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9 The Lyric

Abstract: This chapter examines the lyric in the Romantic period. It consists of an Introduction addressing some key issues: the lyric as the poetic embodiment of a “new poetics of spontaneity and self-expression” (Duff 2009, 53); the lyric as a form used for the expression of private and public themes; and critical constructions of the lyric immediately before, during, and after the Romantic period. The second section focuses on the central theme of the chapter, the achievement of Romantic poets in writing lyrics. It is divided into two parts: one dealing with lyric effects, the other with the treatment of the self and subjectivity. The third section addresses generic sub-divisions within lyric, a capacious generic category. The fourth section, something of a coda to the chapter, readdresses and reaffirms the nature of “originality” in the lyric practice of the period.

Key Terms: lyric, the self, private, public, ode, sonnet, effusion, dramatic monologue, song, tradition, originality, poetics

1 Introduction

For many, lyric is the quintessential Romantic mode, product of a literary era that placed great emphasis on “the spontaneous overflow of powerful feelings” (Wordsworth 2010, 60) which Wordsworth refers to in his Preface to *Lyrical Ballads* (↗ 18), a central manifesto of the Romantic period. What David Duff calls “the ascendancy of a poetics that favoured the short lyric over the long poem” (2009, 50) begins to be established in the period and is evident, as Duff notes, in the rise of anthologies with words in their titles such as “*Beauties*” or “*Flowers*” (2009, 50; emphases in the original). It is among the novelties of his poems in *Lyrical Ballads* to which Wordsworth draws attention that, in them, feeling (modified by thought) shapes a poem’s metre, metaphors, and mode of telling: “the feeling therein developed,” he writes in the Preface, “gives importance to the action and situation, and not the action and situation to the feeling” (Wordsworth 2010, 61). It is the poet’s “Strange fits of passion” (J. Wordsworth and J. Wordsworth 2003, 1)¹ that give importance to the evening ride in Wordsworth’s Lucy poem of that name, to the sensation of near-trance, to the setting of the moon. The poem derives from the ballad tradition, but its poetic essence is lyrical.

¹ All poems are quoted from this edition, unless stated otherwise.

Still, as Duff also notes, “in the ‘high’ Romantic period a taste for lyric coexisted with a fashion for long poems” (2009, 50), and something of this mixture of taste shows in comments made by the poets themselves. For example, Keats (731) asks in a letter, in response to Hunt’s reported question, “why endeavour after a long Poem?,” “Do not the Lovers of Poetry like to have a little Region to wander in where they may pick and choose?” (1958, I.170) This question, arguably, points in two directions: a refusal to abandon the ambition of writing “a long Poem” coupled with a tendency to locate spaces for lyricism in more extended works, viewed as gardens from which flowers may be culled. Keats himself inserts an “Ode to Sorrow” in the final book of his long poem, *Endymion*. Lyric exists, not simply in the shorter poems which are this chapter’s chief concerns, but as an energy, a presence, in longer works (an explicit example is Shelley’s *Prometheus Unbound*, discussed below).

1.1 “A New Poetics”

If there is some ambivalence among Romantic poets themselves about any privileging of lyric, it is certainly true that poetic practice reveals the influence of a “new poetics of spontaneity and self-expression” (Duff 2009, 53). This influence and its poetic enactment are studied below under “Lyric Effects,” “The Lyric Self,” and “Lyric Sub-Divisions,” but at the outset of this first section, in which significant issues are outlined, it is important to note that the self in Romantic poetics takes on a new particularity. It matters for the impact of Romantic lyric that we are made to experience, in Paul D. Sheats’s words, ways in which “the individual consciousness becomes a unique subject-matter in itself, potentially infinite in depth and complexity, and a component of all perception and knowledge, perhaps inescapably so” (2005, 318). At the same time, self is not accorded an incontestable value in and by Romantic lyric, a guardedness noted in recent criticism. Christoph Reinfandt observes how, from the perspective of recent literary theory, “Romanticism is as much the product of the cultural emergence of subjectivity as its shaping and determining force” (2005, 70). Scott Brewster points out that, while accepting that “it would be impossible to speak relevantly about modern literature without giving a prominent place to lyric poetry,” Paul de Man views modern lyric (that is, lyric poetry of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries) as a literature of self-analyzing complexity, one that “plays out a ‘crisis of self and representation’” (qtd. in Brewster 2009, 73). Lyric is still a central mode in the period, on this reading, yet its function is less to validate the self’s significance than to expose uncertainties about the self’s meaning and function.

Others point to the fact that lyric enmeshes itself in the process of fluid generic redefinition typical of the Romantic period. They observe, as does Brewster, the hybrid nature of Wordsworth and Coleridge’s *Lyrical Ballads*, a title that combines the stress on affective articulation and response evoked by the adjective “Lyrical” with the expectation of narrative raised by the noun “Ballads.” As Brewster notes, the

title “juxtaposes the private, introspective lyric mode with the ballad, a form traditionally associated with folk culture, oral narrative and action” (2009, 80). A further example is Shelley’s *Prometheus Unbound*, a “lyrical drama,” according to its subtitle. “Lyrical” here draws attention to the play’s interest in song and images of music, its metapoetic aspiration towards a poetry that has the effect of being “a perpetual Orphic song” (Shelley 2003, IV.415); to the work’s fascination with subjective states of feeling, whether pessimistic or optimistic, fatalistic or Utopian; and to its deployment of a great range of stanzaic and metrical forms: Asia’s ‘My soul is an enchanted boat’ (Shelley 2003, II.v.72) is an example, with its thirteen-line stanzas containing a virtuosic array of rhymes, and merging of individual and collective harmony:

