express emotions chiefly by its resources of figures of speech and rhythm, by no means words naturally embody and convey the feelings of the poet.

In opposition to the earlier doctrine that figurative language and meter are primarily ornaments used to heighten the aesthetic pleasure, the typical romantic opinion was that expressed by Wordsworth: There is no need in poetry to deviate from ordinary language 'for elevation of style, or any of its supposed ornaments: for, if the Poet's subject be judiciously chosen, it will naturally, and upon fit occasion, lead him to passions the language of which, if selected truly and judiciously, must necessarily be dignified and variegated, and alive with metaphors and figures.'⁶ From this it follows that:

(5) It is essential to poetry that its language be the spontaneous and genuine, not the contrived and stimulated, expression of the emotional state of the poet.

On the thesis, Wordsworth (and in a carefully qualified way, Coleridge) based his attack on the 'mechanical adoption' of figures of speech to which he attributed the debased diction of eighteenth-century poetry. On it depends also the general romantic use of spontaneity, sincerity, and integral unity of thought and feeling as the essential criteria of poetry, in place of their neo-classic counterparts: judgement, truth, and the appropriateness with which diction is matched to the speaker, the subject matter, and the literary kind.⁷

(6) The born poet distinguished from other men particularly by his inheritance of an intense sensibility and a susceptibility to passion.

A poet, as Wordsworth said, differs from other men because he is 'endowed with more lively sensibility, more enthusiasm and tenderness... a man pleased with his own passions and volitions, and who rejoices more than other men in the spirit of life that is in him ...'⁸ Writing later in defense of Robert Burns, he added that this constitution of genius, since it includes him to pleasure, 'is not incompatible with vice, and ... vice leads to misery- the more acute from the sensibilities which are the elements of genius...'⁹ Coleridge also said that sensibility 'both deep and quick' and depth of emotion are essential components of genius, although he insisted that no less essential are the opposing powers of impersonality and 'energy of thought'.¹⁰ Shelley emphasized the 'delicate sensibility' and vulnerability to temptation of the born poet, and John Stuart Mill drew an elaborate portrait of the 'poet by nature' as one who inherits 'fine senses' and 'a nervous organization...so constituted, as to be more easily than common organizations, thrown, either by physical or moral causes, into *states* of enjoyment or suffering ...'¹¹ Later Mill went on to say that, with so fine an emotional texture, the poet cannot but suffer in the present competitive society - not from mortified vanity, but from the poetic temperament itself, under arrangements of society, made by and for harder natures; and in a world, which, for any but the unsensitive, is not a place of contentment ever, nor of peace till after many a hard-fought battle.¹²

We are on the way, by this time, to the stereotype of the *poete maudit*, endowed with an ambiguous gift of sensibility which makes him at the same time more blessed and more cursed than the other members of a society from which he is, by the destiny of inheritance, an outcast.

(7) The most important function of poetry is, by its pleasurable resources, to foster and subtilize the sensibility, emotions, and sympathies of the reader.

Romantic poetry remains poetry with a purpose, but in place of 'solas and doctryne', its aim becomes primarily to cultivate the affective elements of human nature. As Wordsworth put what became a commonplace of his age: 'The end of Poetry is to produce excitement in co-existence with an overbalance of pleasure' and its effect is 'to rectify men's feelings', to widen their sympathies, and to produce or enlarge the capability 'of being excited without the application of gross and violent stimulants'.¹³

These or similar propositions have, since the early nineteenth century, persisted as integral parts of an expressive aesthetics. Eugene Veron, who in his *Esthetique* of 1878 wrote one of the fullest accounts of art as the expression of feeling, includes and expands upon all seven of Wordsworth's thesis. And a number of these points, variously reinterpreted and reorganized, continue to be made by theorists with an expressive bias, who are as doctrinally diverse in other ways as Benedetto Croce and I.A. Richards.

WORDSWORTH AND THE EIGHTEENTH CENTURY

Wordsworth, then, the first great romantic poet, may also be accounted the critic whose highly influential writings, by making the feelings of the poet the center of critical reference, mark a turning-point in English literary theory. It is nevertheless remarkable that Wordsworth was more thoroughly immersed in certain currents of eighteenth-century thinking than any of his important contemporaries. There is, for example, almost none of the terminology of post-Kantian aesthetic philosophy in Wordsworth. Only in his poetry, not in his criticism, does Wordsworth make the transition from the eighteenth-century view of man and nature to the concept that the mind is creative in perception, and an integral part of an organically interrelated universe. To recall the material of the preceding chapter, furthermore, is to recognize the extent to which Wordsworth incorporates in his poetic theory eighteenth-century speculations on the emotional origin of language, prevalent ideas about the nature and value of primitive poetry, together with the results of a century of developments in Longinian doctrines, and substitutes this amalgam for neo-classic theories which had been based more substantially on Aristotle, Horace, Cicero, and Quintilian. Dr. Johnson would have been pained by most of Wordsworth's critical conclusions, but he would have found little occasion for surprise either in the technical vocabulary or in the reasoning by which these conclusions were established.

Wordsworth remained within a well-defined tradition in the general pattern of his criticism, no less than in its details. Throughout the Preface, Wordsworth has recourse to basic standard for establishing validity, whether in the aims of the poet or the criteria of the critic - the common nature of men, always and everywhere. This is the system to which A.O. Lovejoy has given the name 'Uniformitarianism', and which he has shown was a leading principle in normative provinces of thought- moral, theological, and political, as well as aesthetic - in the seventeenth century and through most of the eighteenth century.¹⁴

This way of thinking depends on the assumption that human nature, in its passions and sensibilities no less than its reason, is everywhere fundamentally the same; and it educes the consequence that the shared opinions and feelings of mankind constitute the most reliable norm of aesthetic, as of other values. To cite Hugh Blair, in matters of taste, the standard must be 'the common sentiments and feelings of men'. 'For the universal feeling of mankind is the natural feeling; and because it is the natural, it is for that reason, the right feeling.'¹⁵ In this doctrine a great many eighteenth-century critics were well agreed; and they also shared the opinion that, since the earliest poets were endowed by nature with all the necessary faculties and powers for writing great poetry, the earliest productions - the *Iliad*, for example - are in certain respects without a peer. Dr. Johnson has Imlac say, 'It is commonly observed that the early writers are in possession of nature, and their followers of art: that the first excel in strength and invention, and the latter in elegance and refinement.'¹⁶

The theorists we now single out as aesthetic primitivists departed from this quite orthodox neo-classic opinion mainly in emphasis and detail. For one thing, they not only noted, but deplored the replacement of nature by art in the course of literary history; and for another, they specified the superiority of the primitive poet to consist particularly in the simple and uniform purity of his feelings and imagination, and in the uninhibited spontaneity and candor with which he gave those feelings expression. 'In the infancy of societies,' as Blair said, '[men's] passions have nothing to restrain them, their imagination has nothing to check it. They display themselves to one another without disguise, and converse and act in the uncovered simplicity of nature.' Hence, because it was then free from the restraints and refinements of civility, 'poetry, which is the child of imagination, is frequently most glowing and animated in the first ages of society'.¹⁷

According to one common eighteenth-century variant of this point of view, the elemental and uniform -and, therefore, the normal - aspects of human nature and products are to be found not only in 'chronological', but in 'cultural' primitives, including people dwelling in civilized nations but insulated by caste or rural habitat from the artifice and complications of culture. In its aesthetic application, this presumption was one reason for the vogue in the eighteenth century of poets who were either peasants or proletarians -Stephen Duck, the Thresher Poet; Mary Collier, the Poetical Washerwoman; Henry Jones, the Poetical Shoemaker - from whose ranks the one aspirant to make good was the Poetical Plowboy, Robert Burns.¹⁸

Wordsworth was not a chronological primitivist, for unlike Blair, he did not believe that in certain major respects, man's best poetic age lies behind him. In a letter written in 1809 for Coleridge's periodical, *The Friend*, he even suggests a cautious commitment to the belief that, by and large, there is a 'progress of human nature towards perfection' in both moral dignity and intellectual power.¹⁹ But the critical theory he held during those early years of the nineteenth century, when he formulated his most important literary pronouncements, may in all fairness be classified as a form -though a highly refined and developed form - of cultural primitivism. Wordsworth's cardinal standard of poetic value is 'nature', and nature, in his usage, is given a triple and primitivistic connotation: Nature is the common denominator of human nature; it is most reliably exhibited among men living 'according to nature' (that is to say, in a culturally simple, and especially a rural environment); and it consists primarily in an elemental simplicity of thought and feeling and a spontaneous and 'unartificial' mode of expressing feeling in words. In 1802 he wrote a letter to the youthful Christopher North which exhibits his characteristic normative procedure, and provides us with an illuminating gloss on the Preface to *the Lyrical Ballads* which he had written two years before. 'Whom must poetry please?' Wordsworth asked.

I answer, human nature as it has been [and ever] will be. But, where are we to find the best measure of this? I answer, [from with] in: by stripping our own hearts naked, and by looking out of ourselves towards men who lead the simplest lives, and most according to nature; men who have never known false refinements, wayward and artificial desires, false criticisms, effeminate habits of thinking and feeling, or who having known these things have outgrown them.

To find 'fair representatives of the vast mass of human existence', we must leave the class of 'gentlemen, persons of fortune, professional men, ladies'; we must 'descend lower, among cottages and fields, and among children'.²⁰

Wordsworth is not an ideal expositor, and he complains frequently in his letters that writing prose came hard to him and induced muscular cramps, a nervous sweat, and despondency of spirit. The argument of the Preface to the *Lyrical Ballads* is not pellucid, but it clears up considerably, I think, once we recognize how persistent is its reference, in each area of discussion, to the norm of what Wordsworth called 'human nature as it has been [and ever] will be', of which the simple Cumberland dalesman is assumed to be the nearest existing approximation. Thus:

(1) The subject matter of poetry. Wordsworth tells us that his purpose was, above all, to trace 'the primary laws of our nature: chiefly, as far as regards the manner in which we associate ideas in a state of excitement'. To illustrate these generically human laws,

humble and rustic life was generally chosen, because in that condition, the essential passions of the heart find a better soil in which they can attain their maturity, are less under restraint, and speak a plainer and more emphatic language; because in that condition of life our elementary feelings coexist in a state of greater simplicity ... because the manners of rural life germinate from those elementary feelings ... and are more durable; and, lastly, because in that condition the passions of men are incorporated with the beautiful and permanent forms of nature ... Such a language, arising out of repeated experience and regular feelings, is a more permanent, and a far more philosophical language, than that which is frequently substituted for it by Poets ...²¹

Dr. Johnson was Wordsworth's chief example of a bad critic, but it is instructive to notice how close is the parallel, in concept and critical idiom, between Wordsworth's justification of his ballad characters and Johnson's praise of Shakespeare's comic characters. Shakespeare's characters, Johnson had said,

act upon principles arising from genuine passion, very little modified by particular forms ... they are natural, and therefore durable ... The uniform simplicity of primitive qualities neither admits increase, nor suffers decay...

