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WORDSWORTH, COLERIDGE AND THE POETIC REVOLUTION

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In my previous lecture, I suggested that one of the key figures in the ferment that led up to the astonishing decade that began with the fall of the Bastille in 1789 was Jean-Jacques Rousseau, whose *Social Contract* laid many of the intellectual foundations of the revolution. I also suggested that, along with the political revolution, there was a revolution in sensibility, in attitudes to the emotions, to women, to sexual relations and to children. I will say more about childhood next time.

In the second half of this lecture, I want to return to that remark of A. W. Schlegel concerning Goethe's *Sorrows of Young Werther*, which I quoted last time: the novel, he said, was 'a declaration of the rights of feeling'. Rousseau, too, offered such a declaration in the form of a novel: [2] his *Nouvelle Héloïse* was the most widely read and widely imitated novels of the eighteenth century. The historian of the book Robert Darnton reckons that it was the bestselling secular book of the entire century, with over seventy editions in print by 1800. The story goes that it was so popular that publishers could not print enough copies to keep up with the demand, so they rented it out by the day or even the hour. Rousseau was overwhelmed with fan mail, telling him of the tears, swoons and ecstasies provoked in his readers. A modern reworking of the medieval story of Héloïse and Abelard, it tells the story of a passionate love affair that crosses the boundaries of class, religious piety and decorum. The full title was *Julie, ou la nouvelle Héloïse*, though when first published in Amsterdam in 1761 it was called *Lettres de deux amans* – 'letters of two lovers, living in a small town at the foot of the Alps'. The lover is Julie's tutor, Saint-Preux. Under the *ancien régime* a posh girl cannot marry her tutor, especially if he is a holy man. But living in the sublime landscape of the Alps and spending time together doing things like rowing on a beautiful lake, they cannot resist their passions. Their affair must, however, come to an end when upper-class Julie dutifully marries a Baron chosen for her by her father. Saint-Preux goes off on a world tour. Six years later he returns and is engaged once more, this time as tutor to Julie's children. They live happily and virtuously together, all passion duly restrained, enjoying a simple country life. But Julie has an epiphany when her child almost drowns: she has never stopped loving Saint-Preux, and soon she expires as if from pure emotional excess.

For readers, the book thus demonstrated the power of passion over the demands of duty and the social order. The Catholic Church duly placed it on the index of prohibited books. But, however often priests and moralists inveighed from pulpit and pamphlet against the dangers of novel-reading, especially for women, the authorities could not prevent the spread of the cult of 'sensibility' – and there was no literary form more suited to the expression of extreme emotion than poetry.



So it was that in the spring of 1787, a London-based but cosmopolitan-inspired monthly journal called the *European Magazine* included in its poetry pages [3] the first published work of a young man on the brink of his seventeenth birthday. It was entitled ‘Sonnet on seeing Miss Helen Maria Williams Weep at a Tale of Distress’. The octave that forms its first half reads as follows:

She wept.—Life’s purple tide began to flow
In languid streams through every thrilling vein;
Dim were my swimming eyes—my pulse beat slow,
And my full heart was swell’d to dear delicious pain.
Life left my loaded heart, and closing eye;
A sigh recall’d the wanderer to my breast;
Dear was the pause of life, and dear the sigh
That call’d the wanderer home, and home to rest.

These few lines travel the road from Rousseau to Romanticism. ‘She wept’, as did so many readers of *Julie, ou la nouvelle Héloïse*, especially female ones. In connecting with a book – a tale of distress that might equally be a novel, a narrative poem or a true story – the reader also connects with the full tide of Life with a capital L. The heart reaches out in the spirit of fellow-feeling with suffering humanity. The key metaphor is that of a stream – a stream of consciousness, perhaps, that will eventually flow into the sea of the unconscious. There may be a whispered echo of Shakespeare’s famous lines in *Julius Caesar*, ‘There is a tide in the affairs of men, / Which taken at the flood ...’ We are, however, in the realm of sensibility, which is associated above all with women, not men. The fluvial imagery is then internalized: the poet’s eyes swim with tears in sympathy with those of Miss Helen Maria Williams, as she in turn weeps in sympathy with the distress about which she is reading. Life flows along the bloodstream, ‘thrilling’ the veins. And then the pulse slows and the heart is swelled to ‘dear delicious pain’. Sympathy, or what we would now call empathy brings, as a later and much greater poem would put it, ‘sensations sweet, / Felt in the blood, and felt along the heart’. *Sensations*, the swelling heart, the excited flow of blood in the veins, the beating of the pulse, the idea that pain might have something delicious about it, above all that verb *felt*: these are going to be key words in poetry for the next forty years. One might almost say that the entire sensibility of another precocious poet, John Keats, is bound within the nutshell of this cluster of images. Think of the ‘Ode to a Nightingale’ and its cry ‘Now more than ever seems it rich to die’.