My soul is an enchanted boat,
Which, like a sleeping swan, doth float
Upon the silver waves of thy sweet singing;
And thine doth like an angel sit
Beside the helm conducting it,
Whilst all the winds with melody are ringing. (Shelley 2003, II.v.72–77)

The lines stage a scene of singing and hearing, and might be describing the ideal experience of reading the lyrical drama. What begins as an encounter between “soul” and singer broadens into a more general intuition as the speaker asserts that the encounter takes place “Whilst all the winds with melody are ringing.” Northrop Frye reminds us that “The traditional associations of lyric are chiefly with music. The Greeks spoke of lyric as *ta mele*, usually translated as ‘poems to be sung’” (2014, 34). Shelley’s Romantic rewriting of Greek drama shapes innovatively self-reflexive inflections out of “traditional associations,” and uses lyric as a vehicle of poetic melody’s self-enactment, as is shown by the near-triumphant building and sustaining of “singing” through the buoyantly echoic rhyme that follows, “ringing.”

1.2 Private and public

Critics debate whether Romantic lyric is a private, subjective form or whether it bears a relationship, possibly one that is mediated and displaced, with historical reality. Should we read Keats’s “To Autumn” (↗ 31) as a poem of eyes-on-the-object sensuous description, or as a retreat from the hurly-political realities of post-Peterloo England, or as a subtly coded engagement with such realities, or as a proto-Heideggerian call to give attention to being, or as a proto-ecological disciplining of the interfering ego? (For further discussion, see Wolfson 1986) Certainly individual, subjective utterance often serves as an oblique mode of telling us about the pressure of history. When in one of the greatest of Romantic lyrics, Wordsworth’s “Lines Written a few Miles above Tintern Abbey,” the speaker declares “I cannot paint / What then I was” (76–77), the reader is alerted to the speaker’s sense of identity and its changes, and to possible

occlusions and withholdings. The affecting declarations by the speaker of his love of nature have seemed to some readers compensation for lost hopes, possibly revolutionary hopes (for a sophisticated version, see Bromwich 1998) – though the poem never quite says explicitly that such is the case. Rather, “Tintern Abbey” invites us through its subtle blank verse to follow the windings of the speaker’s thoughts and feelings, and owes much to its revaluation of the form of the ode, a lyric genre that often mingles an individual perspective and a more general theme. The ode is a form to which in “Tintern Abbey,” as Duff comments, “Wordsworth lays claim [...] even as he nominally abandons it” (2009, 205) when he writes in a footnote added to the 1800 edition of *Lyrical Ballads*: “I have not ventured to call this Poem an Ode; but it was written in the hope that in the transitions, and the impassioned music of the versification would be found the principal requisites of that species of composition” (qtd. in Duff 2009, 205).

1.3 Critical constructions

Finally, there is the question of how Romantic lyric was thought about in its own time and has been constructed after the historical event of its appearance. Keats’s ambivalence about the prestige of the shorter poem has been noticed above; but the period was one in which lyric was being invested with a kind of ur-significance. M. H. Abrams cites the remark by the Sanskrit scholar and translator Sir William Jones that “we may define original and native poetry to be the language of the violent passions, expressed in exact measure, with strong accents and significant words” (qtd. in Abrams 2014 [1954], 142) and comments, as a sign of lyric’s increasing importance in the period: “Plainly Jones employs the lyric, not only as the original poetic form, but as the prototype for poetry as a whole” (Abrams 2014 [1953], 142). Hugh Blair in his 1783 *Lectures on Rhetoric and Belles Lettres* implies a connection between “extremely metaphorical” (1978, 277) languages and the infancy of a culture, again implying that song and lyric have something especially poetic about them. Although, for Shelley, “drama” is the “form” in which “the connection of beauty and social good” is most “observable” (2003, 686), he presents the poet in a famous image as, above all, a lyricist: “A Poet is a nightingale who sits in darkness, and sings to cheer its own solitude with sweet sounds; his auditors are as men entranced by the melody of an unseen musician, who feel that they are moved and softened, yet know not whence or why” (2003, 680). Echoes of Milton, Coleridge (↗ 19), and Keats are at work here, but Shelley’s “unseen musician” makes explicit the link between “nightingale” and lyricizing poet.

It has been argued that “the lyric takes form through the development of reading practices in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries that became the practice of literary criticism” (Jackson 2005, 8). This process of “lyricization” (Jackson 2005, 8) requires vigilance on the part of readers. Yet, as Jonathan Culler argues, there are ways in which “the concept of a lyric genre” is “valuable” (2014 [2009], 67). A princi-

pal means of understanding Romantic lyric, with which this essay is in sympathy, is the idea of lyric as “the performance of an event in the lyric present, a time of enunciation” (Culler 2014 [2009], 68). Another thought-provoking approach, taking its cue from Romantic practice, is the notion that “Reading well [...] is to make one’s own figuration of power” (Bloom 2014 [1979], 278): not necessarily, as Bloom notes wryly, “a polite process” and a mode “that may not meet the academy’s social standards of civility” (2014 [1979], 278), but one that argues for “the lyric as the genre that dramatizes ‘the poetic breaking of poetic form’” (Jackson and Prins 2014, 269). Romantic lyric exists, and is both generative of and resistant to schemes of reading; indeed, it continually invites readers to “find an outside or alternative to the history of poetics” (Jackson and Prins, 271), prompting the recognition of an impulse to express what Wordsworth calls “something evermore about to be” (*The Prelude*; Wordsworth 2010, VI.542; ↗ 21).