If there be, what I believe there is, in every nation, a style which never becomes obsolete ... this style is probably to be sought in the common intercourse of life, among those who speak only to be understood, without ambition of elegance.²²

Wordsworth, then, was quite in agreement with Johnson that the poet properly concerns himself with the general and uniform elements, passions, and language of human nature; he merely differed in regard to the place these qualities are best exemplified in real life. This difference, however, led in practice to a drastic break with traditional poetic decorum. To Wordsworth, a mad mother, an idiot boy, or a child who cannot know of death were as appropriate subjects for serious poetry as Achilles or Lear. The poetic representation of these people was not intended to be a *shift* from *the* universal and normal to the deviant and abnormal, as some critics have charged from his day to this. On the contrary, by a simple extension of the most widely held premise of neo-classic thought - an extension for which there was ample precedent even in Johnson's lifetime - Wordsworth turned in his poetry to those feelings and thoughts whose very presence in peasants, children, and idiots in what proves them to be the property, not of the cultivated classes alone, but of all mankind. In such characters, as Wordsworth declared, 'the elements are simple, belonging rather to nature than to manners, such as exist now and will probably always exist ...'²³ On these grounds Wordsworth rationalized the great and important extension of literary sympathies and subject matter which he exemplified in his poetic practice.

In Wordsworth's theory, the 'essential passions' and 'unelaborated expressions' of humble people serve not only as the subject matter of poetry, but also as the model for the 'spontaneous overflow' of the poet's own feelings in his act of composition. In the last analysis, Wordsworth refers the questions of subject matter, of diction, of characterization, and of all the elements of a poem to what in his system is the logically primitive category:

(2) The nature of the poet. 'Taking up the subject, then, upon general grounds, let me ask, what is meant by the word Poet? What is a Poet?' Wordsworth's answer is that he is 'a man speaking to men', different from other men not in kind, but merely in degree of sensibility, passion, and power of expression. Hence, 'where the Poet speaks through the mouths of his characters', the subject 'will naturally, and upon fit occasion, lead him to passions', of which the language will be that really spoken by men. On those other occasions, 'where the Poet speaks to us in his own person and character', he also feels, and therefore speaks, as the representative of uniform human nature.

But these passions and thoughts and feelings are the general passions and thoughts of men ... The Poet thinks and feels in the spirit of human passions. How, then, can his language differ in any material degree from that of all other men who feel vividly and see clearly?²⁴

The fact that he grounded poetry in his own feelings made Wordsworth, as he realized, especially vulnerable to the contemporary charge that these feelings might be peculiar to himself, and capriciously linked to trivial subjects. 'I am sensible,' he admitted, 'that my associations must have sometimes been particular instead of general.' His defense is that though, being human, he is fallible, a poet's best guide to universal human feeling is his own feeling. An author cannot, without danger, defer to 'the simple authority of a few individuals, or even of certain classes of men ... his own feelings are his stay and support'.²⁵

Wordsworth next considers a possible inference from his expressive theory of poetry which was, in fact, one day to become a justification for coterie poetry and private symbolism. Might not a poet be allowed to abandon a universal language and 'to use a peculiar language when expressing his feelings for his own gratification or that of men like himself?' To this, Wordsworth objects that 'Poets do not write for Poets alone, but for men'²⁶ - which brings us to a third area of his argument:

(3) The audience. Wordsworth was as certain as any neoclassic critic had been that poetry must produce 'immediate pleasure', that it must appeal to the constant and uniform susceptibilities of men, and that, therefore, as Dr. Johnson had put it, 'by the common sense of readers, uncorrupted with literary prejudices, after all the refinements of subtilty and the dogmatism of learning, must be finally decided all claim to poetical honours'.²⁷ But here Wordsworth was confronted with a difficulty, for one of the main concerns of his Preface was to justify his own poetic principles and practice against the indifference or

adverse judgements of the great majority of readers in his own day. Exactly parallel had been the chronic dilemma of many neo-classic theorists, who had found the equalitarian implications of a reliance upon the voice of men in general to come into conflict with their own cultivated aesthetic preferences. Dr. Johnson boldly put his reliance on the common reader; but other critics not only derogated the consensus of their own time and place in favour of the consensus of ages, but disqualified all but a very few men as competent to speak for man in general. The train of logic by which this surprising conclusion could be achieved is evident in Lord Karnes's *Elements of Criticism*. What is uniform among men, according to Karnes, is 'not only invariable, but *also perfect, or right...*' But to determine the standard of taste 'common to the species', we cannot 'rely on a local or transitory taste; but on what is the most general and the most lasting among polite nations'. In consequence, not only are 'savages' to be disfranchised, but also 'those who depend for food on bodily labour', as well as any other men who 'by a corrupted taste are unqualified for voting. The common sense of mankind must then be confined to the few that fall not under these exceptions.'²⁸

Wordsworth also employs a rationale of exclusion, although of course he reverses Karnes's bias by looking toward, rather than away from, 'those who depend for food on bodily labour' as the best practical index to the general sense of mankind. As he wrote in his letter to Christopher North, poetry must please 'human nature as it has been and ever will be', but this is very poorly represented by much of human nature as it now exists, because a great proportion of the reading public has been perverted by 'false refinements' and 'artificial desires'. A great poet, Therefore, instead of conforming himself to, ought rather to rectify men's feelings, to give them new compositions of feeling, to render their feelings more sane, pure, and permanent, in short, more consonant to nature ...²⁹

On such grounds as these, Wordsworth writes in the Conclusion to his Preface of 1800, he believes that fulfilment of his aims would produce 'genuine poetry; in its nature well adapted to interest mankind permanently'. Fifteen years later, the 'unremitting hostility' with which his poems continued to be opposed by some critics motivated him to expand upon this thesis in the Essay Supplementary to the Preface. This time he proceeds by drawing a distinction between the passing and fallible voice of 'the Public' and that eternal and universal norm which emerges, through time, as the voice of 'the People'.

Is it the result of the whole, that, in the opinion of the Writer, the judgement of the People is not to be respected? The thought is most injurious ... The People have already been justified, and their eulogium pronounced by implication, when it was said, above - that, of *good* poetry, the *individual*, as well as the species, *survives*. And how does it survive but through the people? ... The voice that issues from this Spirit is that Vox Populi which the Deity inspires. Foolish must he be who can mistake for this a local acclamation, or a transitory outcry - transitory though it be for years, local though from a Nation.³⁰

(4) The diction of poetry. In any theory that poetry is an expression of feeling, the question of diction tends to become primary. For the feeling of the poet are most readily conceived to overflow, not into plot or into characters, but into words, and it becomes the major task of the critic to formulate the standards by which the language of poetry is to be regulated and judged.

That Wordsworth's deliverances on this subject - to which he devoted the greater part of his Preface - were peculiarly dark and equivocal is attested by the endless disputes about his meaning from his day to our own. Much of the difficulty arises from his repeated formulation of the poetic norm as a selection of 'the real language of men', or 'the language really spoken by men', and from the associated statement that there can be no *essential* difference between the language of prose and metrical composition'.³¹ The total context makes it plain that (despite some wavering because of the ambiguity of the word 'real') Wordsworth's chief concern is not with the single words or the grammatical order of prose discourse, but with figurative departures from literal discourse, and that Wordsworth's main intention is to show that such deviations are justifiable in verse only when they have the same psychological causes that they have in the 'artless' speech of every day. Those who have thought to confound Wordsworth's argument by demonstrating that in his own poetry he uses a larger vocabulary and a different syntactic ordonnance than a peasant does, have largely missed the point. In Wordsworth's theory the relation between the language of 'Tintern Abbey' and the speech of a Lake Country shepherd is not primarily one of lexical or a

grammatical, but of genetic equivalence. Both forms of discourse, he would claim, are instances of languages really spoken by men under the stress of genuine feeling.

Once more Wordsworth's argument is clarified if we look at it in the perspective of eighteenth-century criticism. In his use, the term 'real' as the norm of poetic language is for the most part interchangeable with the term 'natural' – 'the real language of nature' is one of his phrases – and 'nature', as elsewhere in Wordsworth, connotes several attributes. First, the language of nature is not the language of poets as a class, but the language of mankind. It is not colored, as Wordsworth says, by a diction 'peculiar to him as an individual Poet or belonging simply to Poets in general'.³² Second, it is exemplified in the language uttered by "the earliest poets", who 'wrote naturally, and as men'; and in prose, its best present instance is 'the simple and unelaborated expressions' of essential passions by men living close to nature.³³ Third, considered genetically, natural language is the instinctive and spontaneous overflow of feeling into words, and is therefore opposed to the deliberate adaptation of means to end, and of the adherence to specifically poetic conventions, which characterize 'art'. The one qualification Wordsworth sets to this principle is the necessity 'of giving pleasure', which involves a selection to remove what would be 'painful or disgusting in the passion'; but, he is quick to say, this does not require the poet 'to trick out or elevate nature' – those words 'which are the emanations of reality and truth'.³⁴

In short, in setting the standard of poetic diction, Wordsworth adopts and elaborates the old antithesis between nature and art and, like the aesthetic-primitivists of the preceding age, declares himself for nature. This is implied throughout the Preface, and made explicit in his tripartite essay *Upon Epitaphs*, one part of which was published in *The Friend* in 1810, and the other two first printed from manuscript in Grosart's *The Prose Works of William Wordsworth* (1876). Even though the total essay is Wordsworth's longest piece of sustained criticism and devotes itself, like the Preface, to combating the notion that 'what was natural in prose would be out of place in verse',³⁵ it has not received adequate attention from students of Wordsworth's literary theory.

'I vindicate', he begins the third part of the essay, 'the right and dignity of Nature.'

I have said that this excellence is difficult to attain; and why? Is it because nature is weak? No! Where the soul has been thoroughly stricken ... there is never a want of *positive* strength; but because the adversary of Nature (call that adversary Art or by what name you will) is *comparatively* strong.... [Of the verse epitaphs in *Elegant Extracts*] there is scarcely one which is not thoroughly tainted by the artifices which have over-run our writings in metre since the days of Dryden and Pope.³⁶

It is clear that Wordsworth is opposing Pope's theory, as well as his practice, of poetic language. 'True Wit', Pope had said, 'is Nature to advantage dressed', and 'true expression' consists in giving thoughts their just and appropriate 'dress' and ornament. 'It gilds all objects, but it alters none.' False wit, on the other hand, results when poets are 'unskill'd to trace The naked nature ... And hide with ornaments their want of art'.³⁷ But to Wordsworth, all such wit is false wit, and all art – in the meaning of the deliberate adjustment of phrase to sentiment and of rhetorical ornament to phrase – serves only to pervert what he calls 'genuine' poetry. Rejecting 'art' in the neo-classic sense of the term, Wordsworth also rejects the related concept of language as the dress of thought, and of figures as the ornaments of language.³⁸

When we turn back to the Preface and Appendix to the *Lyrical Ballads*, we find that Wordsworth justifies figures of speech generally, and the different kinds of figures severally, only when, instead of being 'supposed ornaments', they are 'naturally' suggested by passion.³⁹ 'Poetic diction', he explains, originated at that period in the history of poetry when, through 'a mechanical adoption' of figures of speech, men 'frequently applied them to feelings and thoughts with which they had no natural connexion whatsoever'.

