

## The Poetry of the Age of Sensibility

### *Periods of Neo-Classicism revisited*

- 1660–1700: Restoration (Age of Dryden, Charles II, William of Orange, Queen Mary);
- 1700–1745: Augustan Age (Age of Pope, Queen Anne, George I, George II);
- 1745–1798: Age of Sensibility (Age of Johnson, George II, George III).

Instincts and feelings/emotions begin to gain dominance over judgment and reason. Balance of human faculties. Transition to Romanticism (*Lyrical Ballads*, 1798).

### Precursors: Pope's contemporaries

#### James Thomson (1700–1748)

- son of a Scottish minister (childhood in rural Scotland, did not see London until he was 25);
- 1726: *Winter* published – introducing a new type of nature poetry;
- 1730: *The Seasons* (following the success of *Winter*).
  - interest in **natural detail** vs. search for the general, universal: a sharp eye for the actual;
  - interest in **the sublime in nature** vs. the beautiful: wildness, primitive energy;
  - in subsequent editions enlarged with **contemplative passages**: teaching people not only what to see but also what to feel about what they see – intention: looking intently, focusing;
  - **blank verse** vs. heroic couplets: invoking the Miltonic tradition – influence on Wordsworth;
  - poetry of the eye vs. some Romantic nature poetry focusing on the imagination.

#### Edward Young (1683–1765)

- recognized satirist in the Augustan tradition;
- his most famous and popular poem: *The Complaint, or Night Thoughts on Life, Death and Immortality* (generally referred to as *Night Thoughts*) (1742–45);
  - implicit response to Pope's *Essay on Man* (1733): human happiness is not to be found in the outward world (society), only in the human interior (the divine in humans);
  - often gloomy and melancholy: lonely poet image, contemplating his own mortality in the graveyard;
- 1759: *Conjectures on Original Composition* – proto-romantic theory of poetry:

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A Star of the first magnitude among the Moderns was *Shakespeare*; among the Antients, *Pindar* [cf. Gray]; who (as *Vossius* tells us) boasted of his No-learning, calling himself the Eagle, for his Flight above it. And such Genii as these may, indeed, have much reliance on their own native powers. For Genius may be compared to the Body's natural Strength; Learning to the superinduced Accoutrements of Arms: if the First is equal to the proposed exploit, the Latter rather encumbers, than assists; rather retards, than promotes, the Victory. *Sacer nobis inest Deus* [Our holy God is inside], says *Seneca*. With regard to the Moral world, *Conscience*, with regard to the Intellectual, *Genius*, is that God within. Genius can set us right in Composition, without the Rules of the Learned; as Conscience sets us right in Life, without the Laws of the Land: *This*, singly, can make us Good, as Men; *That*, singly, as Writers, can, sometimes, make us Great.

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**Graveyard School**, e.g. Robert Blair, *The Grave* (1743).

### Mid-century poets and theorists

A group of young poets consciously seeking to sound a new voice in poetry: Joseph and Thomas Warton, Mark Akenside, William Collins.

- new poetry first published in the second half of the 1740s;
- manifesto: Joseph Warton, *Essay on the Genius and Writings of Pope* (1756);
- contrast between the poetry of “familiar life” (Pope) and true poetry (“creative and glowing imagination,” aspiring to the “transcendently sublime and prophetic”);
- Pope: great wit but “not, assuredly, in the same rank with Spenser, Shakespeare and Milton”;
- attempt to revive **romance** (imitations of Spenser), to generate **myth**, to add **vision** to the visible, to excite humanity to an awareness of its **creative (divine) powers**, and to recover the imaginary power of **folk traditions** (cf. Collins's “Ode on the Popular Superstitions of the Highlands of Scotland”);

- sometimes merely *imaginary* – Johnson: Collins “delighted to rove through the meanders of enchantment, to gaze on the magnificence of golden palaces, to repose by the waterfalls of Elysian gardens”;
- poetic attitude involves an element of posing, role-playing (the image of the Poet).

### Edmund Burke (1729–1797)

- *A Philosophical Enquiry into the Origin of Our Ideas of the Sublime and Beautiful* (1757): theory of the effects of poetic and artistic creation based on the passions, *delight*, and *pleasure*:

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Whatever is fitted in any sort to excite the ideas of pain, and danger, that is to say, whatever is in any sort terrible, or is conversant about terrible objects, or operates in a manner analogous to terror, is a source of the sublime; that is, it is productive of the strongest emotion which the mind is capable of feeling. (I.7)

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- *Reflections on the Revolution in France* (1790): political, social, and cultural survey contrasting the Glorious Revolution of 1688 with the French Revolution of 1789 – disparaging the latter, reaffirming (from a Whig perspective) the merits of the former;
- language of theory and criticism adapted to the content of writing; constant self-perfection.