At the core of this sonnet is the idea that a poem can offer a momentary ‘pause of life’. In momentarily suspending what a later sonnet would call the ‘getting and spending’ of daily routine in which we ‘lay waste our powers’, poetry can call the wanderer home, bring us ‘home to rest’. But what we come home to is a bond, a sympathy for ‘the still sad music of humanity’. You will have guessed the identity of the teenage poet by now. The sonnet in the *European Magazine* was signed ‘Axiologus’: *logos*, Words, *axion*, Worth. It is indeed a poem about the worth of words, the power of poetry. Wordsworth will go on, in company with his friend Samuel Taylor Coleridge, to make unprecedented claims for that worth, for poetry as a form of salvation, a revolution of the self.

Who, then, was Miss Helen Maria Williams? Born in 1761, she and her sister and half-sister were brought up by her mother in Berwick-upon-Tweed after her father died while she was an infant. The premature death of a father and its effect on a child’s sensibility will also be a key to Wordsworth. Helen Maria wrote poems from an early age. Brought to London in 1781, she was taken up by a Presbyterian minister called Dr Andrew Kippis. He wrote a preface praising her first published poem, *Edwin and Eltruda*, published when she was just twenty-one years old. Set



in the time of the English civil war, it tells the story of lovers whose families fight on opposite sides and it ends with their tragic death. Think *Romeo and Juliet*, with a dash of *La nouvelle Héloïse*, particularly in the character of Eltruda, who is a young woman of extreme benevolence, her sympathy extending to every living thing:

For the bruise'd insect on the waste,
A sigh would heave her breast;
And oft her careful hand replac'd
The linnet's falling nest.

The naming of a specific species of finch; the tender care for a bird's nest: such details prefigure the delicate descriptions of the greatest of all the Romantic poets of nature, John Clare, of whom we will hear a little in our fifth lecture of the season. One may also see the young Helen Maria Williams anticipating Wordsworth at his best. Eltruda is compared to a 'lonely flower' that 'smiles in the desert vale'.¹ That is a conventional enough image, an echo of Thomas Gray's famous lines in his 'Elegy written in a Country Churchyard': 'Full many a flower is born to blush unseen / And waste its sweetness on the desert air'. But in their rhythm of alternating tetrameters and trimeters (four- and three-stress lines), the following lines from *Edwin and Eltruda* feel very like a dry run for Wordsworth's mysterious, mesmerizing Lucy poems that were published in the second, 1800, edition of *Lyrical Ballads*. [4] Thus Williams:

So liv'd in solitude, unseen,
This lovely, peerless maid;
So grac'd the wild, sequester'd scene,
And blossom'd in the shade.²

And Wordsworth:

She dwelt among th' untrodden ways
Beside the springs of Dove,
A Maid whom there were none to praise
And very few to love.

A Violet by a mossy Stone
Half-hidden from the Eye!
—Fair as a star when only one

Is shining in the sky!

The thing that is unique to Wordsworth is the intrusion of the poet's self in the final stanza, signaled by a startling exclamatory pause and the heartache of the closing line:

¹ *Poems*, vol. 1, p. 65.

² *Ibid*, p. 66.



She *liv'd* unknown, and few could know
When Lucy ceas'd to be;
But she is in her Grave, and oh!
The difference to me.