A democratic impulse is often at work here, as poets seek to give a voice, through lyric, to the outcast, the marginalized, the cast-aside, sometimes persuading the genre in the direction of dramatic monologue. Felicia Hemans’s *Records of Woman* (1828) gives expression to the voices of many different women: Arabella Stuart and Properzia Rossi, for example, the latter of whom, a sculptor, speaks of her work in ways that waken a sense of the link and gap between experience and art which work reflexively: that is, in reading of Properzia’s feeling that the art-work is “the mould / Wherein I pour the fervent thoughts, the untold, / The self-consuming!” (43–45), we discern the lineaments of Hemans’s own understanding of the issue as it relates to her. Or such, at any rate, is the illusion of inward knowledge that the poem generates. The poem is at once dramatic monologue, a sub-division or extension of lyric that can be read as a challenge to some assumptions made about it (see Tucker 2014 [1985], 145), and metapoetic lyric.

Wordsworth’s “The Mad Mother” also illustrates Romantic lyric’s ability to accommodate dramatic monologue (as does the same poet’s “Complaint of a Forsaken Indian Woman,” which aligns itself with the traditional lyrical sub-genre of the “complaint”). In “The Mad Mother” the mother is overheard by the narrator as “She talked and sung the woods among” (9), her near-anguished preoccupation with herself and her baby sharply to the fore. Coleridge seized on the lines, “The breeze I see is in the tree; / It comes to cool my babe and me” (39–40), as

expressive of that deranged state, in which from the increased sensibility the sufferer’s attention is abruptly drawn off by every trifle, and in the same instant plucked back again by the one despotic thought, and bringing home with it, by the blending, *fusing* power of Imagination and Passion, the alien object to which it had been so abruptly diverted, no longer an alien, but an ally and an inmate (Coleridge 1983, II.150; emphasis in the original).

The mother’s obsession with her suffering and her wish to give succour to and be soothed by her baby are forces of “Imagination and Passion,” on this account, that make “an ally and an inmate” of the “breeze.” The poem, for Coleridge, is not simply

expressive of pathos but one that points to the power possessed by the mind in a “deranged state.” The suggestion, here, that lyric flourishes when expressive of and driven by emotions that border on the “deranged” is relevant to other lyrics of the Romantic period, John Clare’s “I Am,” for instance. The poem is a lyric of the absolute self: “I am – yet what I am, none cares or knows; / My friends forsake me like a memory lost” (Clare 1984, 1–2). What gives the poem its pathos is the enduring strength or capacity for self-recognition that persist through the losses recorded by the poet. The monosyllabic first line trails away into desolateness, but the initial “I am,” with its wry echo of God’s self-definition to Moses in Exodus 3:14 (“I AM THAT I AM”), sounds a note of bare resilience that has its own quality of defiance.

2 The Achievement

2.1 Lyric effects

Whatever the cavils and the disputes, it is impossible to deny that the lyric poetry associated with British Romanticism changes our understanding of poetry’s capabilities. Jonathan and Jessica Wordsworth introduce “Romantic Hallmarks,” the first section of their *Penguin Book of Romantic Poetry*, with the rhapsodic yet justifiable claim that Romantic poetry (of which their touchstones in the section are all lyric poems or lyrical excerpts)

has an immediacy rarely found in other periods. Many will know the magic of these poems; those who do not will find themselves captured by something that is at once high art, and a part of themselves – something that stirs the imagination, yet seems to come from within. (2003, 3)

The Wordsworths’ examples testify to formal variety; they include lyrical ballads, such as Wordsworth’s “Lucy poems”; a fragment, (according to its self-mythologizing Preface), Coleridge’s “Kubla Khan”; odes (“To Autumn,” Shelley’s “To a Skylark”; ↗ 32); song (Moore’s “Oh! Blame Not the Bard!”; ↗ 26); a sonnet (Smith’s “To the South Downs” ↗ 24) and poems such as Burns’s “To a Mountain Daisy,” which are best defined as lyrical poems in which we sense the expressive presence and intent of speakers hard to distinguish from the poets themselves, poems that convey their meanings and emotions with succinctness, intensity and force.

Burns (↗ 13) uses a tightly wrought stanza (the so-called “Habbie” stanza rhyming *aaabab*, the *a*-rhymed lines consisting of iambic tetrameters, the *b*-rhymed lines made up of iambic dimeters) to convey with wry, robust, delicate tenderness his distress at having crushed the flower’s “slender stem” (4) with his plough. The poem surprises and delights by bringing vividly to the reader’s attention the value of the daisy, apostrophized in the first line as “Wee, modest, crimson-tippéd flower.”