### Thomas Gray (1716–1771)

- The most accomplished poet of the age;
- though a middle-class man, took the Grand Tour as Horace Walpole’s companion;
- scholar (resided most of his life in Cambridge, eventually made Professor of Modern History);
- wide scholarly interests: classics, pre-Elizabethan poetry, Welsh and Norse poetry (cf. “The Bard”);

#### “Ode on the Death of a Favourite Cat” (1747)

- mock Horatian ode inspired by the fatal accident of Selima, Walpole’s she-cat;
- double moral regarding female vanity and predilection for jewellery and the generally risky state a favourite of a high-ranking person is usually in.

#### “Elegy Written in a Country Churchyard” (1742–50)

- originally inspired by the premature death of Gray’s intimate friend Richard West;
- graveyard theme sublimated into a perfectly controlled poem;
- classical and Renaissance prototypes;
- bridge between Milton’s *Lycidas* and Wordsworth’s *Lyrical Ballad* poems (syntax, vocabulary);
- over 25% of the entire poem is anthologized in various “books of wisdom”;
- perfect textbook example of the iambic pentameter – used to an extreme range of rhythmic purposes, adapted to the content of the stanza, spiced with alliteration and assonance (see sample below);
- melancholy, Stoic philosophy of life, ‘vanitatum vanitas’ theme:

The boast of heraldry, the pomp of pow’r,  
And all that beauty, all that wealth e’er gave,  
Awaits alike th’ inevitable hour.  
The paths of glory lead but to the grave. (33–36)

- simple life of rural people juxtaposed with greatness: a common theme elevated to a new height of general human appeal;
- poetic self: observing self at first, the poet writes himself out from the poem – “Epitaph”; moving away, distancing – contemplative subject becomes object of observation and memory.

#### “The Progress of Poesy” (1757)

- Pindaric ode – triadic form:
  - strophe;
  - antistrophe;
  - epode;
- governing image of a brook growing into a river;
- tripartite progress: Greece – Rome – England; Shakespeare – Milton – Dryden and Classicists (Gray);
- juxtaposes the sublime and the beautiful as the sources of poetic effect;
- language influenced the first generation of Romantic poets (e.g. Coleridge and the “Aeolian harp”).

#### “The Bard: A Pindaric Ode” (1757)

- shows interest in medieval historical themes;
- ballad-like in prophetic content and obscure setting; heroism as a main theme;
- cf. Arany, “A walesi bárdok” (imitation or paraphrase or translation).

## Samuel Johnson (1709–1784)

- son of a provincial bookseller – poverty;
- forced to abandon Oxford without a degree;
- 1735: marriage to a wealthy widow (20 years his senior);
- school near Lichfield;
- 1737: he and his pupil, David Garrick, in London: hack work for *The Gentleman's Magazine*; political pamphlets (attacking Walpole and his administration); Parliamentary reports; **Grub Street** writing;
- original work: "London" (1738) – imitation of Juvenal's satire on Rome;
- 1747: *Plan of a Dictionary of the English Language* – much of the next seven years devoted to this project;
- *The Rambler* (1750–52): a twice-weekly paper – Johnson the moralist (cf. sentimentalism);
- 1749: *Irene* (tragedy) performed at Drury Lane;
- 1749: "The Vanity of Human Wishes" – his first publication to bear his name; major theme: the intrusion of desires and hopes that distort reality and lead to false expectations; ideal of disinterestedness:

Yet when the sense of sacred presence fires,  
And strong devotion to the skies aspires,  
Pour forth thy fervours for a healthful mind,  
Obedient passions, and a will resign'd;  
For love, which scarce collective man can fill;  
For patience, sov'reign o'er transmuted ill;  
For faith, that panting for a happier seat,  
Counts death kind Nature's signal of retreat:  
These goods for man the laws of heav'n ordain,  
These goods he grants, who grants the pow'r to gain;  
With these celestial wisdom calms the mind,  
And makes the happiness she does not find. (357–68)

- 1755: the publication of the *Dictionary*:
  - vast knowledge of the English language;
  - some deliberately whimsical, prejudiced, and/or witty, sarcastic entries (*Patron* = "Commonly a wretch who supports with insolence, and is paid with flattery");
  - most definitions precise and concise (a valuable storehouse of 18th-century meaning and usage);
  - method: quoting illustrative examples from works of English authors from 1580 to 1750: a valuable record of the changing of the language (technique kept and improved in the *OED* today);
- fame but no financial security: articles and reviews for *The Literary Magazine*; *The Idler* essays (1758–60);
- 1759: *Rasselas, Prince of Abyssinia* – written in about a week to raise money for his dying mother (profit eventually spent on her funeral); link to Grub Street literature, so called after a district of London where Johnson himself also lived for a considerable period;
- 1762: government pension of £300 a year
- 1764: founding member of the Literary Club (Reynolds, Burke, Adam Smith, Goldsmith, Boswell, etc.);
- 1765: complete edition of Shakespeare's works; "Preface": theoretical work on the nature of drama;
- 1779: *The Lives of the Poets*, Vols. 1–4 (22 lives);
- 1781: *The Lives of the Poets*, Vols. 5–10 (30 lives), comprehensive critical account of the lives and works of poets from Cowley to Gray.