Women were cautious about exposing their identity in print – like all the novels which Jane Austen would publish in her lifetime, Williams' first book of poetry was anonymous. But in 1784 she boldly put her name on the title-page of an epic poem called *Peru*. Two years later, she gathered her early works together with many new ones in a two-volume collection simply entitled *Poems*. It was published by the method of subscription, whereby purchasers paid up front to cover the cost of production. Over fifteen hundred people signed up, a remarkable number for a volume of poetry by a young woman.

Among Williams' readers (though not subscribers) was the teenage Wordsworth. He did not literally *see* Miss Helen Maria Williams weeping at a tale of distress. He *read* her poems and projected an image of her as the sympathetic poet. His sonnet was almost certainly inspired by a passage in *Peru*. Williams' epic concerns the Spanish massacre of the Incas. It is a manifestation of her anti-imperial, pacifist sensibility. In a footnote, she writes, in anticipation of the coming revolutions such as that led by Toussaint L'Ouverture in the Caribbean, that 'there is much reason to hope, that these injured nations may recover the liberty of which they have been so cruelly deprived'. *Liberty* is going to be another of our watchwords. At the climax of *Peru*, Williams introduced a personification of Sensibility, weeping for the Incas. A visionary figure descends from the clouds: 'It lights on earth—mild vision! gentle form— / 'Tis Sensibility!' Then, 'Wet with the dew of tears', the 'ray of pity' beaming from her eyes, she addresses

Ye to whose yielding hearts my power endears
The transport blended with delicious tears,
The bliss that swells to agony the breast,
The sympathy that robs the soul of rest.³

One can see where the language of Wordsworth's sonnet comes from. His clever device is to elide this figure with its creator: he makes Helen Maria Williams into the very embodiment of Sensibility. His reading is fully justified by the presence in her collection of a poem called 'To Sensibility', which argued – against the (nearly always male) critics of what we might call the School of Sensibility – that strong emotion, weeping especially, is an essential part of what it is to be human because it answers to the moral imperative to feel for others and show benevolence towards them, or, as Wordsworth puts it in the closing line of his sonnet written in response to his reading of her, 'To cheer the wand'ring wretch with hospitable light'.

In 1788, Williams published an anti-slavery poem, then early in 1790 her first novel appeared. Its very title, *Julia*, revealed the influence of Rousseau. And in a digression in its second volume, Williams introduces a new poem of her own, under the pretence that it is written by a friend of the loser in the novel's love-triangle. Written whilst he was in a terrible prison, but dreaming prophetically of the destruction of that place: it was called 'The Bastille, A Vision'.

³ *Peru*, Canto the Sixth, lines 216ff., 247-50



Soon after her novel was published, Helen Maria Williams set off for France. She arrived in Paris on the very eve of the first anniversary of the Fall of Bastille. She had gone straight into the eye of the revolutionary storm. Later in that year she published [5] her *Letters written in France, in the Summer 1790, to a friend in England; containing, various anecdotes relative to the French Revolution*. ‘I arrived in Paris’, she begins her first letter, ‘the day before the federation’; she gave thanks for the good fortune of a speedy journey: ‘Had the packet which conveyed me from Brighton to Dieppe sailed a few hours later; had the wind been contrary; in short, had I not reached Paris at the moment I did reach it, I should have missed the most sublime spectacle which, perhaps, was ever represented on the theatre of this earth’.⁴ Week by week, she reported from the front line, praising every aspect of the early days of the revolution:

It was the triumph of human kind; it was man asserting the noblest privileges of his nature; and it required but the common feelings of humanity to become in that moment a citizen of the world. For myself, I acknowledge that my heart caught with enthusiasm the general sympathy; my eyes filled with tears; and I shall never forget the sensations of that day, ‘while memory holds her seat in my bosom’.⁵

In the act of becoming one of her country’s few field correspondents at the scene of the epoch-making events, she moves her vocabulary of sensibility – heart, sympathy, tears, sensations – into the political arena.