Apostrophe may be the marker of poetry as artificial speech, sometimes involving “the pretension to vatic action” (see Culler 2014 [2009], 68), but here artifice is at the service of newly invigorated sentiment: mainly the result of Burns’s cunning changes of linguistic register and affective focus; he moves from dialect endearment (“Wee”), to a more standard English form of approval (“modest,” normally a term used positively of a young person), to a compound adjective (“crimson-tippéd”) that implies that he is looking at a real flower, not simply at a symbol.

As the poem develops, it accommodates emblematic associations, typical of Romantic-period lyric’s elasticity of suggestion. The poet compares, with something close to mock-heroic pomp, the fate of the flower to that of the “artless maid, / Sweet floweret of the rural shade” (31–32) brought subliminally to mind by the word “maiden” in the opening line. He then moves to a comparison with “the fate of simple bard, / On Life’s rough ocean luckless starred!” (37–38), at which point the poem takes on a deeper, more self-referential point and pathos. It is not any “simple bard” that the poem finishes by invoking, but the bard who “mourns[] the Daisy’s fate” (49). Referring to this bard in the second person, Burns writes:

That fate is thine – no distant date –
Stern Ruin’s plough-share drives elate,
Full on thy bloom,
Till crushed beneath the furrow’s weight
Shall be thy doom! (50–54)

Abstraction melds with and arises from the particular incident with which the poem opens. The “plough-share” is now “Ruin’s,” but the concreteness of the earlier image still makes itself felt in these lines, whose diction in phrases such as “crushed beneath the furrow’s weight” stays in touch with the earlier contrite confession: “For I maun crush amang the stoure / Thy slender stem” (3–4). The lyric constructs its meanings in its own self-referring terms, terms which bring to the fore the poet’s trust in Scottish speech: an aspect of Romantic lyric is its rootedness in ideas of place and nation, even as it also, conversely, often offers apparent transcendence or evasion of the local.

Such “self-referring terms” are evident in Wordsworth’s “Ode: Intimations of Immortality.” Helen Vendler has drawn attention to what she calls the poem’s “powerfully plotted succession [...] of ‘wounds’ and ‘cures’” (1978, 79). Thus, if the poet fears for the growing child that “custom [will] lie upon thee with a weight, / Heavy as frost and deep almost as life” (130–131), he concludes the poem by announcing that time, maturity and “the human heart by which we live” (203) mean that “To me the meanest flower that blows can give / Thoughts that do often lie too deep for tears” (205–206). A network of verbal echoes links these final lines to the rest of the poem; they include, as just suggested, a reconsideration of “deep.” The poet’s thoughts “that do often lie too deep for tears” have access to a profundity that lies below custom’s own destructive depth of influence, where it seems “deep almost as life.” Again, “To me” reminds us that Wordsworth builds into the poem his own singularity of per-

spective, even as he acknowledges common human responses, deriving from “the human heart by which we live.” The poem has begun with the assertion that, once, “every common sight / To me did seem / Apparelled in celestial light” (2–4), where Wordsworth, like Burns, mixes up his line-lengths and diction to expressive ends. The Latinate final line, there, exists in yearning, complex connection with and disconnection from the plain line that precedes it, a line that concedes that former glories were a form of seeming and that the loss is very much a personal one. The ode seeks to speak to “common” preoccupations – with growing older, the movement through phases of life – but it makes clear its source in and commitment to an individual’s “intimations”; accordingly, it adapts the traditional tripartite odic structure (strophe, antistrophe, and epeode) to its own particular purposes.

An effect of lyric, in the period, is often an illusion of timelessness (lyric inhabits its own self-created time) and the impression of what John Stuart Mill calls “the poet’s utter unconsciousness of a listener” (qtd. in Jackson 2005, 9). Critics have exposed these effects as illusions, pointing to the ways in which “lyricization” involves “an uneven series of negotiations of many different forms of circulation and address” (Jackson 2005, 8) or encouraging “[a]n understanding of the Romantic lyric as a popular cultural vehicle for exchanges between poets and readers” (Zimmerman 1999, 36). Certainly lyrics such as Shelley’s sonnet “England in 1819” demand that any reading responds to the historical situation depicted (↗ 32 Percy Bysshe Shelley, *Selected Poetry*; ↗ 1 *Political and Social History c. 1780–1832*). Hemans’s (↗ 35) “Casabianca” depends for its effect on our knowledge that the boy who bravely “stood on the burning deck” (1) with exemplary if extreme courage was, in fact, fighting against the British state, as is tactfully hinted in an authorial note:

Young Casabianca, a boy about thirteen years’ old, son to the Admiral of the Orient, remained at his post (in the Battle of the Nile), after the ship had taken fire and all the guns had been abandoned, and perished in the explosion of the vessel, when the flames had reached the powder (J. Wordsworth and J. Wordsworth 2003, 33).

Carol Rumens, while only able to muster two cheers for the poem’s aesthetic quality, notes that Hemans did not

write a jingoistic set of verses about British heroism during the Napoleonic wars, but chose to describe a French tragedy [*l’Orient* was the French flagship at the Battle], in a poem running counter to nationalist stereotype, and appealing to universal human emotions. Its heart is in the right place, if, not always, its technique. (2011, n.p.)

Rumens, arguably, misses the characteristic way in which Hemans generates a sub-text; the last lines are less heavy-handed, for example, in their assertion that “the noblest thing which perished there / Was that young, faithful heart!” (39–40), than able to make us wincingly aware of the corporeal destruction of the boy’s seat of life as his “fragments strewed the sea” (36). As often in Romantic lyric, metre attunes our

ears: the midline spondee dwells on the fate of the “young, faithful heart,” as though youth and fidelity are condemned to participate in a dark historical plot whereby such qualities are doomed to “perish.”