## The Sixties: forgery and medieval rediscovery

- Macpherson's Ossianic poems (*The Works of Ossian*, 1760–65):
  - highlight the interest in local mythologies, Gaelic themes;
  - prose poems based on Scots Gaelic originals but created by Macpherson;
  - broad European impact.
- Thomas Chatterton's (1752–70) forgeries:
  - the Rowley poems: precursor to Romantic medievalism;
  - the 'marvellous boy' (Wordsworth, rather anachronistically);
  - Romantic death by suicide.
- Percy's *Reliques of Ancient English Poetry* (1765):
  - comprehensive survey of the English poetic tradition;
  - antiquarian interest in genuine early writing.

## William Cowper (1731–1800)

- parentage of church ministers and poets from Hertfordshire;
- 1740–42: serious eye problems; treatment in London;
- 1753: first mental breakdown after hopeless love for his cousin Theadora Cowper;
- 1754: the Nonsense Club (George Colman, Robert Lloyd);
- 1763: breakdown before final examination in law; three suicide attempts;
- 1764: recovery and religious conversion;
- 1767: friendship with the reverend John Newton
- 1768: moves to Orchard Side, Olney; spiritual support from John Newton (*Olney Hymns*, 1771);
- 1773: suicide attempt;
- 1779: *Olney Hymns* published;
- 1783–85: *The Task* – spiritual autobiography, apology, or confession; anticipates Wordsworth's *Prelude*:

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Lady Ann Austen “fond of blank verse, demanded a poem of that kind from the author, and gave him the Sofa for a subject. He obeyed; and, having much leisure, connected another subject with it; and, pursuing the train of thought to which his situation and turn of mind led him, brought forth at length, instead of the trifle which he at first intended, a serious affair – a Volume!” (from the “Advertisement”)

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- 1787: repeated period of derangement;
- 1788–91: translates Homer's *Odyssey* (revised in 1797–99).

### “Lines Written during a Short Period of Insanity” (c. 1773)

- Sapphic strophe (intriguing paradox of formal complexity and perfection vs. insanity);
- religious doubt and horror of failed suicide attempts (“Damn'd below Judas...”);
- syntax to express desperation, Miltonic and Latinate convolution of words; pronoun use.

### “The Solitude of Alexander Selkirk” (1782)

- a different perspective on the famous castaway than Defoe's *Robinson*: the benefits of human society praised over the autonomy of an isolated individual;
- Biblical language (“Had I the wings of a dove...” – cf. Psalm 55, but for opposite purposes);
- comradeship, social bonds, love and compassion highlighted.

## Robert “Rabbie” Burns (1759–1796)

- national poet of Scotland, composed both in English and in the Scots language (Burns night: Jan 25);
- 1779: defies father, joins Tarbolton dancing class;
- 1780: Tarbolton Bachelors' Club;
- 1781: joins the Freemasons;
- 1786: plans to emigrate to Jamaica
- collected, revised, and adapted Scottish folk songs – popular (“Auld Lang Syne”; “A Red Red Rose”);
- 1787: Edinburgh edition of his poems published (second edition: 1793);
- 1787 onwards: edited and contributed to James Johnson's *Scots Musical Museum*;
- 1790: “Tam O' Shanter.”

He was fluent in the idiom of contemporary English poetry (late Neo-Classical style, e.g. “Address to the Shade of Thomson”) as well as developing his own idiosyncratic mixture of English and Scots, using many dialectal words and turns of speech, invigorating his poetic style:

O Lord, my God! that glib-tongu'd Aiken,  
My vera heart and flesh are quakin,  
To think how we stood sweatin', shakin,  
    An' p[iss]'d wi' dread,  
While he, wi' hingin lip an' snakin,  
    Held up his head.

Lord, in Thy day o' vengeance try him,  
Lord, visit them wha did employ him,  
And pass not in Thy mercy by 'em,  
    Nor hear their pray'r,  
But for Thy people's sake, destroy 'em,  
    An' dinna spare.

But, Lord, remember me an' mine  
Wi' mercies temp'ral an' divine,  
That I for grace an' gear may shine,  
    Excell'd by nane,  
And a' the glory shall be thine,  
    Amen, Amen!

(from “Holy Willie's Prayer”)