The result was a poetic language (and here Wordsworth unmistakably reveals that he uses "real" as a synonym of natural) 'differing materially from the real language of men in *any situation*', although in time, 'the taste of men becoming gradually perverted, this language was received as a natural language'.⁴⁰ The same antithesis between the language of nature and of art, together with the rejection of art, prompts the epithets Wordsworth applies to the characteristic diction of the eighteenth century poets. This diction is 'artificial', and the result of 'false refinement or arbitrary innovation'; detached from the laws of human

nature, and therefore 'arbitrary and capricious'; 'spoken by rote' rather than 'instinctively ejaculated'; and in consequence, it replaces the natural and universal language of men by 'a family language', passed on from father to son 'as the common inheritance of Poets'.⁴¹

By showing that Wordsworth's theory had its roots in earlier primitivistic doctrine, I should by no means be taken to condemn, or even to derogate, Wordsworth's achievement. The attempt to correct earlier tendencies to formalize and freeze the 'art' of poetry by emphasizing the opposing elements of 'nature' was historically justifiable, and validated at least in the pragmatic sense that the theory was the working hypothesis, and so helped shape the procedure, of one of the great and original poets of the language. Wordsworth's criticism rests on the solid basis of his recognition of the greatness, and the potentialities as literary models, of the ballads, songs, and stories of oral tradition. It rests also on his perception of the possibilities as literary subject matter of the ways and speech of men living close to the soil, comparatively insulated from the rapid changes of life and manners in the urban world. And if neither the literature nor manners of the folk are 'artless' in the way Wordsworth asserted, and if his attempt to generalize from their attributes to all of poetry is open to serious objection, still Wordsworth, by doctrine and example, brought into the literary province the store of materials which has since been richly exploited by writers from Thomas Hardy to William Faulkner.

In addition, Wordsworth succeeded in elaborating and qualifying the doctrines of earlier enthusiasts for the primitive so as to convert them into a reputable and rewarding, if not in itself a wholly adequate, contribution to our critical tradition. Certainly Wordsworth did not conceive of the great poet as a thoughtless and instinctive child of nature. Just as he required the poet to keep his eye on the subject, and reminded him that he writes not for himself, but for men, so he affirmed the good poems are produced only by a man who has 'thought long and deeply. For our continued influxes of feeling are modified and directed by our thoughts, which are indeed the representatives of all our past feelings...' In this way, he refined the key assumption of aesthetic primitivism into the conception of a spontaneity which is the reward of intelligent application and hard-won skills - a spontaneity, as F.R. Leavis has said, 'supervening upon complex developments', and a naturalness 'consummating a discipline, moral and other'.⁴² Wordsworth's own practice, as this is described in Dorothy Wordsworth's *Journals*, also gives ample evidence that once they have been composed, poems may be subjected to long and arduous revision. It is the strength of Wordsworth's expressive theory, therefore, that he brings into its purview elements of the older conception that poetry is a deliberate art; it is its peculiarity that these elements are carefully relegated to a temporal position before or after the actual coming-into-being of the poem. For in the immediate act of composition, the best warrant of 'naturalness', Wordsworth insists, is that the overflow of feeling be spontaneous, and free both from the deliberate adaptation of conventional language to feeling and from the deliberate bending of linguistic means to the achievement of poetic effects.

It is worth emphasizing, finally, that although Wordsworth repudiates the opinion that nature in poetry must be 'to advantage dressed', he consents to the opinion that it may be 'what oft was thought'. In one instance, Wordsworth overtops Dr. Johnson in his demand for uniformity, instead of originality, in the materials of poetry. Johnson, like Wordsworth, was interested in mortuary verse, and had anticipated him in, writing essays on epitaphs. Johnson had selected a composition of Pope's for special praise because in it 'there is scarce one line taken from common places'. For this Wordsworth reprimands him :

It is not only no fault but a primary requisite in an epitaph that it shall contain thoughts and feelings which are in their substance common-place, and even trite. It is grounded upon the universal intellectual property of man, - sensations which all men have felt and feel in some degree daily and hourly: - truths whose very interest and importance have caused them to be unattended to, as things which should take care of themselves.

The next sentence, however, marks the point at which the two theorists part company: 'But it is required', says Wordsworth, 'that these truths should be *instinctively* ejaculated or should rise irresistibly from circumstances ...'⁴³

That the great romantic poet should exceed the great neoclassic critic in his quest for uniformity will not seem anomalous if we remember that Johnson, on his part, had balanced his demand for common truths by requiring what 'is at once natural and *new*', and if we remember also that none of the English romantic poets was of Novalis' opinion that 'the more personal, local, temporal, and peculiar

[eigentümlicher] a poem is, the nearer it is to the center of poetry'.⁴⁴ In England the high-water mark of the workshop of uniqueness and originality had come and passed with Young's *Conjectures*. In his demand that the content of poetry be what is central to all mankind, Wordsworth was at one with Boileau, Pope, and Johnson; the substitution of poetry as the overflow of feeling, however, for poetry as a pleasure-giving imitation enforced a change in the application of this criterion. Since a poet is 'a man speaking to men', to express his spontaneous feelings is the best way to insure a universal content and to appeal to what is universal in mankind. This way of thinking, severed from Wordsworth's insistence that the poet's eye be kept on his subject, was to reach its theatrical extreme in the formulation of Victor Hugo:

Helas! quand je vous parle de moi, je vous parle de vous. Comment ne le sentez-vous pas? Ah! insense, qui crois que je ne suis pas toi.⁴⁵

THE ROMANTIC IMAGINATION (1950)

C.M. Bowra

If we wish to distinguish a single characteristic which differentiates the English Romantics from the poets of the eighteenth century, it is to be found in the importance which they attached to the imagination and in the special view which they held of it. On this, despite significant differences on points of detail, Blake, Coleridge, Wordsworth, Shelley, and Keats agree, and for each it sustains a deeply considered theory of poetry. In the eighteenth century imagination was not a cardinal point in poetical theory. For Pope and Johnson, as for Dryden before them, it has little importance, and when they mention it, it has a limited significance. They approve of fancy, provided that it is controlled by what they call 'judgement', and they admire the apt use of images, by which they mean little more than visual impressions and metaphors. But for them what matters most in poetry is its truth to the emotions, or, as they prefer to say, sentiment. They wish to speak in general terms for the common experience of men, not to indulge personal whims in creating new worlds. For them the poet is more an interpreter than a creator, more concerned with showing the attractions of what we already know than with expeditions into the unfamiliar and the unseen. They are less interested in the mysteries of life than in its familiar appearance, and they think that their task is to display this with as much charm and truth as they can command. But for the Romantics imagination is fundamental, because they think that without it poetry is impossible.

This belief in the imagination was part of the contemporary belief in the individual self. The poets were conscious of a wonderful capacity to create imaginary worlds, and they could not believe that this was idle or false. On the contrary, they thought that to curb it was to deny something vitally necessary to their whole being. They thought that it was just this which made them poets, and that in their exercise of it they could do far better than other poets who sacrificed it to caution and common sense. They saw that the power of poetry is strongest when the creative impulse works untrammelled, and they knew that in their own case this happened when they shaped fleeting visions into concrete forms and pursued wild thoughts until they captured and mastered them. Just as in politics men turned their minds from the existing order to vast prospects of a reformed humanity, so in the arts they abandoned the conventional plan of existence for private adventures which had an inspiring glory. As in the Renaissance poets suddenly found the huge possibilities of the human self and expressed them in a bold and far-flung art, which is certainly much more than an imitation of life, so the Romantics, brought to a fuller consciousness of their own powers, felt a similar need to exert these powers in fashioning new worlds of the mind.

The Romantic emphasis on the imagination was strengthened by considerations which are both religious and metaphysical. For a century English philosophy had been dominated by the theories of Locke. He assumed that in perception the mind is wholly passive, a mere recorder of impressions from without, 'a lazy-looker-on on an external world'. His system was well suited to an age of scientific speculation which found its representative voice in Newton. The mechanistic explanation which both philosophers and scientists gave of the world meant that scanty respect was paid to the human self and especially to its more instinctive, though not less powerful, convictions. Thus both Locke and Newton found a place for God in their universes, the former on the ground that 'the works of nature in every part of them sufficiently evidence a deity'.¹ and the latter on the principle that the great machine of the world implies a mechanic. But this was not all what the Romantics demanded from religion. For them it was a question less of reason than of feeling, less of argument than of experience, and they complained that these mechanistic explanations were a denial of their innermost convictions. So too with poetry. Locke had views on poetry, as he had on most human activities, but no very high regard for it. For him it is a matter of 'wit', and the task of wit is to combine ideas and 'thereby to make up pleasant pictures and agreeable visions in the fancy'.² Wit, in his view, is quite irresponsible and not troubled with truth or reality. The Romantics rejected with contumely a theory which robbed their work of its essential connection with life.

John Spencer Hill, *The Romantic Imagination* (Macmillan, 1989)

Locke is the target both of Blake and of Coleridge, to whom he represents a deadly heresy on the nature of existence. They are concerned with more than discrediting his special views on God and poetry; they are hostile to his whole system which supports those views, and, even worse, robs the human self of importance. They reject his conception of the universe and replace it by their own systems, which deserve the name of 'idealist' because mind is their central point and governing factor. But because they are poets, they insist that the most vital activity of the mind is the imagination. Since for them it is the very source of spiritual energy, they cannot but believe that it is divine, and that, when they exercise it, they in some way partake of the activity of God. Blake says proudly and prophetically:

This world of Imagination is the world of Eternity; it is the divine bosom into which we shall all go after the death of the Vegetated body. This World of Imagination is Infinite and Eternal, whereas the world of Generation, or Vegetation, is Finite and Temporal. There Exist in that Eternal World the Permanent Realities of Every Thing which we see reflected in this Vegetable Glass of Nature. All Things are comprehended in their Eternal Forms in the divine body of the Saviour, the True Vine of Eternity, The Human Imagination.³

For Blake the imagination is nothing less than God as He operates in the human soul. It follows that any act of creation performed by the imagination is divine and that in the imagination man's spiritual nature is fully and finally realized. Coleridge does not speak with so apocalyptic a certainty, but his conclusion is not very different from Blake's: 'The primary IMAGINATION I hold to be the living Power and prime Agent of all human Perception, and as a repetition in the finite mind of the eternal act of creation in the infinite I A.M.'⁴ It is true that he regards poetry as a product of the secondary imagination, but since this differs only in degree from the primary, it remains clear that for Coleridge the imagination is of first importance because it partakes of the creative activity of God.