On the very day of her arrival in Paris, a pair of Cambridge students who had just taken their third-year exams crossed the Channel at the beginning of a summer vacation walking tour of Europe. They spent that night of 13 July 1790 in Calais. The next day they witnessed the celebrations of the anniversary of Bastille day and the establishment of the ‘federation’ in the town of Ardres. The festivities were on a far smaller scale than those in which Helen Maria Williams rejoiced in Paris, but they were no less ardent. Years later, one of the two students – who was, of course, William Wordsworth – remembered the day in a sonnet addressed to his companion: [6]

Jones! when from Calais southward you and I
Travell’d on foot together; then this Way,
Which I am pacing now, was like the May
With festivals of new-born Liberty:
A homeless sound of joy was in the Sky;
The antiquated Earth, as one might say,
Beat like the heart of Man: songs, garlands, play,
Banners, and happy faces, far and nigh!⁶

The purpose of their holiday was picturesque tourism, not political engagement: they did not go to Paris, walking instead through rural France, then taking boats down the Saône and Rhone rivers on their way to the Monastery of the Grande Chartreuse, the Haute-Savoie, the vale of Chamonix and the sight of Mont Blanc. They crossed the Alps via the Simplon Pass (not realizing the point at which they reached the summit), then wandered around the Swiss and north Italian lakes –Maggiore, Lugano, Como. By the end of August, it was back to Lucerne, Zurich and

⁴ *Letters written in France* (1790), pp. 1-2.

⁵ *Letter II*, p. 14.

⁶ ‘Composed near Calais, on the Road Leading to Ardres, August 15, 1802’; in the 1836 edition of his complete poems, Wordsworth avoided possible confusion by adding a footnote to ‘like the May’, indicating that the date he was remembering was not actually one in May but ‘14th July, 1790’.



Constance, then in September to Berne and Basel, where they bought a boat to sail along the Rhine to Cologne, where they sold it before returning to England to prepare for final examinations prior to graduation in January 1791.

After going down from Cambridge, Wordsworth followed the typical graduand's path of moving to London and not finding work. In the summer, he went to Wales and spent several months walking with Jones in the mountains. Back in London, he made the bold decision to return to France. While waiting to embark in Brighton, he called on the poet Charlotte Smith, whose sonnets he admired. She gave him letters of introduction: one of them was addressed to none other than Helen Maria Williams, who had by this time moved to Orléans. He arrived in Paris by night, at the end of November. He immediately fell in with the Girondins, the more moderate faction in the National Assembly, which he visited. He may also have been introduced to the more radical Jacobin Club. Either now, or on a return visit a year later, he got to know an extraordinary English philosopher called 'Walking' Stewart whom we will meet at the end of the lecture.

A few days later, he was off to Orléans, to visit Helen Maria Williams. He narrowly missed her, because she had just headed back to Paris. But he stayed for nearly a year, making two of the most important acquaintances of his life: a pro-revolutionary military officer called Michel Beaupuy and a girl called Annette Vallon who would bear his illegitimate daughter. All these events are recorded in great detail in the epic autobiographical poem that was posthumously christened *The Prelude*. Among the most memorable passages are an embedded ode to the joy of revolutionary hope: [7]

O pleasant exercise of hope and joy!
For great were the auxiliars which then stood
Upon our side, we who were strong in love;
Bliss was it in that dawn to be alive,
But to be young was very heaven ...
When Reason seem'd the most to assert her rights
When most intent on making of herself
A prime Enchanter to assist the work
Which then was going forwards in her name:
Not favor'd spots alone, but the whole earth
The beauty wore of promise ...

and a lesson from Beaupuy on the need to eradicate poverty and inequality:

And when we chanced
One day to meet a hunger-bitten Girl
Who crept along, fitting her languid self
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, that poverty,
At least like this, would in a little time
Be found no more, that we should see the earth
Unthwarted in her wish to recompense
The industrious and the lowly Child of Toil,
All institutes for ever blotted out
That legalized exclusion, empty pomp
Abolish’d, sensual state and cruel power
Whether by edict of the one or few,
And finally, as sum and crown of all,
Should see the People having a strong hand
In making their own Laws, whence better days
To all mankind.

Notice here how the language of democratic and radical politics is mingled with that of strong feeling (agitation of the spirits and attunement to the mood of solitude). We are back in the territory of Jean-Jacques Rousseau, as he moves between, on the one hand, his *Social Contract*, with its idea of the power of the ‘general will’ of the people, and on the other, his novel of sensibility and his *Reveries of the Solitary Walker*.