Timelessness, or better, an illusion of moving in and out of time and of dwelling in the poem’s own present, is a signal characteristic, “illusion” if one wishes, of Romantic lyrics: “Kubla Khan,” despite the best efforts of contextualizing critics, is an instance; the poet speaks as though uttering an imaginative fiat, spellbindingly constructing a “stately pleasure-dome” (2) of a poem, opening into different landscape at its own wish, a self-reflexive work entering its own imaginary world. The reader has to read against the grain of the poem in order to suppress awareness of it as, in Culler’s words, “the performance of an event in the lyric present, a time of enunciation” in favour of historicist allegorizing.

Again, Mill’s observation about the apparent indifference of Romantic lyric to a reader holds true of many, if by no means all, poems. Romantic lyric can be poetry for what T. S. Eliot thinks of as “the voice of the poet talking to himself” (2014 [1953], 197). The example he gives of the poet who “has something germinating in him for which he must find words” (Eliot 2014 [1953], 198) is a lyric by Thomas Lovell Beddoes from his long work *Death’s Jest-Book* (↗ 37), beginning with the words “Squats on a toadstool under a tree,” spoken by, in lines quoted by Eliot, a “bodiless childful of life in the gloom / Crying with frog voice, ‘what shall I be?’” (qtd. from Eliot 2014 [1953], 198). That implicit question, not always so wailful, but sometimes intently exploratory, pervades many Romantic lyrics and seems self-focused. The reader plunged into the meditative reverie of Shelley’s “Mont Blanc” has little sense of the poem having regard to her or his responses as the poet posits an initial statement about mental experience – “The everlasting universe of things / Flows through the mind” (1–2) – before the poet goes on to find an analogue for his epistemological surmises in the external scene: “Thus thou, Ravine of Arve” (12). Freed from the role of addressee, we feel that the poem has no evidently “palpable design upon us” (Keats 1958, I.224). Our role is that of covert accomplice in the poem’s endeavours at meaning-making. The poet may grow polemical, as at the end of section three, where he praises the mountain’s voice for its ability to “repeal / Large codes of fraud and woe” (80–81). But it is less our assent that is demanded than willingness to listen, to follow the poem through its ongoing intricacies of thought and speculation. One function of the teasing final question is to draw attention to the fact that the poem has been about as well as a product of “the human mind’s imaginings” (143).

Though currently unfashionable, Mill’s suggestion that readers of Romantic lyrics share in the condition whereby, as Yeats recalled the maxim, “Oratory [in fact Mill wrote “Eloquence”] is heard, poetry is overheard” (qtd. in Tucker 2014 [1985], 144) is a useful guide to some lyric experiences offered by Romantic poetry. It might be better to conclude that the reader is often invited, as in Blake’s Songs, to accept the need for interpretative work, but that such work shadows as much as it shapes the meanings of Romantic lyric. It is for the reader to hear and see the significance of sudden metrical

transitions, such as can be heard in the different sections of “Kubla Khan.” The lines “Could I revive within me / Her symphony and song” (42–43) bring into being a realm of yearning conditionality at odds with the fulfilment coursing through the veins of this preceding couplet: “It was a miracle of rare device – / A sunny pleasure-dome with caves of ice!” (35–36).

2.2 The lyric self

The sonnet’s return to a central generic place in English literature, in the work of Charlotte Smith (↗ 24) accompanies a welcoming of the self as affective agent, and a sophistication about its function within a lyric. Paradoxically, such sophistication takes the form of assuming a greater directness of self-presentation. The opening poem in her *Elegiac Sonnets* (1784) parades poetry’s artifice, its “dear delusive art” (6), suggesting that the “Muse’s favours” are, indeed, “dear” (13), the word’s repetition underscoring its double meanings: costly as well as much-loved. A final near-quotation from Pope’s *Eloisa and Abelard*, lamenting that “those paint sorrow best, who feels it most!” (14), suggests the poet’s awareness that language is an intertextual web as much as it is the medium for direct outpouring of feeling. And yet the poem signals to us, in a way that is both cunning and touching, that the poem’s ‘I’, a word only used once in the poem, in its second line, not only wishes to “paint sorrow” but “feels it,” too.

Smith’s canniness about the self bequeaths a legacy that other sonneteers in the period take up, even if, like Mary Robinson, they use different verse forms: Robinson turns from the Shakespearean form of the sonnet favoured by Smith to the “legitimate” or Petrarchan form in her work, employing the interweaving rhymes of the sestet for sinuous effects, as in the powerful close of sonnet XXV in her *Sappho and Phaon* sequence. There, the sestet opens with yearning hope, “Oh, sovereign of my heart – return, return!” (9), before it moves into a denial of the possibility of “return” as that imperative collides with the rhyme word “urn”: “The mind’s dark winter of eternal gloom / Shows midst the waste a solitary urn” (12–13).