This is a tremendous claim, and it is not confined to Blake and Coleridge. It was to some degree held by Wordsworth and Shelley and Keats. Each was confident not only that the imagination was his most precious possession but that it was somehow concerned with a supernatural order. Never before had quite such a claim been made, and from it Romantic poetry derives much that is most magical in it. The danger of so bold an assumption is that the poet may be so absorbed in his own private universe and in the exploration of its remoter corners that he may be unable to convey his experience to other men and fail to convert them to his special creed. The Romantics certainly created worlds of their own, but they succeeded in persuading others that these were not absurd or merely fanciful. Indeed, in this respect they were closer to earth and the common man than some of their German contemporaries. They have not the respect for unsatisfied longing as an end in itself or the belief in hallucination and magic which play so large a part in the mind of Brentano, nor have they that nihilistic delight in being detached from life, of which Novalis writes to Caroline Schlegel: 'I know that imagination is most attracted by what is most immoral, most animal; but I also know how like a dream all imagination is, how it loves night, meaninglessness, and solitude.'⁵ This was not what the English Romantics thought. They believed that the imagination stands in some essential relation to truth and reality, and they were at pains to make their poetry pay attention to them.

In doing this they encountered an old difficulty. If a man gives free play to his imagination, what assurance is there that what he says is in any sense true? Can it tell us anything that we do not know, or is it so removed from ordinary life as to be an escape from it? The question had been answered in one sense by Locke when he dealt so cavalierly with poetic wit, and a similar answer was given by Blake's revolutionary friend, Tom Paine, in his *Age of Reason*: 'I had some turn, and I believe some talent for poetry; but this I rather repressed than encouraged as leading too much into the field of imagination.' This is a point of view, and it is not new. It is based on the assumption that the creations of the imagination are fantasies and, as such, divorced from life. The problem had troubled the Elizabethans, and Shakespeare shows acquaintance with it when he makes Theseus say:

The poet's eye, in a fine frenzy rolling,
Doth glance from heaven to earth, from earth to heaven;
And, as imagination bodies forth

The forms of things unknown, the poet's pen
Turns them to shapes, and gives to airy nothing
A local habitation and a name.⁶

This would have won the approval of an Italian philosopher like Pico della Mirandola, who thought that the imagination is almost a diseased faculty, and would certainly have welcomed Theseus' association of the poet with the lunatic and the lover. Even those who did not venture so far as this thought that the creations of the imagination have little to do with actual life and provide no more than an agreeable escape from it. This was Bacon's view in *The Advancement of Learning*: "The imagination, being not tied to the laws of matter, may at pleasure join that which nature hath severed and sever that which nature hath joined, and so make unlawful matches and divorces of things. Bacon regards this as a harmless and not unpleasant activity, but not more. Though the Elizabethans excelled almost all other ages in the creation of imaginary worlds, their gravest thinkers made no great claim for them and were on the whole content that they should do no more than give a respite from the cares of ordinary life.

Such a position is plainly unsatisfactory for poets who believe that the imagination is a divine faculty concerned with the central issues of being. Indeed, it must be difficult for almost any poet to think that what he creates is imaginary in the derogatory sense which Bacon and his like give to the word. Poets usually believe that their creations are somehow concerned with reality, and this belief sustains them in their work. Their approach is indeed not that of the analytical mind, but it is none the less penetrating. They assume that poetry deals in some sense with truth, though this truth may be different from that of science or philosophy. That Shakespeare understood the question is clear from what Hippolyta says in answer to Theseus' discourse on the imagination:

But all the story of the night told over,
And all their minds tranfigur'd so together,
More witnesseth than fancy's images,
And grows to something of great constancy,
But, howsoever, strange and admirable.⁷

Hippolyta has sense enough to see that a poet's inventions are not an 'airy nothing' but stand in some relation to reality. In this she presents a view which is in opposition to that of the Platonist Pico but which has some affinity with that of Guarino, who says that the statements of poetry are true not literally but symbolically.⁸ For Hippolyta the creations of the imagination are related to living experience and reflect some kind of reality.

The Romantics face this issue squarely and boldly. So far from thinking that the imagination deals with the non-existent, they insist that it reveals an important kind of truth. They believe that when it is at work it sees things to which the ordinary intelligence is blind and that it is intimately connected with a special insight or perception or intuition. Indeed, imagination and insight are in fact inseparable and form for all practical purposes a single faculty. Insight both awakes the imagination to work and is in turn sharpened by it when it is at work. This is the assumption on which the Romantics wrote poetry. It means that, when their creative gifts are engaged, they are inspired by their sense of the mystery of things to probe it with a peculiar insight and to shape their discoveries into imaginative forms. Nor is this process difficult to understand. Most of us, when we use our imaginations, are in the first place stirred by some alluring puzzle which calls for a solution, and in the second place enabled by our own creations in the mind to see much that was before dark or unintelligible. As our fancies take coherent shape, we see more clearly what has puzzled and perplexed us. This is what the Romantics do. They combine imagination and truth because their creations are inspired and controlled by a peculiar insight. Coleridge makes the point conclusively when he praises Wordsworth:

It was the union of deep feeling with profound thought; the fine balance of truth in observing, with the imaginative faculty in modifying the objects observed; and above all the original gift of spreading the tone, the

atmosphere, and with it the depth and height of the ideal world around forms, incidents, and situations, of which, for the common view, custom had bedimmed all the lustre, had dried up the sparkle and the dew drops.⁹

So long as the imagination works in this way, it cannot fairly be accused of being an escape from life or of being no more than an agreeable relaxation.

The perception which works so closely with the imagination is not of the kind in which Locke believed, and the Romantics took pains to dispel any misunderstanding on the point. Since what mattered to them was an insight into the nature of things, they rejected Locke's limitation of perception to physical objects, because it robbed the mind of its most essential function, which is at the same time to perceive and to create. On this Blake speaks with prophetic scorn: 'Mental Things are alone Real; what is call'd Corporeal, Nobody Knows of its Dwelling Place: it is in Fallacy, and its Existence an Imposture. Where is the Existence Out of (Mind or Thought? Where is it but in the Mind of a Fool?'¹⁰ Coleridge came to a similar conclusion for not very different reasons: 'If the mind be *not passive*, if it be indeed made in God's image, and that, too, in the sublimest sense, the *Image of the Creator*, there is ground for the suspicion that any system built on the passiveness of the mind must be false as a system.'¹¹

When they rejected the sensationalist view of an external world, Blake and Coleridge prepared the way to restoring the supremacy of the spirit which had been denied by Locke but was at this time being propounded by German metaphysicians. Blake knew nothing of them, and his conclusions arose from his own visionary outlook, which could not believe that matter is in any sense as real as spirit. Coleridge had read Kant and Schelling and found in them much to support his views, but those views were derived less from them than his own instinctive conviction that the world of spirit is the only reality. Because he was, first a poet and only secondly a metaphysician, his conception of a universe of spirit came from his intense sense of an inner life and from his belief that the imagination, working with intuition, is more likely than the analytical reason to make discoveries on matters which really concern us.

In rejecting Locke's and Newton's explanations of the visible world, the Romantics obeyed an inner call to explore more fully the world of spirit. In different ways each of them believed in an order of things which is not that which we see and know, and this was the goal of their passionate search. They wished to penetrate to an abiding reality, to explore its mysteries, and by this to understand more clearly what life means and what it is worth. They were convinced that, though visible things are the instruments by which we find this reality, they are not everything and have indeed little significance unless they are related to some embracing and sustaining power. Nor is it hard to see what this means. Most of us feel that a physical universe is not enough and demand some scheme which will explain why our beliefs and convictions are valid and why in an apparently mechanistic order we have scales of values for which no mechanism can account. Locke and Newton explain what the sensible world is, but not what it is worth. Indeed, in explaining mental judgements by physical processes they destroy their validity, since the only assurance for the truth of our judgements is the existence of an objective truth which cannot be determined by a casual, subjective process. Such systems embody a spirit of negation, because in trying to explain our belief in the good or the holy or the beautiful they succeed only in explaining it away. That is why Blake dismissed atomic physicists and their like as men who try in vain to destroy and divine light which alone gives meaning to life, and proclaimed that in its presence their theories cease to count:

The Atoms of Democritus
And Newton's Particles of light
Are sands upon the Red sea shore,
Where Israel's tents do shine so bright.¹²

The Romantics were concerned with the things of the spirit and hoped that through imagination and inspired insight they could both understand them and present them in compelling poetry.

It was this search for an unseen world that awoke the inspiration of the Romantics and made poets of them. The power of their work comes partly from the driving force of their desire to grasp these ultimate truths, partly from their exaltation when they thought that they had found them. Unlike their German

contemporaries, who were content with the thrills of *Sehnsucht*, or longing and did not care much what the *Jenseits*, or 'beyond', might be, so long as it was sufficiently mysterious, the English Romantics pursued their lines of imaginative enquiry until they found answers which satisfied them. Their aim was to convey the mystery of things through individual manifestations and thereby to show what it means. They appeal not to the logical mind but to the complete self, to the whole range of intellectual faculties, senses, and emotions. Only individual presentations of imaginative experience can do this. In them we see examples of what cannot be expressed directly in words and can be conveyed only by hint and suggestion. The powers which Wordsworth saw in nature or Shelley in love are so enormous that we begin to understand them only when they are manifested in single, concrete examples. Then, through the single cases, we apprehend something of what the poet has seen in vision. The essence of the Romantic imagination is that it fashions shapes which display these unseen forces at work, and there is no other way to display them, since they resist analysis and description and cannot be presented except in particular instances.

The apprehension of these spiritual issues is quite different from the scientific understanding of natural laws or the philosophical grasp of general truths. Such laws and truths are properly stated in abstract words, but spiritual powers must be introduced through particular examples, because only then do we see them in their true individuality. Indeed, only when the divine light of the imagination is on them do we begin to understand their significance and their appeal. That is why Blake is so stern on the view that art deals with general truths. He has none of Samuel Johnson's respect for the 'grandeur of generality', and would disagree violently with him when he says, 'nothing can please many and please long, but just representation of general nature'. Blake thought quite otherwise:

To Generalize is to be an Idiot. To Particularize is the Alone Distinction of Merit. General Knowledges are those Knowledges that Idiots possess.¹³

What is General Nature? Is there Such a Thing? What is General Knowledge? Is there such a Thing? Strictly Speaking All Knowledge is Particular.¹⁴

Blake believed this because he lived in the imagination. He knew that nothing had full significance for him unless it appeared in a particular form. And with this the Romantics in general agreed. Their art aimed at presenting as forcibly as possible the moments of vision which give to even the vastest issues the coherence and simplicity of single events. Even in 'Kubla Khan', which keeps so many qualities of the dream in which it was born, there is a highly individual presentation of a remote and mysterious experience, which is in fact the central experience of all creation in its Dionysiac delight and its enraptured ordering of many elements into an entrancing pattern. Coleridge may not have been fully conscious of what he was doing when he wrote it, but the experience which he portrays is of the creative mood in its purest moments, when boundless possibilities seem to open before it. No wonder he felt that, if he could only realize all the potentialities of such a moment, he would be like one who has supped with the gods:

And all should cry, Beware! Beware!
His flashing eyes, his floating hair!
Weave a circle round him thrice,
And close your eyes with holy dread,
For he on honey-dew hath fed,
And drunk the milk of Paradise.

