

The EYE of the
BEHOLDER

How to See the World
Like a Romantic Poet

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PREFACE

If you were to ask a random group of American college students how many of them had written at least one poem in their life, you would likely see about a third of their hands go up. But if you were to follow your first question with a second—“how many of you have ever written a poem that was not in the first person?”—you would see most of those hands go back down. I do not exaggerate when I say that in the minds of most Americans—students or otherwise—poetry in particular and the arts in general are considered to be mostly, if not exclusively, a form of self-expression. Such has been the common wisdom for the past two centuries. Could you go back in time, however, to any period before the Romantic Age and poll a group of poets and critics as to what poetry and the arts were, you would be hard pressed to find a single person who would answer that poetry is a form of self-expression. They might have told you that the role of poetry was to imitate nature or to glorify God or to celebrate heroism or to explore theological, philosophical, and scientific beliefs or to teach and please or to woo women or to dramatize human character, choice and motivation—but not to express in rhyme their depression and angst or to work through personal crises or to project their inner mood onto the external world.

True, one can find exceptions to the rule. In the lyrics of Sappho and Catullus, the sonnets of Shakespeare and Donne, and the love poems of Dante and Petrarch, one hears the authentic, often anguished voice of the poet. Still, none of these writers would have reduced poetry to self-expression. The idea that one’s diary or journal should serve as the primary raw material for serious poetry would have seemed foreign to

nearly all poets who lived before the French Revolution. The role of the poet was not to air in public his personal struggles nor spin “original” ideas out of his head nor remake the world in accordance with his own unique, radically individual genius; rather, it was to use his creative gifts and craftsman-like talents to give a more perfect and lasting shape to pre-existing material: a shape that squared with beauty, that resonated with truth, and that aspired to goodness.

All of that changed during the Romantic Age. Born out of the French Revolution and its radical faith that a nation could be shaped and altered by the dreams and visions of its people, British Romantic Poetry was founded on a similar belief that the objects and realities of our world—whether they be natural or human—are not fixed in stone but can be molded and transformed by the visionary eye of the poet. This key romantic notion—that things are as they are perceived, that the external world is, in part, a projection of the internal mood of the poet—found its first full flowering in two collections of poetry that form a sort of arch or doorway to the rich and vibrant world of British Romantic Poetry: William Blake’s *Songs of Innocence and Experience* and Wordsworth and Coleridge’s *Lyrical Ballads*. Were I writing an exhaustive study of the subject, I would begin by considering the work of such eighteenth-century pre-Romantic poets as James Thomson, Edward Young, Thomas Gray, Thomas Chatterton, Thomas Gray, William Cowper, and (especially) Robert Burns. For the purposes of this book, however, I will narrow my focus to these two age-defining collections.

Accordingly, I will devote most of Part I to a close study of Blake’s *Songs*, a work whose deceptively simple, nursery-rhyme-like stanzas mask a depth of mature thought and insight. I shall show how, in these timeless poems, the same images and events take on a different coloring, form, and reality when viewed through the eyes of innocence and experience. After explaining how Blake uses the terms “innocence” and “experience” to define not external realities but internal perceptions, I will contrast the pastoral vision of the former with the angst-ridden, overly-self-conscious vision of the latter. I will conclude Part I with a look at Blake’s brilliant but esoteric mini-epic, *The Marriage of Heaven and Hell*, a work that offers us Romanticism in its most radical form. Here, and throughout the book, I will attempt to show that though Romanticism brings with it the promise of freshness, growth, and freedom, it also carries with it a dark side.

Although my analysis of the Romantics and their poems will be traditional in focus and content, I should mention here that in my handling

of Blake I will be going off somewhat on my own. In my own personal reading of Blake, one that is not meant to reflect the views of traditional scholars or of the publisher of this book, I chart a movement in which Blake slowly but inexorably morphs from a position that is fairly close to orthodox (incarnational) Christianity to one that is essentially Gnostic. Part II will take up *Lyrical Ballads*, another work whose simple stanzas are more complex than they might at first seem. I shall show how Romantic poets can present both common, mundane objects with a freshness and a wonder that lends them an air of the mystical, and strange, supernatural objects with an emotional intensity and psychological truth that makes them seem real and natural. I will conclude Part II by exploring both the joys and dangers of inspiration and “specialness” by a close look at three of Romanticism’s weirdest and most haunting lyrics.

In the third and final part, I shall broaden the scope of the book to encompass a key Romantic movement—or turn—that undergirds many of the greatest works of the Romantic Age and that makes them read like private journals set to verse. The movement is an internal one from despair to hope, crisis to resolution; the turn an emotional and psychological one from feelings of dejection and isolation to a renewed and restored sense of oneness with nature and the self. Although this crisis/resolution motif is sometimes played out solely within a present moment, in the more complex lyrics, it includes a brief but terrifying rupture between the poet’s past and present selves, a sense of alienation between what the poet once was and now is. It was the Romantics who were the first to tap fully the power of memory (or recollection), the first great explorers of the dark, hidden areas of our psyche. Indeed, a century before Freud and Piaget, the Romantics had already explored and mapped the unconscious mind and defined, in some of the most beautiful verses ever written, the stages of childhood through which each of us must progress.

The first half of Part III will focus on the central crisis/resolution poems of Wordsworth and Coleridge. These two poets, along with Blake, make up the first great generation of Romantic poets: those who grew up during the French Revolution and who saw their hopes for political freedom both raised and dashed by the success and failure of that great event. It is the work of these three poets that shall be my chief concern in this book. I will, however, in the second half of Part III, devote two final chapters to the poetry of Shelley and Keats. Together with Byron, these two poets make up the second great generation of Romantic poets: those too young to be disillusioned themselves but who inherited the internalized angst

that the Revolution produced in their Romantic predecessors. I shall trace in the poetry of Shelley and Keats a kind of internal dissonance between the Romantic desire for pure, unmediated inspiration and joy and its dark opposite—the tendency toward over-self-consciousness. In nearly all of their greatest poetry, Shelley and Keats long to escape from their heavy, burdensome existences into a perfect, aesthetic world of process in stasis: an intense state of suspension in which there is, simultaneously and paradoxically, both static perfection and dynamic growth. Unable to find this perfection in the world around them, they seek it in the higher worlds of nature, art, and love. In songbirds whose melody is pure and un-self-conscious, in ancient statues and urns that seem to dwell in an eternal state of beauty, in the perfect embrace of lovers who seem able to freeze time by the passion of their love, Shelley and Keats encounter a vision of life as it should be lived: simple, direct, emphatic.

Unlike many of the books written on Romanticism, which devote many pages to the poets and few pages to their poetry, I shall keep my focus firmly on the poems themselves. Indeed, in order to facilitate that focus, I shall overlook such epic-length Romantic poems as Wordsworth's *Prelude*, Byron's *Don Juan*, Shelley's *Prometheus Unbound*, and Keats's *Lamia* and confine myself almost exclusively to short lyrical poetry. Aside from the lengthy *Rime of the Ancient Mariner* and two prose pieces that are central to the thesis of this book (Blake's *Marriage of Heaven and Hell* and Wordsworth's "Preface to *Lyrical Ballads*"), all the works covered in this book will be brief and in verse. As I hope to draw the reader as closely and intimately as possible into the life of these poems, I shall be using very few footnotes. Instead, I will provide a bibliographical essay that will both indicate some of the secondary sources that have influenced my own view of the Romantics and provide the lay reader with accessible biographies of each poet and critical studies of their work.