Other Romantic sonnets see the form as particularly suited to expressive ends, its handling of figures and rhymes in intimate connection with the feelings of a presiding but also suffering self. Coleridge (↗ 19), in “To the River Otter,” shows how versification, image, feeling, and rhyme can blend in an evocation of the hiatus yet attachment between adult and child. He uses a modified version of the Italian sonnet to convey a restless movement between present and the past. Addressing the river, establishing a lyric bond between poet and inanimate object, he infuses feeling, not simply through exclamation and assertion, but through vivid recollection of the times when “I skimmed the smooth thing stone along thy breast, / Numbering its light leaps” (4–5). The poem itself numbers, counts out poetic feet, as it makes “light leaps,” and Coleridge makes poem and experiential process deeply interfused, as

in the interlaced vowel effects of the final line to which the poem builds, yet which comes as a speech-ending climax: “Ah, that I were once more a careless child!” (14): a line which “is less an immersion in self-pity than an expert miming of an unrealizable wish” (O’Neill 2013, 332).

Mary Tighe (7 22), in “Written at Scarborough,” traces parallels and contrasts between her experiences and the ebb and flow of waves on the beach: the poem’s main volta or turn effectively arrives in the couplet that concludes her poem, “But I, like the worn sand, exposed remain / To each new storm which frets the angry main” (13–14). The first-person pronoun takes a strong stress, there, as though asserting its pre-eminence among the poem’s figurative counters, and the poem reaps the benefit of his modified form of a Shakespearean rhyme scheme: Tighe, like Shakespeare, has three quatrains followed by a couplet, but her quatrains have an *abba* pattern, not *abab*; thus, the poem is always bringing attention back, at the end to the speaker whose “exposed” state finally comes into view. For Wordsworth in “Scorn Not the Sonnet,” the form is the “key” with which “Shakespeare unlocked his heart” (2–3); its rhymes fit the wards of the lock, allowing the “heart” freedom. In the same poem, Wordsworth draws attention to the form’s more public possibilities: in Milton’s “hand / The thing became a trumpet, whence he blew / Soul-animating strains” (12–14), where “thing” has a fine negligence as it suggests the sonnet’s openness to various reworkings.

In their section on “Romantic Lyric and Song,” the Wordsworths assert that “It seems inevitable that the Romantic period, with its emphasis on individuality and its belief in personal emotion, should be a great age of the lyric” (2003, 351). Just running through their list of lyrics backs up their assertion, as readings of some of their chosen poems will illustrate. “Backs up,” but also broadens and deepens. The editors include many examples from Blake’s extraordinary *Songs of Innocence and of Experience*, songs which suggest lyric’s capacity for revelation of a state of feeling not necessarily expressing the poet’s personal emotion but revealing his ability to empathize with and analyze from within states of feeling that are “personal” but also recognizably human (7 14 William Blake, *America*). The collection’s sub-title is “Shewing the Two Contrary States of the Human Soul,” and a poem such as “The Clod and the Pebble” shows how lyric can define our understanding of as well as feelings about the state of “love.” The clod celebrates a vision of love as apparently selfless and self-sacrificing: “Love seeketh not itself to please, / Nor for itself hath any care” (1–2). After a middle stanza, presenting clod and pebble as opposed lyric voices (the clod is said to have “sang” [5], the pebble to have “Warbled” [8]), the pebble proposes a counter-vision, according to which

Love seeketh only self to please,
To bind another to its delight –
Joys in another’s loss of ease,
And builds a Hell in Heaven’s despite. (9–12)

The phrasing is pungently subversive of the ethical and social norms invoked by the clod. It achieves lyric memorability through extreme compression of utterance: the reversal of the clod's opening words is an example, as is the sudden swooping of the voice on the unapologetically fierce verb "Joys," and the clear indication in the final line that the speaker is, to adapt a comment Blake makes in *The Marriage of Heaven and Hell* about Milton in *Paradise Lost*, of the devil's party and knows it only too well. The effect is less to tell us about someone who is in love than about the collision in our thinking about love between, say, the socially approved idea of submission to another and the experiential reality of ego-satisfaction. Or perhaps the clash is internal and complex – perhaps in every clod lurks a pebble.

Many of Blake's *Songs* use the word 'I' to focus attention on human experience, the fact that it will involve a "state of soul," an experiencer. The emphasis is on the self as a medium through which permanent types of feeling are communicated, laid bare, unmasked. In "A Poison Tree," lyric approaches the condition of subversive morality-tale. Echoes of the story in Genesis of God's testing of Adam and Eve appear, only to undergo change. In this poem it is the scheming psyche of the subject which calculates a way of trapping the "foe" (3), first by hypocritical seeming, "soft deceitful wiles" (8), then by subjecting him to a test that is also a temptation. Abstractions, however, such as "temptation" are kept to a minimum; instead, the reader responds to the stealthy unfolding of the poem's dark plot, conveyed through a series of "ands" that affect not to understand what is taking place, and to the speaker's nurturing of the poison tree

Till it bore an apple bright,
And my foe beheld it shine,
And he knew that it was mine,

And into my garden stole,
When the night had veiled the pole;
In the morning glad I see
My foe outstretched beneath the tree. (10–16)

Blake does not moralize; we are not told that repression of feeling is likely to issue in indirect forms of psychological violence. Still, the lyric teaches us what it means to be driven to entrap another because of an inability to express anger; it does so, partly through its metrical finesse, the light trochaic tread of "In the morning glad I see" deftly avoiding emphasis on the first person, before the hammer blow of the final line where the measure turns iambic.