It was in such experience, remote and strange and beyond the senses, that the Romantics sought for poetry, and they saw that the only way to convey it to others was in particular instances and examples.

The invisible powers which sustain the universe work through and in the visible world. Only by what we see and hear and touch can we be brought into relation with them. Every poet has to work with the world of the senses, but for the Romantics it was the instrument which set their visionary powers in action. It affected them at times in such a way that they seemed to be carried beyond it into a

transcendental order of things, but this would never have happened if they had not looked on the world around them with attentive and loving eyes. One of the advantages which they gained by their deliverance from abstractions and general truths was a freedom to use their senses and to look on nature without conventional prepossessions. More than this, they were all gifted with a high degree of physical sensibility and sometimes so enthralled by what they saw that it entirely dominated their being. This is obviously true of Wordsworth and of Keats, who brought back to poetry a keenness of eye and of ear which it had hardly known since Shakespeare. But it is no less true of Blake and Coleridge and Shelley. The careful, observing eye which made Blake a cunning craftsman in line and colour was at work in his poetry. It is true that he was seldom content with mere description of what he saw, but, when he used description for an ulterior purpose to convey some vast mystery, his words are exact and vivid and make his symbols shine brightly before the eye. Though Coleridge found some of his finest inspiration in dreams and trances, he gave to their details a singular brilliance of outline and character. Though Shelley lived among soaring ideas and impalpable abstractions, he was fully at home in the visible world, if only because it was a mirror of eternity and worthy of attention for that reason. There are perhaps poets who live entirely in dreams and hardly notice the familiar scene, but the Romantics are not of their number. Indeed, their strength comes largely from the way in which they throw a new and magic light on the common face of nature and lure us to look for some explanation for the irresistible attraction which it exerts. In nature all the Romantic poets found their initial inspiration. It was not everything to them, but they would have been nothing without it; for through it they found those exalting moments when they passed from sight to vision and pierced, as they thought, to the secrets of the universe.

Though all the Romantic poets believed in an ulterior reality and based their poetry on it, they found it in different ways and made different uses of it. They varied in the degree of importance which they attached to the visible world, and in their interpretation of it. At one extreme is Blake, who held that the imagination is a divine power and that everything real comes from it. It operates with a given material, which is nature, but Blake believed that a time would come when nature will disappear and the spirit be free to create without it. While it is there, man takes his symbols from it and uses them to interpret the unseen. Blake's true home was in vision, in what he saw when he gave full liberty to his creative imagination and transformed sense-data through it. For him the imagination uncovers the reality masked by visible things. The familiar world gives hints which must be taken and pursued and developed:

To see a World in a Grain of Sand
And a Heaven in a Wild Flower,
Hold Infinity in the palm of our hand
And eternity in an hour.¹⁵

Through visible things Blake reached that transcendent state which he called 'eternity' and felt free to create new and living worlds. He was not a mystic striving darkly and laboriously towards God, but a visionary who could say of himself:

I am in God's presence night and day,
And he never turns his face away.¹⁶

Of all the Romantics, Blake is the most rigorous in his conception of the imagination. He could confidently say, 'One Power alone makes a Poet: Imagination, the Divine vision',¹⁷ because for him the imagination creates reality, and this reality is the divine activity of the self in its unimpeded energy. His attention is turned towards an ideal, spiritual world, which with all other selves who obey the imagination he helps to build.

Though Blake had a keen eye for the visible world, his special concern was with the invisible. For him every living thing was a symbol of everlasting powers, and it was these which he wished to grasp and to understand. Since he was a painter with a remarkably pictorial habit of mind, he described the invisible in the language of the visible, and no doubt he really saw it with his inner vision. But what he saw was not, so to speak, an alternative to the given world, but a spiritual order to which the language of physical

sight can be applied only in metaphor. What concerned him most deeply and drew out his strongest powers was the sense of a spiritual reality at work in all living things. For him even the commonest event might be fraught with lessons and meanings. How much he found can be seen from his 'Auguries of Innocence', where in epigrammatic, oracular couplets he displays his sense of the intimate relations which exist in reality and bind the worlds of sight and of spirit in a single whole. His words look simple enough, but every word needs attention, as when he proclaims:

A Robin Red breast in a Cage
Puts all Heaven in a Rage.

Blake's Robin redbreast is itself a spiritual thing, not merely a visible bird, but the powers which such a bird embodies and symbolizes, the free spirit which delights in song and in all that song implies. Such a spirit must not be repressed, and any repression of it is a sin against the divine life of the universe. Blake was a visionary who believed that ordinary things are unsubstantial in themselves and yet rich as symbols of greater realities. He was so at home in the spirit that he was not troubled by the apparent solidity of matter. He saw something else: a world of eternal values and living spirits.

Keats had a more passionate love than Blake for the visible world and has too often been treated as a man who lived for sensuous impressions, but he resembled Blake in his conviction that ultimate reality is to be found only in the imagination. What it meant to him can be seen from some lines in 'Sleep and Poetry' in which he asks why the imagination has lost its old power and scope:

Is there so small a range
In the present strength of manhood, that the high
Imagination cannot freely fly
As she was wont of old? Prepare her steeds,
Paw up against the light, and do strange deeds
Upon the clouds? Has she not shown us ail?
From the clear space of ether, to the small
Breath of new buds unfolding? From the meaning
Of Jove's large eye-brow, to the tender greening
Of April meadows?

Keats was still a very young man when he wrote this, and perhaps his words are not so precise as we might like. But it is clear that he saw the imagination as a power which both creates and reveals, or rather reveals through creating. Keats accepted the works of the imagination not merely as existing in their own right, but as having a relation to ultimate reality through the light which they shed on it. This idea he pursued with hard thought until he saw exactly what it meant, and made it his own because it answered a need in his creative being.

Through the imagination Keats sought an absolute reality to which a door was opened by his appreciation of beauty through the senses. When the objects of sense laid their spell upon him, he was so stirred and exalted that he felt himself transported to another world and believed that he could almost grasp the universe as a whole. Sight and touch and smell awoke his imagination to a sphere of being in which he saw vast issues and was at home with them. Through beauty he felt that he came into the presence of the ultimately real. The more intensely a beautiful object affected him, the more convinced he was that he had passed beyond it to something else. In *Endymion* he says that happiness raises our minds to a 'fellowship with essence' and leaves us 'alchemized and free of space':

Feel we these things? That moment we have stept
Into a sort of oneness, and our state

Is like a fleeting spirit's. But there are
Richer entanglements, enthrallments far
More self-destroying, leading by degrees
To the chief intensity.¹⁸

The beauty of visible things carried Keats into ecstasy, and this was the goal of his desires, since it explained the extraordinary hold which objects of sense had on him and justified his wish to pass beyond them to something permanent and universal. Keats, notion of this reality was narrower than Blake's, and he speaks specifically as a poet, whereas Blake included in the imagination all activities which create or increase life. Moreover, while Blake's imagination is active, Keats suggests that his is largely passive and that his need is to feel the 'chief intensity'. But he is close to Blake in the claims which he makes for the imagination as something absorbing and exalting which opens the way to an unseen spiritual order.

Coleridge, too, gave much thought to the imagination and devoted to it some distinguished chapters of his *Biographia Literaria*. With him it is not always easy to disentangle theories which he formed in later life from the assumptions upon which he acted almost instinctively before his creative faculties began to fail. At times he seems to be still too aware of the sensationalist philosophy of his youth. From it he inherits a conception of a world of facts, an 'inanimate cold world', in which 'objects, *as* objects, are essentially fixed and dead'. But as a poet he transcended this idea, or turned it to an unexpected conclusion. Just because the external world is like this, the poet's task is to transform it by the imagination. Just as 'accidents of light and shade' may transmute 'a known and familiar landscape',¹⁹ so this dead world may be brought to life by the imagination. Coleridge justified this by a bold paradox: 'Dare I add that genius must act of the feeling that body is but a striving to become mind - that is mind in its essence.'²⁰ What really counted with him was his own deep trust in the imagination as something which gives a shape to life. What this meant to him in practice can be seen from the lines in 'Dejection' in which he explains that nature lives only in us and that it is we who create all the matters in her:

Ah! from the soul itself must issue forth
A light, a glory, a fair luminous cloud
Enveloping the Earth
And from the soul itself must there be sent
A sweet and potent voice, of its own birth,
Of all sweet sounds the life and element!

Coleridge does not go so far as Blake in the claims which he makes for the imagination. He is still a little hampered by the presence of an external world and feels that in some way he must conform to it. But when his creative genius is at work, it brushes these hesitations aside and fashions reality from a shapeless, undifferentiated 'given'. In the end he believes that meaning is found for existence through the exercise of a creative activity which is akin to that of God.

Coleridge advanced no very definite view of the ultimate reality which poetry explores. If we may judge by 'Kubla Khan', he seems to have felt, at least in some moods, that the mere act of creation is itself transcendental and that we need ask for nothing more. But perhaps the evidence of 'Kubla Khan' should not be pressed too far. Indeed, if we turn to 'The Ancient Mariner' and 'Christabel', it seems clear that Coleridge thought that the task of poetry is to convey the mystery of life. The ambiguous nature of both poems, with their suggestion of an intermediate state between dreaming and waking, between living people and unearthly spirits, gives an idea of the kind of subject which stirred Coleridge's genius to its boldest flights. Whatever he might think as a philosopher, as a poet he was fascinated by the notion of unearthly powers at work in the world, and it was their influence which he sought to catch. Of course, he did not intend to be taken literally, but we cannot help feeling that his imaginative conception of reality was of something behind human actions which is more vivid than the familiar world because of its sharper

contrasts of good and evil and the more purposeful way in which it moves. This conception was developed only in poetry, and even then only in two or three poems. Coleridge seems to have been forced to it by a troubled and yet exciting apprehension that life is ruled by powers which cannot be fully understood. The result is a poetry more mysterious than that of any other Romantic, and yet, because it is based on primary human emotions, singularly poignant and intimate.