Two weeks after the publication of Helen Maria Williams’ *Letters written in France*, with Wordsworth back in Cambridge after his Alpine walking tour, Edmund Burke launched the counter-offensive to this vein of radical thought: *Reflections on the Revolution in France* described the uprising of the people as

‘the most astonishing that has hitherto happened in the world’. A generation later, the poet, critic and journalist Leigh Hunt, [8] who had been imprisoned for libeling the Prince Regent, argued in the preface to a volume of his poetry called *Foliage* (1818) that during his lifetime there had been a comparable revolution in poetry. As the ancien régime had been overthrown in France, so in English poetry the French-influenced neoclassicism associated with Alexander Pope and his followers had been consigned to history. ‘This has undoubtedly been owing, in the first instance,’ Leigh Hunt writes, ‘to the political convulsions of the world, which shook up the minds of men, and rendered them too active and speculative to be satisfied with their common-places’. The second cause, he suggests, is ‘the revived inclination for our older and great school of poetry’, exemplified by the elevation of Shakespeare to the status of national poet and divine genius. ‘The third, and not the least,’ Hunt concludes, ‘was the accession of a new school of poetry itself, of which Wordsworth has justly the reputation of being the most prominent ornament, but whose inner priest of the temple perhaps was Coleridge’.

Leigh Hunt’s preface to *Foliage* offers a succinct summary of the essence of poetry as understood by the new school. Its secret is ‘A sensitiveness [*sic*] to the beauty of the external world, to the unsophisticated impulses of our nature, and above all, imagination, or the power to see, with verisimilitude, what others do not, – these are the properties of poetry.’ Or, as Wordsworth put it in one of his very greatest lyrics, [9] poetry happens when the beauty of the external world works in unison with the feelings and the imagination to create an elevated, quasi-sacred state in which ‘even the motion of our human blood’ is ‘Almost suspended’ and ‘we are laid asleep^[SEP]/ In body, and become a living soul’:



While with an eye made quiet by the power
Of harmony, and the deep power of joy,
We see into the life of things.

One of the questions I want to explore in this lecture is whether this new theory of poetry constituted a philosophical revolution or a political one – or both. I'll seek an answer at the end of the lecture when I turn to this poem in more detail.

The principal members of the 'new school' were first called 'the Lake Poets' but eventually they and their successors, including the circle around Leigh Hunt (Keats, Shelley, Byron and the prose writers Hazlitt, De Quincey and Lamb), became known as the Romantics. And their innovations were duly described as a 'revolution' akin to that in France. I think that the first person to group them and name them as such was the French critic Hippolyte Taine, in a history of English literature published in 1864. There he tells of how 'On the eve of the nineteenth century began in Europe the great modern revolution. The thinking public and the human mind changed, and underneath these two collisions a new literature sprang up'. Taine was thinking of a triple revolution: not only the political one in France, but also the industrial one in this country ('The steam-engine and spinning-jenny create in England towns of from three hundred and fifty thousand to five hundred thousand souls') and the philosophical revolution that began in Germany, about which I spoke a good deal in my last lecture. As Taine put it,

Then was manifested the disease of the age, the restlessness of Werther and Faust ... I mean, discontent with the present, the vague desire of a higher beauty and an ideal happiness, the painful aspiration for the infinite. Man suffered from doubt, yet he doubted; he tried to seize again his beliefs, they melted in his hand; he would sit down and rest in the doctrines and the satisfactions which sufficed his predecessors, and he does not find them sufficient. He expends himself, like Faust, in anxious researches through science and history, and judges them vain, dubious, good for ... pedants of the academy and the library. It is the beyond he sighs for.⁷

By the end of the nineteenth century it had become commonplace to use the word 'revolution' to describe the literary innovations that had occurred at the dawn of that century. So, for example, in another history of English literature, by the biographer and scholar Edmund Gosse, we read of 'the romantic revolution of 1798'. That was the year when, under the imprint of a minor provincial publisher, a slender volume of poetry was published with no author's name on the cover and the unassuming title, *Lyrical Ballads, with a few other poems*. [10] The authors were William Wordsworth and Samuel Taylor Coleridge. Gosse went on to argue that by the early 1820s 'the romantic revolution was complete: the new spirit had penetrated every corner of literary production, and the various strains introduced from Germany, from Celtic sources, from the resuscitated study of natural landscape, from the habit of contemplation of radical changes in political, religious, and social ideas, had settled down into an accepted intellectual attitude'.⁸ It is this 'romantic revolution' that is the theme of my second series of lectures as Gresham Professor of Rhetoric.