3 Lyric Sub-Divisions

Lyric in the Romantic period is a genre that is able, as adumbrated above, to accommodate many kinds. William Hazlitt may have written of Wordsworth in *The Spirit of the Age* (↗ 36) that his revolutionary poetry swept away generic distinctions: “The Ode and Epode, the Strophe and the Antistrophe, he laughs to scorn” (1969, 140). Hazlitt discerns here a revolutionary “‘levelling’ attitude to traditional genres and generic hierarchies” (Duff 2009, 203). But, as Stuart Curran, in particular, has shown, the Romantics did not so much discard as transform genre, including lyric, whose sub-divisions include old forms such as the Ode (Wordsworth’s “Ode: Intimations of Immortality,” just discussed, being a famous example), along with many newer forms, such as so-called “effusions,” as in the first version of the poem Coleridge would later entitle “The Eolian Harp,” originally published as “Effusion XXXV,” or the late poem by Wordsworth “Extempore Effusion upon the Death of James Hogg.”

The ode, traditionally, is a form that features lofty themes and complex versification; characteristically it is “dramatic, self-reflexive, and dialectical” (Curran 1986, 66). The Romantics take the ode to a new level of structural sophistication and affective depth. Shelley’s “Ode to the West Wind” answers to Curran’s description: it contains drama, as the speaker confronts the turbulent energies of the west wind and seeks an answerable intensity of utterance; it is self-conscious about its own procedures, as is evidenced by the function of “thus” in the fourth section, when Shelley says, had he been as he was as a boy, he “would ne’er have striven // As thus with thee in prayer in my sore need” (51–52). The word makes us acutely aware of the poem’s own self-presentation as a “prayer” wrung from the poet at a time of “sore need.” Self-reflexivity also shows itself in the poem’s concluding section: in the reworking of the image of “leaves,” now seen in metaphorical terms as applied to the poet himself in the exclamatory line, “What if my leaves are falling like its own!” (58); in the explicitly metapoetic reference to “the incantation of this verse” (65); and, most subtly and dialectically, in the question which concludes the poem, which invites us to consider the validity of poem’s handling of seasonal imagery.

The effusion presents itself as occasional, prompted into being by a moment, an event: Coleridge’s poem records a particular moment in 1795, Wordsworth’s expresses feelings aroused in him by the death of particular friends, feelings catalysed by the death of the Scottish writer, James Hogg (↗ 34). In the case of Wordsworth’s poem effusion takes on elegiac overtones as, in eleven quatrains of often varied iambic tetrameter, Wordsworth makes memories of his friendship with Hogg the ground of a lament for the makers. The poem develops, as is so often the case with Romantic lyric, its own music, the effect of confining rhyme to the second and fourth lines (always masculine) and leaving the first and third lines unrhymed, though always finishing with a word with two syllables. An example is supplied by the third stanza:

The mighty Minstrel breathes no longer,
 Mid mouldering ruins low he lies;
 And death upon the braes of Yarrow,
 Has closed the Shepherd-poet's eyes. (9–12)

The first line pays tribute to “The mighty Minstrel” who is the subject of contrary suggestions: momentarily he breathes again, for all that he said to breathe “no longer,” in Wordsworth’s deft, succinct tribute. This is partly because of the effect to which the word “Yarrow” is put. It is associated with the living Hogg, which makes the third line of the above stanza doubly chilling: death seem not only to have “closed the Shepherd-poet’s eyes” but to have descended upon “the braes of Yarrow.” The loss of Hogg leads Wordsworth to mourn the loss of other writers: Coleridge, “The rapt one, of the godlike forehead” (17), where the unexpected stress on “one” conveys his fellow-poet’s uniqueness; Lamb; Crabbe; and, unmentioned by name, Felicia Hemans, invoked in terms suited to her own poetry as “that holy spirit, / Sweet as the spring, as ocean deep” (37–38), the three adjectives combining to recreate her particular value. Dirge-like as the poem is, it is also swift, unlugubrious, full of surprises, as when Wordsworth writes: “our haughty life is crowned with darkness” (29). The word “haughty,” implying arrogance and courage, lends “crowned” a double-edged tone and shows how Romantic lyric reawakens attention through arresting or unexpected words: playing its own variation on old poetic techniques. Again, the comparison between the speedy passage out of life of those whom Wordsworth calls “brother” (23) and “clouds that rake the mountain-summits, / Or waves that own no curbing hand” sets up different associations: in this case, of a movement “From sunshine to the sunless land” (24) that participates in the sublimity of natural forces.

In Coleridge’s much-earlier effusion, an attempt is made to connect human and natural life. Effusion licenses the expression of delight in nature’s sounds and silences, and scents. It also accommodates the sense of a link between such sounds, as “the desultory breeze” (14) plays on and over the Eolian harp, “that simplest lute, / Placed lengthways in the clasping casement” (12–13), and the poet’s own creation of poetic melodies. Out of this intuited link emerges a train of thought and feeling to which Coleridge’s sensitive use of blank verse is well attuned, which suggests to the poet analogies between the workings of his “indolent and passive brain” (33) and “this subject lute” (35). In turn, the poet finds himself proposing a speculation he will soon withdraw, fearing that it transgresses religious orthodoxy, that “all of animated Nature / Be but organic harps, diversely framed [...]?” (36–37). It is as though effusion is a mode, such is the poem’s legerdemain, that discovers it is impelled by the same energies that pass though and are operative in “animated Nature.”