Wordsworth certainly agreed with Coleridge in much that he said about the imagination, especially in the distinction between it and fancy. For him the imagination was the most important gift that a poet can have, and his arrangement of his own poems shows what he meant by it. The section which he calls 'Poems of the Imagination' contains poems in which he united creative power and a special, visionary insight. He agreed with Coleridge that this activity resembles that of God. It is the divine capacity of the child who fashions his own worlds:

For feeling has to him imparted power
That through the growing faculties of sense
Doth like an agent of the one great Mind
Create, creator and receiver both,
Working but in alliance with the works
Which it beholds.²¹

The poet keeps this faculty even in maturity, and through it he is what he is. But Wordsworth was fully aware that mere creation is not enough, that it must be accompanied by a special insight. So he explains that the imagination

Is but another name for absolute power
And clearest insight, amplitude of mind,
And Reason in her most exalted mood.²²

Wordsworth did not go so far as the other Romantics in relegating reason to an inferior position. He preferred to give a new dignity to the word and to insist that inspired insight is itself rational.

Wordsworth differs from Coleridge in his conception of the external world. He accepts its independent existence and insists that the imagination must in some sense conform to it. Once again he sees the issue illustrated by childhood:

A plastic power
Abode with me; a forming hand, at times
Rebellious, acting in a devious mood;
A local spirit of his own, at war
With general tendency, but, for the most,
Subservient strictly to external things
With which it communed.²³

For Wordsworth the imagination must be subservient to the external world, because that world is not dead but living and has its own soul, which is, at least in the life that we know, distinct from the soul of man. Man's task is to enter into communion with this soul, and indeed he can hardly avoid doing so, since from birth onward his life is continuously shaped by nature, which penetrates his being and influences his thoughts. Wordsworth believed that he helped to bring this soul of nature closer to man, that he could show

by words

Which speak of nothing more than what we are.²⁴

how exquisitely the external world is fitted to the individual mind, and the individual mind to the external world. This, it must be admitted, was not to Blake's taste, and he commented: 'You shall not bring me down to believe such fitting and fitted.'²⁵ But for Wordsworth this was right. Nature was the source of his inspiration, and he could not deny to it an existence at least as powerful as man's. But since nature lifted him out of himself, he sought for a higher state in which its soul and the soul of man should be united in a single harmony. Sometimes he felt that this happened and that through vision he attained an understanding of the oneness of things.

Though Shelley's mind moved in a way unlike that of his fellow Romantics, he was no less attached to the imagination and gave to it no less a place in his theory of poetry. He understood the creative nature of his work and shows what he thought of it when in *Prometheus Unbound* a Spirit sings of the poet:

He will watch from dawn to gloom
The lake-reflected sun illumine
The yellow bees in the ivy-bloom,
Nor heed nor see, what things they be;
But from these create he can
Forms more real than living man,
Nurslings of immortality!

Shelley saw that though the poet may hardly notice the visible world, he none the less uses it as material to create independent beings which have a superior degree of reality. Nor did he stop at this. He saw that reason must somehow be related to the imagination, and he decided, in contradistinction to Wordsworth, that its special task is simply to analyse the given and to act as an instrument for the imagination, which uses its conclusions to create a synthetic and harmonious whole. He calls poetry 'the expression of the Imagination', because in it diverse things are brought together in harmony instead of being separated through analysis. In this he resembles such thinkers as Bacon and Locke, but his conclusion is quite different from theirs, since he insists that the imagination is man's highest faculty and through it he realizes his noblest powers.

In his *Defence of Poetry* Shelley controverted the old disparaging view of the imagination by claiming that the poet has a special kind of knowledge:

He not only beholds intensely the present as it is, and discovers those laws according to which present things ought to be ordered, but he beholds the future in the present, and his thoughts are the germs of the flower and the fruit of latest time ... A poet participates in the eternal, the Unite, and the one.²⁶

For Shelley the poet is also a seer, gifted with a peculiar insight into the nature of reality. And this reality is a timeless, unchanging, complete order, of which the familiar world is but a broken reflection. Shelley took Plato's theory of knowledge and applied it to beauty. For him the Ideal Forms are a basis not so much of knowing as of that exalted insight which is ours in the presence of beautiful things. The poet's task is to uncover this absolute real in its visible examples and to interpret them through it. It is spiritual in the sense that it includes all the higher faculties of man and gives meaning to his transient sensations. Shelley tried to grasp the whole of things in its essential unity, to show what is real and what is merely phenomenal, and by doing this to display how the phenomenal depends on the real. For him the ultimate reality is the eternal mind, and this holds the universe together:

This Whole
Of suns, and worlds, and men, and beasts, and flowers,
With all the silent or tempestuous workings
By which they have been, are, or cease to be,

Is but a vision; all that it inherits
Are motes of a sick eye, bubbles and dreams;
Thought is its cradle, and its grave, nor less
The future and the past are idle shadows
Of thought's eternal flight, they have no being:
Nought is but that which feels itself to be.²⁷

In thought and feeling, in consciousness and spirit, Shelley found reality and gave his answer to Prospero's nihilism. He believed that the task of the imagination is to create shapes by which this reality can be revealed.

The great Romantics, then, agreed that their task was to find through the imagination some transcendental order which explains the world of appearances and accounts not merely for the existence of visible things but for the effect which they have on us, for the sudden, unpredictable beating of the heart in the presence of beauty, for the conviction that what then moves us cannot be a cheat or an illusion, but must derive its authority from the power which moves the universe. For them this reality could not but be spiritual, and they provide an independent illustration of Hegel's doctrine that nothing is real but spirit. In so far as they made sweeping statements about the oneness of things, they were metaphysicians, but, unlike professional metaphysicians, they trusted not in logic but in insight, not in the analytical reason but in the delighted, inspired soul which in its full nature transcends both the mind and the emotions. They were, too, in their own way, religious, in their sense of holiness of reality and the awe which they felt in its presence. But, so far as their central beliefs were concerned, they were not orthodox. Blake's religion denied the existence of God apart from men; Shelley liked to proclaim that he was an atheist; Keats was uncertain how far to accept the doctrines of Christianity. Though later both Coleridge and Wordsworth conformed almost with enthusiasm, in their most creative days their poetry was founded on a different faith. The Romantic movement was a prodigious attempt to discover the world of spirit through the unaided efforts of the solitary soul. It was a special manifestation of that belief in the worth of the individual which philosophers and politicians had recently preached to the world.

This bold expedition into the unknown, conducted with a scrupulous sincerity and a passionate faith, was very far from being an emotional self-indulgence. Each of these poets was convinced that he could discover something very important and that he possessed in poetry a key denied to other men. To this task they were prepared to devote themselves, and in different ways they paid heavily for it, in happiness, in self-confidence, in the very strength of their creative powers. They were not content to dream their own dreams and to fashion comforting illusions. They insisted that their creations must be real, not in the narrow sense that anything of which we can think has some sort of existence, but in the wide sense that they are examples and embodiments of eternal things which cannot be presented otherwise than in individual instances. Because the Romantics were poets, they set forth their visions with the wealth that poetry alone can give, in the concrete, individual form which makes the universal vivid and significant to the finite mind. They refused to accept the ideas of other men on trust or to sacrifice imagination to argument. As Blake says of Los,

I must Create a System or be enslav'd by another Man's.
I will not Reason and Compare: my business is to Create.²⁸

The Romantics knew that their business was to create, and through creation to enlighten the whole sentient and conscious self of man, to wake his imagination to the reality which lies behind or in familiar things, to rouse him from the deadening routine of custom to a consciousness of immeasurable distances and unfathomable depths, to make him see that mere reason is not enough and that what he needs is inspired intuition. They take a wider view both of man and of poetry than was taken by their staid and rational predecessors of the eighteenth century, because they believed that it is the whole spiritual nature of man that counts, and to this they made their challenge and their appeal.

'VARIETIES OF IMAGINATION IN WORDSWORTH' (1955)

Rene Wellek

In many pronouncements imagination is substantially the eighteenth-century faculty of arbitrary recall and willful combination of images. In others it is the neo-Platonic intellectual vision. There is apparently no chronological progress from one conception to the other. The idea of imagination as vision occurs both early and late. There seems to be a distinction between statements in prose and statements in verse. The neo-Platonic metaphysical conception permeates the last books of *The Prelude* and *The Excursion*, the psychological the Preface of 1815. The discussion in *The Prelude* and *The Excursion*, in verse, can hardly be treated as literary theory without falsifying its tone and implication. The distinctions there between imagination in general and the poetic imagination are so fluid and obscure that it seems impossible to extract a coherent doctrine for poetics. Wordsworth disconcertingly vacillates among three epistemological conceptions. At times he makes imagination purely subjective, an imposition of the human mind on the real world. At other times he makes it an illumination beyond the control of the conscious mind and even beyond the *individual soul*. *But most frequently he takes an in-between position which favors the idea of a collaboration.*

An ennobling interchange

Of action from within and from without.

[*Prelude* (1850) XIII 375-6]

The many passages which suggest an extreme subjectivism, an activity of the imagination exerting itself against the world, must be always interpreted in the light of the other conceptions which assume a continuity between mind and nature. When Wordsworth speaks of throwing a 'certain colouring of imagination' over incidents and situations from common life', he justifies his choice of subject matter. Even when he says that the duty of poetry is 'to treat things not as they *are*, but as they *appear*, not as they exist in themselves, but as they *seem* to exist to the *senses*, and to *the passions*', he defends the poet's emotion and transfiguration of reality and not psychological solipsism or illusionism¹ which may seem to follow if we press the terms 'appear' and 'seem'.

The famous vision on Mount Snowdon suggests a parallelism between the workings of nature and imagination; nature, represented by the moon, 'moulds, endues, abstracts, combines'. It has a 'genuine counterpart, in the imaginative faculty of 'higher minds' (geniuses, especially poets) who, like nature, can 'create a like existence'. These higher minds can hold 'communion with the invisible world'. They have genuine liberty, genuine free will. This imagination is identified with -

absolute strength

And clearest insight, amplitude of mind.