⁷ Taine, *History of English Literature*, trans. H van Laun, vol. 2 (1872), p. 227. Original French edition: 1864.

⁸ *English Literature: An Illustrated Record*, vol. 3 *From the Age of Johnson to the Age of Tennyson* (1903), pp. 199, 200.



So what were the contents of the *Lyrical Ballads* of 1798? First, that anonymous title-page. Why no authors' names? Coleridge provided an explanation in a letter to his friend Joseph Cottle, the Bristol publisher who saw the volume into print: [11] '—As to anonymous Publications, depend on it, you are deceived.—Wordsworth's name is nothing—to a large number of persons mine stinks—'. Wordsworth's name was nothing because his only previous volumes of poetry, *Descriptive Sketches* and *An Evening Walk*, had sunk almost without trace. Coleridge's name was mud because he had developed a reputation as a dangerous radical. [12 + 13]

The anxiety to maintain the anonymity of the authors was such that, after the Bristol edition was in print, one of Coleridge's contributions to the collections was removed because it had already been published elsewhere and could therefore be traced back to him. [14] Look at the subtle difference between the contents list in the original Bristol edition, and the London one that appeared later in 1798: 'Lewti' has been replaced by 'The Nightingale' (the latter poem being slightly longer resulted in the pagination going 69, blank, 69, 70).

There was another difference between the Bristol and London versions. Wordsworth decided that the innovative poetic project needed an explanatory preface, so he inserted an 'Advertisement', [15] in which he explained that the poems were to be 'considered as experiments': 'They were written chiefly with a view to ascertain how far the language of conversation in the middle and lower classes of society is adapted to the purposes of poetic pleasure'. The trouble with posh, highly educated poets, he implies, is that they don't speak the language of ordinary people. They all too frequently resort to what Wordsworth goes on to call 'gaudiness and inane phraseology' of many modern writers. These poems, by contrast, may seem strange and awkward, but they contain 'a natural delineation of human passions, human characters, and human incidents'. They are in the spirit not of the genteel poetry of the eighteenth century but of 'our elder writers' – by which Wordsworth means the popular culture of medieval ballads and the plays of Shakespeare, with their mingling of kings and clowns, the elite and the people. He adds that the opening (and much the longest) poem in the collection, Coleridge's 'The Rime of the Ancient Mariner' [16] was 'professedly written in imitation of the *style*, as well as of the spirit of the elder poets' – hence its archaic vocabulary and spelling.

And what of Wordsworth's poetry in the collection? The first of his contributions is about a baby abandoned at birth; the two longest are about, respectively, a Downs syndrome boy and a female vagrant; others are about impoverished old people, a shepherd fallen on hard times, a convict, an old man travelling to a hospital to visit his war-wounded son, and a dungeon that as might well be the Bastille, not to mention a 'Mad Mother' and 'a forsaken Indian Woman'. It is this kind of material that led Leigh Hunt's friend William Hazlitt to associate *Lyrical Ballads* with the French Revolution.

Hazlitt first met Coleridge when he tramped for miles over the fields from his native Wem in Shropshire, solely in order to hear him preach. He boldly befriended the master and got himself an invitation to Nether Stowey in the West Country, where Coleridge was living near Wordsworth. Here he is, in early June 1798: 'In the afternoon, Coleridge took me over to All-Foxden, a romantic old family mansion of the St Aubins, where Wordsworth lived'. William was not there, but Dorothy Wordsworth gave them tea and 'free access to her brother's poems, the *Lyrical Ballads*, which were still in manuscript'. Then the next morning:

as soon as breakfast was over, we strolled out into the park, and seating ourselves on the trunk of an old ash tree that stretched along the ground, Coleridge read aloud, with a sonorous and musical voice the ballad of *Betty Foy*. I was not critically or sceptically inclined. I saw touches of truth and nature, and took the rest for



granted. But in the *Thorn*, the *Mad Mother*, and the *Complaint of a Poor Indian Woman*, I felt that deeper power and pathos which have been since acknowledged ... as the characteristics of this author; and the sense of a new style and a new spirit in poetry came over me. It had to me something of the effect that arises from the turning up of the fresh soil, or of the first welcome breath of Spring.⁹

