

English Literature of the Romantic Period, 1798-1832
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Backgrounds to the English Romantics-The Self and Imagination

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In this session, the fifth lesson for the week, we will be looking at the ideas of the Self and Imagination as part of the backgrounds to the study of the English Romantics.

Individualism remains the key theme in all English Romantics, particularly in the case of Wordsworth. Proceeding from political and philosophical ideas about the rights of individuals, English Romanticism was built upon an entire creed of individual intelligence, individual cognition, individual responses and individual consciousness to contexts and events. In other words, the Romantics were concerned with the self. The ‘self’ was perceived as the centre of all worldly things. This draws upon European philosophical thought of, for instance, Immanuel Kant who treated subjectivity as inherently autonomous and self-determined and which leads on to moral agency. Kant famously defined autonomy as the ground of the dignity of human nature and of every rational nature.

The Romantic Self, most explicitly poetically revealed in Wordsworth's *The Prelude*, is one that transcends or responds to the immediate setting and thus creates the world around him.

Keats's description of Wordsworth as a poet of the egotistical sublime best captures this definition of the Romantic Self, that the world exists because *I* perceive it, that it is my consciousness that the world centers around. The Self is self-contained. I own my Self. The Self owns himself, is defined by himself and is a coherent consciousness that perceives the world. In a sense the reflecting Self ‘can recognize the unity of the knower (self) and the known (self),’ in Thomas Pfau’s account.

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What is the connection between the Self and the poetic occasion? One might look at Wordsworth’s *The Excursion* to better understand:

Of truth, of Grandeur, Beauty, Love and Hope,
And melancholy subdued by Faith;
Of blessed consolations in distress;

Of moral strength, and intellectual Power;
Of joy in widest commonality spread;
Of the individual mind that keeps her own
Inviolable Retirement, subject there
To Conscience only, and the law supreme
Of that Intelligence that governs all.

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In many of Wordsworth's poems it is always an 'I' that observes, not just the eye, but the observing "I".

The "I" dominates everything else. But reflecting on the Self is what makes the Self. That is, in a rather complicated way of thinking about it, the Self posits itself *for itself* and not necessarily for an intelligence or consciousness external to it.

The "Wordsworthian antinomies," as they have been termed by Nicola Trott, consist of "shaping spirit and shapeless impulse, of spontaneity and self control, and of overflow of powerful feelings that can be produced by one who has thought long and deeply." It is from this that imagination emerges, in Trott's reading. In a text like *Prelude*, scholars see it as the poetry of self-interrogation but also of thanksgiving.

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Given the Romantic emphasis on the Self and their constant exploration of the nature of their consciousness, it is not surprising that much Romantic poetry is devoted to the autobiographical theme. In fact, practically all the Wordsworth is an autobiographical exercise. Wordsworth's oft-cited description of *The Prelude* as mapping the "growth of a poet's mind" summarizes the autobiographical theme.

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There are variants of the autobiographical theme as well. Percy Shelley saw the individual poet as the genius who articulated truths and prophecies about mankind. In his famous declaration, "poets are the unacknowledged legislators of mankind," he saw the poet as a socially relevant individual and the function of poetry into something more than an individual's emotional response to the world. The poet-as-genius is now rendered into the poet-as-prophet, but both of course, centralise the poet and his genius. The poet as genius is a

Wordsworthian ideal, while the poet as prophet is Shelley's reworking of the theme. The poet is of course invariably male, let us not forget that, in the Romantic patriarchal gendered notion of poetry itself.

This argument in Shelley gave poetry a social function and it moves away from the Wordsworthian idea of poetry as a mere overflow of powerful feelings recollected in tranquility. In other words, in Wordsworth, the poetic output, the poetic consciousness, the poetic conscience is an exercise in self-indulgence whereas Shelley's is something which has a more social function and to which people must pay attention.

This theme about the primacy of the prophetic imagination of poet is best captured in Shelley's famous "West Wind" poem:

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Drive my dead thoughts over the universe
Like withered leaves to quicken a new birth!
And, by the incantation of this verse,
Scatter, as from an unextinguished hearth
Ashes and sparks, my words among mankind!

Shelley here speaks about the social relevance of poetry. He does not say, *watch me observe myself*. He does not say, *watch me develop my own mind*, which is how Wordsworth's - what I call - rather self-indulgent poetic oeuvre works. Shelley is actually saying, *I have something to say to the world and the world would do well to heed to what I am saying*.

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M. H. Abrams famously argued (1965) that to see Wordsworth's "Tintern Abbey" or Keats's "Nightingale" ode as simply nature lyrics is reductive, for then one would miss the incessant attention paid to the state of the mind. In the Romantic lyric, according to Abrams's influential argument, the speaker faces a personal crisis, a moral dilemma and/or resolves an emotional problem - and this is what constitutes the lyric in the Romantic age. In other words, M. H. Abrams is actually reinforcing what we have just been saying - that for people like Wordsworth, there is an internal contradiction, internal dilemma or internal conflict within the soul or consciousness which they are trying to resolve.

For example in Coleridge's "Dejection" ode, Keats's "Nightingale" ode and Shelley's "West Wind" ode, the speaker reflects upon his own situation and seeks an understanding of

his actions and state of mind in passages such as, “I fall upon the thorns of life, I bleed” (Shelley) and “Now afflictions bow me down to earth: /Nor care I that they rob me of my mirth” (Coleridge).