And reason in her most exalted mood.²

It is then associated very closely with intellectual love. Imagination is here conceived as intellectual intuition, as a higher faculty of knowing, as reason, *nous*, *Vernunft*, which demands the association of love, the love of mankind and of God. On occasion Wordsworth adopts the language of idealism and calls imagination 'the faculty by which the poet conceives and produces - that is, images individual forms in which are *embodied universal ideas or abstraction*³. But such an approximation to the idea of poetry as a symbolism of abstractions is rare. More common is the view that imagination 'turns upon infinity', 'incites and supports the eternal', and thus suggests religion or, at least, religious feelings.⁴

Only the 1815 Preface brings the concept of imagination into closer relation with actual literary texts. There Wordsworth defends the ordering of his poems by explaining imagination and fancy in psychological terms. He objects to the usual definitions as making imagination and fancy only modes of memory and then tells that it rather means 'processes of creation or of composition'. His illustrations are, however, curiously inept: they merely cite very ordinary metaphorical transfers. Thus the sapphire

gatherer in *King Lear* 'hangs' on the cliff, which, according to Wordsworth, shows imagination, because 'hanging' is not to be understood as actual support from above but refers, presumably, to the precariousness of the man's hold on the rocks. Other examples are drawn from Wordsworth's own poetry. The stock-dove's voice is described as 'buried among trees'; the phrase is not literally accurate but suggests the love of seclusion of the bird and the effect of the 'voice being deadened by the intervening shade'. Similarly, calling the cuckoo a 'wandering voice' is an instance of imagination, as 'voice' is here a substitution depriving the creature almost of a corporeal existence, while 'wandering' suggests seeming ubiquity. Wordsworth then proceeds to an analysis of more complex instances and discusses his own leechgatherer, who is compared to both a 'huge stone' and a 'sea-beast'. The stone is given some measure of life to make it similar to the beast, and the sea-beast is deprived of some life to assimilate it to the stone. Thus imagination of defined, in a quotation from Charles Lamb, as 'drawing all things to one', as 'consolidating numbers into unity' but also as 'dissolving and separating unity into number'.⁵ It seems thus both a unifying and an analyzing power. Elsewhere Wordsworth discusses his sonnet 'With Ships the Sea' as another example of the mind fastening on an individual object (a ship) among a multitude of others, as if the poem were an elementary lesson in the psychology of attention.⁶ Wordsworth here seems not to go beyond the idea that imagination dissolves, endows, modifies, and abstracts, and when he speaks of imagination as shaping and creating, he seems to think of nothing more than 'consolidating numbers into unity'.

Next comes the distinction between fancy and imagination, for which Wordsworth quotes Coleridge's passing reference in *Omniana*.⁷ Wordsworth argues that Coleridge's definition of fancy as the 'aggregative or associative power' (in contrast to imagination as the 'shaping or modifying power') is too general. He maintains that imagination, as well as fancy, aggregates and associates, evokes and combines, and that fancy, as well as imagination, is a creative faculty. But actually Wordsworth's own theory is well in agreement with Coleridge's, at least as that theory was developed or put on paper a little later.⁸ Both Wordsworth and Coleridge make the distinction between fancy, a faculty which handles 'fixities and definites', and imagination, a faculty which deals with the 'plastic, the pliant and the indefinite'.⁹ The only important difference between Wordsworth and Coleridge is that Wordsworth does not clearly see Coleridge's distinction between Imagination as a 'holistic' and fancy as an associative power and does not draw the sharp distinction between transcendentalism and associationism which Coleridge wanted to establish. His own examples lead to a rather naive revival of the difference between the beautiful and sublime. We are in the presence of fancy when definite sizes are indicated, in the presence of imagination when we hear that the Archangel's 'stature reached the sky' or when the firmament is called 'illimitable'.¹⁰ Chesterfield's conceit of referring to the 'dews of the evening as the 'tears of the sky' is dismissed as fancy, while Milton's sky weeping 'sad drops' at the completion of Adam's fall is improved as imagination because 'the mind acknowledges the justice and reasonableness of the sympathy in nature'.¹¹ In practice this amounts to a rating of imagery in terms of seriousness. Fancy is disparaged because it is based on some kind of deceit. Fancy is recognized by the rapidity with which she scatters her thoughts and images, and by the 'curious subtlety and the successful elaboration with which she can detect the lurking affinities' of thoughts and images.¹² Fancy is thus a sleight of hand and an intellectual exercise. Combinatory power, intellectual subtlety are unpoetic compared to the slow workings of imagination dealing with indefinite illimitable objects. The distinction serves to devalue the whole line of wit both seventeenth and eighteenth century poetry though Wordsworth concludes by quoting an 'admirable composition', Cotton's 'Ode upon Winter', as an example of fancy.

The distinction between fancy and imagination is parallel to a distinction between the animating metaphors or personifications of the eighteenth century of which Wordsworth disapproves and the metaphors which he himself uses. This is not very clear theoretically but is apparently based on some final test of truth. Chesterfield is wrong, because the 'dews of the evening' are not the 'tears of the sky'. Milton is right because it is spiritually true that the sky should weep at Adam's fall. 'I have never given way to my own feelings in personifying natural objects', says a late letter, 'without bringing all that I have said to a rigorous aftertest of good sense'.¹³ But surely Wordsworth's good sense is not that of other men: it includes the belief in a profound identity of man and nature, in the good heart of the ass, in the flower enjoying the air it breathes, and in the 'unutterable love in the silent faces of the clouds'.¹⁴ Imagination is

thus linked and fused with Wordsworth's view, or rather feeling, of the world as a unity and community of living beings.

Wordsworth rarely uses what is the critically most fruitful element in the theory of imagination: the insight into the wholeness and totality of a work of art. After alluding to August Wilhelm Schlegel, he praises Shakespeare's 'judgement in the selection of his materials, and in the manner in which he has made them, heterogeneous as they often are, constitute a unity of their own, and contribute all to one great end'.¹⁵ His objections to eighteenth century poetry are frequently directed against something which could be called its atomism: the 'glaring hues of diction' which show no appreciation of a 'pure and refined scheme of harmony'; or the imagery of Macpherson, 'defined, insulated, dislocated, in absolute independent singleness'.¹⁶ A standard of unity or rather of continuous flow is also at the basis of his criticism of *ollave rime* in an epic poem such as Tasso's, or behind his praise of the sonnet for its 'pervading sense of intense unity'. 'Instead of looking at this composition as a piece of architecture, making a whole out of three parts, I have been much in the habit of preferring the image of an orbicular body; a sphere, or a dewdrop'.¹⁷ The analogy from building is rejected in favour of an analogy, not from an organisation but from the roundness of a geometrical sphere.

Wordsworth thus holds a position in the history of criticism which must be called ambiguous or transitional. He inherits from neoclassicism a theory of the imitation of nature to which he gives, however, a specific social twist; he inherits from the eighteenth century a view of poetry as passion and emotion which he again modifies by his description of the poetic process as 'recollection in tranquillity'. He takes up rhetorical ideas about the effect of poetry but extends and amplifies them into a theory of the social effect of literature, binding society in a spirit of love. But he also adopts, in order to meet the exigencies of his mystical experiences, a theory of poetry in which imagination holds the central place as a power of unification and ultimate insight into the unity of the world. Though Wordsworth left only a small body of criticism, it is rich in survivals, suggestions, anticipations, and personal insights.

WORDSWORTH AND THE TRANSFORMING IMAGINATION' (1969)

F.A.W. Heffernan

For Wordsworth, imagination is a power that acts upon the objects of the visible world. Once set in motion by creative sensibility, it behaves like a natural force, dominating the universe by transforming its sights and sounds. As mist converts a rolling landscape into a ghostly sea, the imagination turns the call of a cuckoo into a voice of mystery. It transfigures the world, investing natural phenomena with an almost supernatural phosphorescence. But its impact is just as powerful on the words the poet uses. In the years that followed the Preface of 1800, Wordsworth came to realize that if the imagination is to work its alchemy on natural objects, it must also make its mark on 'the real language of men'.

Wordsworth's concept of the imagination as a power is based on his belief that nature provides a model for the creative transformations wrought by man. In the days when his conversations with Coleridge 'turned frequently on the two cardinal points of poetry', the two men found in nature a sanction or archetype for the poetic fusion of novelty and truth. Coleridge reported their discovery years later. "The sudden charm', he wrote, 'which accidents of light and shade, which moon-light or sun-set diffused over a known and familiar landscape, appeared to represent the practicability of combining both' (*BL*, vol. II. sig. B³).¹ This movement to nature as guide and authority, so typical of Wordsworth in all of his thinking, is fundamental to his concept of the imagination.

We have seen that Wordsworth postulates a perfect harmony between nature and the mind of man. But we should note with care the basis of this harmony, the reason why the two are so compatible. As early as 1802, Wordsworth wrote that the poet 'considers man and nature as essentially adapted to each other, and the mind of man as naturally the mirror of the fairest and most interesting properties of nature' (*PW*, vol.II. p. 396). The key word here is 'mirror'. It clearly indicates that the consonance of mind and universe is founded on a vital correspondence, a profound *analogy* between their respective powers. In Wordsworth's view, man is the image and likeness of nature.

Wordsworth's sense of this vital correspondence permeates his poetry. Writing of his Cambridge days in Book III of *The Prelude*, completed in 1804, he tells us that 'deep analogies by thought supplied' enabled him to see moral and spiritual qualities in the natural objects about him (III 121-39).² Elsewhere he is more explicit. In a passage of the same period as the lines just cited, he suggests that a consciousness of analogy originates in the mind of the 'favoured' child, gradually emerging and expanding with the passage of time. As the child matures, he finds 'his image' in the universe; the 'inexhaustible' majesty of nature, abundantly manifest in the beauty, excellence, and sublimity of her countenance, appears before him as a fitting counterpart to the 'insatiate power, aspiration, and dignity of his own mind.'³ The child discovers much more than a simple harmony of attributes. Nature renders back to him his deepest self, so that what he sees is a vital analogy between the energies within him and the energies without. So it is with the American frontiersman described in *The Excursion*. Gazing down the mighty ribbon of the Mississippi, he beholds in it the image of 'his own unshackled life/And his innate capacities of soul' (III 933-5).