This was Hazlitt's first acquaintance with the power and pathos of Wordsworth's poetry. Though his relationship with the poet himself would become awkward, Hazlitt remained a consistent champion of him as 'the most original poet now living' and his poetry as 'a pure emanation of the spirit of the age'. In what sense did Hazlitt believe that Wordsworth's poetry embodied the spirit of the age? In the sense that he saw it as the English literary equivalent of the French political revolution: [17]

Our poetical literature had, towards the close of the last century, degenerated into the most trite, insipid, and mechanical of all things, in the hands of the followers of Pope and the old French school of poetry. It wanted something to stir it up, and it found that some thing in the principles and events of the French revolution. From the impulse it thus received, it rose at once from the most servile imitation and tamest common-place, to the utmost pitch of singularity and paradox. The change in the belles-lettres was as complete, and to many persons as startling, as the change in politics, with which it went hand in hand. There was a mighty ferment in the heads of statesmen and poets, kings and people. According to the prevailing notions, all was to be natural and new. Nothing that was established was to be tolerated. All the common-place figures of poetry, tropes, allegories, personifications, with the whole heathen mythology, were instantly discarded; a classical allusion was considered as a piece of antiquated foppery; capital letters were no more allowed in print, than letters-patent of nobility were permitted in real life; kings and queens were dethroned from their rank and station in legitimate tragedy or epic poetry, as they were decapitated elsewhere; rhyme was looked upon as a relic of the feudal system, and regular metre was abolished along with regular government.

'It was a time of promise, a renewal of the world and of letters; and the Deucalions, who were to perform this feat of regeneration were the present poet-laureat [Southey] and the two authors of the *Lyrical Ballads*.' Hazlitt is writing this during the Regency years, by which time Wordsworth had, in his view, sold out to the Establishment. Because of this apostasy, his account has some fun at Wordsworth's expense, but there is no doubting the underlying seriousness of the argument that the 'new school' of poetry is founded on principles of 'sheer humanity' and 'pure nation void of art'. Wordsworth and Coleridge, Hazlitt says, bring the Muses into company with 'a mixed rabble of idle apprentices and Botany Bay convicts, female vagrants, gipsies, meek daughters in the family of Christ [a quotation from Coleridge's poem 'The Eolian Harp', published prior to *Lyrical Ballads*], of idiot boys and mad mothers' – not to mention 'owls and night-ravens'. 'They took the same method', Hazlitt concludes, 'which Rousseau did in his prose paradoxes – of exciting attention by reversing the standards of opinion and estimation in the world. They were for bringing poetry back to its primitive simplicity and state of nature, as he was for bringing society back to the savage state'.

One may readily follow Hazlitt's argument that by making poems out of Botany Bay convicts and female vagrants Wordsworth was radically democratizing the art of literature, but the more inward, personal, meditative, memory-based and philosophical poems in *Lyrical Ballads* can hardly be described in terms of 'primitive simplicity' or even, for that matter, 'a selection of the real language of men'. Not many men or women can speak like this: [18]

⁹ *Complete Works*, 17. 116-17.



And I have felt
A presence that disturbs me with the joy
Of elevated thoughts; a sense sublime
Of something far more deeply interfused,
Whose dwelling is the light of setting suns,
And the round ocean, and the living air,
And the blue sky, and in the mind of man,
A motion and a spirit, that impels
All thinking things, all objects of all thought,
And rolls through all things. Therefore am I still
A lover of the meadows and the woods,
And mountains; and of all that we behold
From this green earth; of all the mighty world
Of eye and ear, both what they half-create,
And what perceive; well pleased to recognize
In nature and the language of the sense,
The anchor of my purest thoughts, the nurse,
The guide, the guardian of my heart, and soul
Of all my moral being

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