Coleridge would drop the generic label, and it is customary for “The Eolian Harp” to be grouped under the heading “Conversation Poems,” a Coleridgean mode with which effusion has an intimate and antecedent relationship. The “conversation poem,” among the major lyric kinds produced by Romantic poets, is the subject of a

justly celebrated essay by M. H. Abrams, “Structure and Style in the Greater Romantic Lyric” (first published in 1965). Abrams notes the form’s affinities with the ode with which it shares a deep interest in transitions. In essence, the form reveals for Abrams, a “repeated out-in-out process, in which mind confronts nature and their interplay constitutes the poem” (2006 [1965], 198). As Abrams points out, “New lyric forms are not as plenty as blackberries” (199), and he shows how, though the form emerges from loco-descriptive poems by Denham, Dyer, and Gray, the new Romantic genre is markedly different in its ability to convey “the free flow of consciousness, the interweaving of thought, feeling, and perceptual detail, and the easy naturalness of the speaking voice” (Abrams 2006 [1965], 206). It is apparent in poems such as Coleridge’s “Frost at Midnight,” which begins with the poet’s attentiveness to the frost’s “secret ministry,” then goes on an associative voyage of memory that takes the poet back to his childhood and schooldays; after that, it imagines a future projected for the poet’s baby son sleeping beside him, a future in which the son will be solaced and inspired by nature. Finally the poet returns to where he started, with a significant difference: nature’s “ministry” is still secret but it now manifests itself in an evidently benign way as it hangs up “silent icicles, / Quietly shining to the quiet moon” (78–79). Coleridge achieved this effect of return by cutting six extra lines describing the baby’s response to the icicles; the relative loss of vigour and form-complicating life is compensated for by greater aesthetic shapeliness as the poet traces what Abrams calls the poem’s “lyric rondure” (2006 [1965], 201), a trade-off that dramatizes a struggle between experiential data and formal order latent in lyric poetry.

4 Romantic Originality

There is considerable evidence of continuity between eighteenth-century poetic lyric and Romantic lyric (see Fairer 2009). But is undeniable that Romantic poets continually and, in Shelley’s words from *A Defence of Poetry*, “inevitably innovate upon the example of [their] predecessors in the exact structure of [their] peculiar versification” (2003, 679) – and handling of lyric form. Ballad is reconceived, in, say, in the finely taut, lyric narrative of Scott’s “Proud Maisie” (sung by Madge Wildfire in Scott’s novel *The Heart of Midlothian*; ↗ 28), in which the pride of youth and beauty collides, without homiletic comment, with the cold realities of death. All is done through juxtaposition, between Maisie and “Sweet Robin” (3), a bird whose sweetness sours quickly. Or does it? Here are the last two stanzas:

“Who makes the bridal bed,
 Birdie, say truly?” –
 “The gray-headed sexton
 That delves the grave duly.

The glow-worm o'er grave and stone
 Shall light thee steady.
 The owl from the steeple sing,
 'Welcome, proud lady.'" (9–16)

Maisie, we note, is not at all thrown by the bird's previous statement that she will be taken "Kirkward" (8) by "six braw gentlemen" (7). Throughout, the feminine rhymes move with poised unsteadiness towards that final marriage of "steady" and "lady." Brooks and Warren (from whom the poem is quoted) invite us to consider the following questions:

How heavily are we to weight the word "proud"? Is the rebuke given to Maisie's pride harsh and bitter? What is the robin's attitude towards Maisie and her hopes? Jeering? Mocking? Playful? Or what? (1960, 52)

They exhort their tyro reader to "read the last stanza very carefully" (Brooks and Warren 1960, 52). Their questions prompt us to recognize how withheld and unforthcoming the poem is about supplying straightforward answers. The bird's anticipations may be less "Jeering" than far-sighted, less a deflationary or sardonic dismissal than an astringently charitable *memento mori*.

Certainly what marks this lyric out as Romantic is the innovative use of a traditional form and an ability to make us re-examine stock responses. Romantic lyric surprises and revitalizes tradition. Shelley's "Hymn to Intellectual Beauty" has odic qualities (see Cronin 1981, 224; Curran 1986, 63), including the deployment of abrupt, unadvertised transition. Blake's "The Tyger" condenses the Book of Job's most searching enquiries into a compactly riddling questioning of ultimates in its fearfully symmetrical, trochaic quatrains; it licenses its imaginings through daringly unparaphrasable imagery. Wordsworth's "Elegiac Stanzas, Suggested by a Picture of Peele Castle in a Storm," and his "Resolution and Independence" (or "The Leech-Gatherer"), breathe a human voice into demanding stanza forms, a voice that changes in pitch, modulation, and feeling at several key moments, inviting and obliging the reader to travel with the poet as he investigates in one poem the impact on his outlook of "deep distress" ("Elegiac Stanza," 36) and in the other his fear of possible "Solitude, pain of heart, distress and poverty" ("The Leech-Gatherer," 35). Marrying joy and dejection, pain and intensities of hope and longing, the Romantic lyric is forever bearing witness to what Coleridge in his "Letter to Sara Hutchinson" (later to undergo a generic shape-change from distressed epistle to relatively restrained ode in "Dejection: An Ode") calls the "shaping spirit of imagination" (242).

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