Because of this dynamic correspondence of forces, Wordsworth held that the creation of poetry imitates the action of creative power in the visible world. Coleridge, of course, had similar ideas; in 1801 he called the human mind *'the Image of the Creator'* (*LC*, vol.II, p.709), and three years later he described 'Imagination or the *modifying* Power' as 'a dim Analogue of Creation' (*LC*, vol. II, p. 1034). But Wordsworth need not have borrowed these insights from his formidable friend. By October, 1800, he had completed Book II of *The Prelude*,¹ and in this book he clearly indicates that perception is for him an *active* process. The infant shown to us is a 'creator' of the world about him, operating on it as 'an agent of the one great mind'(II 272-3). Furthermore, this operation demonstrates 'the first/Poetic spirit of our human life' (II 275-6), and therefore constitutes a paradigm of the creative act. Like the infant, the poet must imitate the living power manifest in nature herself; the exercise of imagination then becomes - as Wordsworth later called it - a 'God-like [function] of the Soul'.⁵

We can see this more clearly by examining Wordsworth's comments on the relation between poetry and nature. Plainly, he believed the two inseparable. In the Preface of 1800, when he says in effect that his poetry makes its appeal to 'certain inherent and indestructible qualities of the human mind', he links those qualities to 'certain powers in the great and permanent objects that act upon it, which are equally inherent and indestructible' (*PW*, vol. II, p. 389). But the link is more specific in *The Prelude*. There he explains that natural forms themselves infuse poetry with passion. With their noble influence, these forms can sway the poet's heart and mind; and if he captures the spirit of their influence in a work of his own, it becomes 'a power like one of Nature's' (XII 289-312). The words are more than empty abstractions, for throughout his life, Wordsworth believed that the energy of nature is precisely what the poet should incorporate in his work. Counseling a correspondent as late as 1830, he writes: 'You feel strongly; trust to those feelings, and your poem will take its shape and proportions as a tree does from the vital principle that actuates it'.⁶

Wordsworth's analogy does not simply involve the form of the tree and that of the poem. Instead, it embraces the kinds of *energy* that produce these forms. Each of them, tree and poem, is in Wordsworth's mind a living organism. Each is the outward articulation of an inner creative power, the manifestation of what he called "divine vitality" in a sonnet of his later years (*PW*, vol. III, p. 52). By the power of his imagination, therefore, he seeks to imitate in his poems the power of nature - revealed most vividly whenever it suddenly changes the face of an object. Such a change can have electric impact. 'By abrupt and unhabitual influence', he writes, nature sometimes

Doth make one object so impress itself
 Upon all others, and pervade them so
 That even the grossest minds must see and hear
 And cannot chuse but feel. (*Prelude*, XIII 80-4)

This was the kind of transformation that excited Wordsworth's imitative instincts. Many years after his composition of 'The Thorn', he told Isabella Fenwick: '[The poem] arose out of my observing, on the ridge of Quantock Hill, on a stormy day, a thorn which I had often passed in calm and bright weather without noticing it. I said to myself, "Cannot I by some invention do as much to make this Thorn permanently an impressive object as the storm has made it to my eyes at this moment ?", (*PW*, vol. II, p. 511). Clearly, Wordsworth saw himself as a kind of translator. To use the words of Coleridge, he had been struck by the 'sudden charm' of an arresting metamorphosis, by the action of change in a 'known and familiar' sight; his poem would be an imitation of that action, rendering into poetic terms an 'impressive' transformation wrought by nature.

We can see this process in a brief examination of the poem itself. An apparently negligible object emerges with sharp detail in the opening stanzas, graphically defined as if by a camera in perfect focus: it is an old, gray, knotted, and apparently stunted little tree - overgrown with tufts of moss that seem determined to drag it down. By this photographic concentration alone, of course, Wordsworth makes the object seize our attention. But what especially arrests us is the atmosphere of pathetic desolation which surrounds the tree, stubbornly erect and yet 'a wretched thing forlorn'. Even before we learn of its connection with the forsaken mother, the appeal of the object is instantly affective, because the poet transforms it into something implicitly human. In so doing, he attempts to make it as striking for the reader as the storm has made it for him. And he was clearly thinking of this attempt when he gave his earliest definition of the imagination. In 1800, in a note to "The Thorn", he called it 'the faculty which produces impressive ideas out of simple elements' (*PW*, vol. II, p. 512).

Wordsworth knew, of course, that subtle transformation did not penetrate 'the grossest minds'. They could impress the sensitive alone, who would cooperate with nature to receive her gift, and 'catch it by an instinct. Say rather by an intellectual sense. Or attribute, inevitably fine.⁷ Newton Stallknecht is right when he says that Wordsworth often thought of man as a spectator to the artistry of nature; but the spectator must be singularly equipped to appreciate that artistry. Above all, a poet must be able to recognize a transformation when he sees one, catching from it what Wordsworth calls

an 'impression'. Only then can he translate into poetry the power of nature. Describing the background of *Descriptive Sketches*, Wordsworth said in 1843: 'Nothing that I ever saw in nature left a more delightful impression on my mind than that which I have attempted, alas, how feebly ! to convey to others in these lines'. (*PW*, vol. I, p. 324). Wordsworth has sought to create for his reader the kind of impression that nature has made upon him. But because of his creative sensibility, the impression he has received is itself, in part, one of his own making. He illustrates this point in his late remarks on another poem 'Yarrow Unvisited'. Commenting on his description of a single swan, floating 'double, swan and shadow', on a still lake, Wordsworth reportedly spoke as follows to Aubrey de Vere:

Never could I have written 'swans' in the plural. The scene when I saw it, with its still and dim lake, under the dusky hills, was one of utter loneliness: there was *one* swan, and one only, stemming the water, and the pathetic loneliness of the region gave importance to the one companion of that swan, its own white image in the water. It was for that reason that I recorded the Swan and the Shadow. Had there been many swans and many shadows, they would have implied nothing as regards the character of the scene; and I should have said nothing about them. (*PrW*, vol. III, pp. 487-8)

This passage surely explains why Wordsworth sometimes speaks of 'imaginative impressions' as the sources of his poetry.⁸ Whatever the precise meaning of the phrase, it is evident that such impressions are in part the products of his own creative energy. As he receives the scene, he intensifies the atmosphere of loneliness with which nature has already invested it. He then conveys this impression in his poetry by imitating the action of nature's power, by transforming the objects of the universe even as nature herself has transformed them. Wordsworth describes the process in an early book of *The Prelude*. At Cambridge, he says, he sought

To apprehend all passions and all moods
Which time, and place, and season do impress
Upon the visible universe, and work
Like changes there by force of my own mind.

(III 85-88)

The language is clear, if a little abstract. But with the cunning of a true poet, Wordsworth saves his richest treatment of transformation for the concluding book of *The Prelude*. He tells us there the story of an unforgettable experience —the sight of hills one summer evening in a heavy mist. It is true, of course, that others had commented on phenomena like this, noting the harmonizing and beautifying effect of vapor upon a landscape.⁹ But it remained for Wordsworth profoundly convinced as he was of the correspondence between nature and the human mind - to see in the transformation wrought by mist a perfect model of imaginative transformation, an archetypal embodiment of imaginative power. This is why his account of a known and familiar spectacle has extraordinary impact.

First of all, Wordsworth describes what he saw from the peak of Snowdon, when the hills about him were quilted by a moonlit fog and the roar of distant waters ascended through a chasm in the vapor. Nature had transformed nearly everything. The mist appeared to him a 'huge sea', and the hundred hills were living things, heaving up 'their dusky backs.../Ail over this still Ocean' (XIII 43-6). After a time the mist dissolved, and the poet mediated on the meaning of the scene. It seemed to him, he says, the 'perfect image of a mighty Mind' (XIII 69), for it showed

That domination which [Nature] oftentimes
Exerts upon the outward face of things,
....moulds them, and endues, abstracts, combines...

(XIII 77-9)

Nature was sculptor, painter, and poet at once, magisterially transforming the landscape 'as if with an imaginative power'.¹⁰ This 'as if line is crucial. It appears only in a fragmentary draft of the Snowdon passage, but it gives us a clue to one of the most vexing questions raised by that passage: just what is the 'mighty Mind' of the early version, or the lower-case 'mind' of the later one? The answer, I think, can be best approached by means of an algebraic proportion. What Wordsworth witnessed at Snowdon was the transforming effect of mist and moonlight upon distant hills. This effect struck him as very similar to the transforming effect that he, as a poet, often had upon the images he used in his poetry. In poetry, he believed, such an effect was produced by the imagination. But what produced it in nature? We have three givens and one unknown - all the requisites for a standard algebraic proportion:

$$\frac{\text{human imagination}}{\text{transformation of images in poetry}} = \frac{X}{\text{transformation of natural objects in actual experience}}$$

In ordinary English, the human imagination is to the transformation of images in poetry as X is to the transformation of natural objects in actual experience. With a formula something like this, not articulated but certainly felt, Wordsworth groped his way toward a definition of X, the unknown factor. What he concluded, I think, was this: the transformation of natural objects before his very eyes was 'presumptive evidence' a favourite phrase of Wordsworth's - that something like the human imagination was at work upon them. It was a mighty mind, an archetype of the human imagination; it exercised itself on natural objects 'as if with imaginative power. What Wordsworth saw at Snowdon was an image, emblem, or shadow of that mind, a demonstration of its power for the human senses. But only in the visible demonstration - only in the emblem - could he perceive the mighty mind. In the Platonic language of the later *Prelude*, therefore, he ascended from 'sense ...to ideal form' (XIV 76). He went from the known to the unknown, believing that in its ideal form as in its sensible manifestation, the transforming power of nature must somehow correspond to the transforming power of his own imagination.

Can we give the 'mind' a specific name ? It is extremely tempting to call it God, for at various times elsewhere, Wordsworth himself suggests that the human imagination is a 'god-like' faculty. It is tempting, too, to explain his concept of nature's 'imaginative power' in Coleridgean terms: to say that for Wordsworth also, the archetype of the human imagination is 'the eternal act of creation in the infinite !' Am' (*BL*, vol. I, p 202). But in fairness to Wordsworth, we must resist these temptations. In the early version of *The Prelude*, Wordsworth tells us that the mighty Mind is exalted by 'the sense of God' (XIII 72), which surely implies that it is not identical with God. Further, even though Wordsworth seems to separate the human imagination from the 'Power' of nature, which is its 'Counterpart/And Brother' (XIII 89-90), he does not clearly separate it from the 'mighty Mind'. There are troublesome ambiguities in both versions of the Snowdon passage. In interpreting either version, can we impute absolute infinite to a mind that 'feeds upon infinity' (XIII 70 and XIV 71) ? In the later version, can we impute absolute transcendence to 'a mind *sustained*/By recognitions of transcendent power' (XIV 77)? None of these questions, I think, can be answered with certainty or precision. They show us that Wordsworth was stuck on the horns of the human dilemma, yearning to define the infinite but able to do so only in finite, anthropomorphic terms. He could not escape the limitations of language itself. Consequently, even if he thought of the 'mind' as the divine, transcendent *archetype* of the human imagination, he seems to describe it as if it were the human imagination itself.

Yet one thing is clear. Wordsworth definitely finds in nature evidence for the existence of a 'Power' which behaves like the human imagination. His own experience - as both a poet and an observer of nature-tells him that this power is the duplicate of 'the glorious faculty/Which higher minds bear with them as their own'. These exalted creatures rival the feats of nature. 'They...send abroad', he says, 'Like transformation, for themselves create/A like existence' (XIII 89-95). Wordsworth wrote these lines about 1805, but he might well have been thinking of them when he composed the first of his essays on epitaphs in 1810. Advising against detailed biography in an epitaph, he states: "The character of a deceased friend or beloved kinsman is not seen, no nor ought to be seen, otherwise than as a tree through a tender haze or a luminous mist, that spiritualises and beautifies it' (*PrW*, vol. II, p. 36). Instinctively, Wordsworth

explains the art of sympathetic portraiture by reference to a natural phenomenon. From the summit of Snowdon he had witnessed living proof of the analogy between natural power and poetic creation; the experience left a permanent stamp upon his mind. For the rest of his life, he firmly believed that when a poet transforms the visible universe by the power of his imagination he imitates the creative action of nature herself.