Coleridge’s lines in the Dejection ode, “one cannot hope from outward forms to win the passion in the life whose fountains are within” are also relevant here.

Thus what M. H. Abrams means is that the English Romantic writers were primarily concerned with conflicts internal to them, internal to their consciousness, to their conscience, and to their moral dilemmas.

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If that was the idea of the self, let us now turn to the other key component of the English Romantics, Imagination. William Blake writes in “Auguries of Innocence,”

To see a world in a grain of sand
And a heaven in a wild flower,
Hold infinity in the palm of your hand
And eternity in an hour.

These four lines could very well be the manifesto for a theory of the imagination among the English Romantics. To see the world, the entire universe in just a grain, the heavens in just a flower, and to have the palm of your hand encompass the universe and entire time frame, temporality, in an hour is something that demands an extraordinary act of imagination.

Blake is not speaking of the world as a grain of sand, no. He is referring instead, to the perception of the world in a grain of sand. He is referring to the ability to imagine in a grain of sand an entire, infinite universe and eternity.

In other words, Blake is saying your perception, your consciousness, your imagination can build worlds. They can build worlds in everyday objects such as sand or flowers.

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This leads us to the most frequently used term in the English Romantics, imagination. The Romantics treated imagination – used, frequently, with ‘poetic genius’ – as the very opposite of rationality and reason. More importantly, the Romantics saw imagination as an active, dynamic process that not only perceived nature but also constructed the very reality of the world around us. As Blake would state in “A Vision of the Last Judgment”,

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I assert for My Self that I do not behold the outward Creation and that to me it is hindrance and not action; It is as the dirt upon my feet, No part of Me. “What,” it will be Question’d, “When the Sun rises, do you not see a round disk of fire somewhat like a Guinea? “

O no, no. I see an innumerable company of the Heavenly host crying “Holy, Holy, Holy is the Lord God Almighty.” I question not my Corporeal or Vegetative eye any more than I would Question a window concerning a Sight. I look thro’ it and not with it.

What Blake is saying here is there is no outward reality: what reality exists is created through the act of perception and imagination. The above passage is a forceful statement of the validity of inner vision and imagination as a creator of the world itself. Blake, in fact, called the world of Imagination the “world of eternity”. Shelley echoes Blake when, in his famous *Defence of Poetry*, he declared, “all things exist as they are perceived; at least in relation to the percipient . . . it [poetry] compels us to feel that which we perceive, and to imagine that which we know. It creates anew the universe”. Here, Shelley links imagination to reality but also foregrounds the poetic imagination for its ability to make us look into what we know and what we feel.

Imagination is not just about making a connection to reality but makes us look into ourselves, *what is it we see and how do we see it*. What does that mean? In a previous session, we spoke about the self for itself. That is basically what an imagination also does. Imagination is the mind observing impressions of the world but also the mind observing itself.

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Coleridge would speak about this when he spoke about an “intellectual intuition” - that sounds like an oxymoron - that enables the mind to synthesize the world's contrasts and differences into an organic whole (a process for which he coined the term “esemplastic” meaning to “unify” or “mould”). This is his famous definition in *Biographia Literaria* (1817) in which he distinguishes between two forms of 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 former 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.

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This unification, (to “idealise and to unify” in Coleridge's phrase) of the opposites and contrasts into a whole is the organic view of the world, and one that is made possible, according to the Romantics, by the faculty of the imagination. The faculty of imagination and poetic genius were linked, as we say to prophecy and visions, especially in Blake’s longer works – with their own vast mythos, complex symbolism and powerful imagery (Frye 1969, and now with a useful dictionary by Dammon 1988).

The end of imagination and the loss of innocence is also Wordsworth's subject. In the famous “Immortality ode” wherein he asks, “Whither is fled the visionary gleam? / Where is it now, the glory and the dream?” Blake, Wordsworth and others wrote “visionary poems” where the images and ideas that came to the poet in the midst of a trance or a dreamlike state were recorded. Such poems enabled the Romantic poet to set himself up as a visionary genius whose mental abilities and processes were far removed, or evolved, in comparison with other humans. Wordsworth’s “A Night Piece” (in *Lyrical Ballads*), Byron's “Darkness”, Shelley's “A Vision of the Sea”, Coleridge's “Kubla Khan” are famous examples of this genre. These are also poems that reinforce the Romantic idea of spontaneity of feeling, and the emotional response to events and places.

To recap,

There are two principal components that influence practically all Romantic writing, the idea of the self and the idea of the imagination.

The Self as we have seen varies. In Wordsworth, it is a rather self-indulgent one. The eye turned upon oneself where the observing I, the perceptive, perceptual self is at the center of the universe. And the world exists for the observing I to watch and perceive. But for Shelley, the poetic Self was not just an observing Self. It was a prophetic voice and Shelley's “Ode to the West Wind” as a case in point would insist that the world pay attention to the poet, the unacknowledged legislator of mankind, as he would famously put it.

For Blake, imagination was central because imagination determined what one understood as the real itself. For people like Blake, imagination was your access to reality. For Coleridge, who was attempting to theorize imagination, secondary imagination was what enabled you to unify and idealize, to bring disparate things together. As we have seen he would, Coleridge would say, to dissolve, to diffuse, to dissipate but to recreate. Thus, it is not just a question of perceiving things, to be able to see unity in the world was central to the imagination.

These two key concepts will work across the entire range of English Romantics.