

Romantic Poetry

Beginnings of literary Romanticism: Rousseau (new confessional writing), French Revolution, *Lyrical Ballads*.

Wordsworth (1770–1850) and Coleridge (1772–1834)

Lyrical Ballads (1798/1802)

1798: the collection *Lyrical Ballads with a Few Other Poems* marks the beginning of “literary Romanticism.”

- “Advertisement”: poems “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 purpose of poetic pleasure.” – Democratic outlook.
- Indications of Rousseauism.
- **Wordsworth’s** poetic ideals in “Preface” to the 3rd edition (1802):
 - reaction against the “gaudiness and inane phraseology of many modern writers”;
 - poems written (i) in a “language really used by men” (ii) presenting “ordinary things . . . to the mind in an unusual way” for the sake of reflection (cf. *unheimlich* in Freud and Wittgenstein) – democratism;
 - the association of ideas to be “traced”;
 - “spontaneous overflow of powerful feelings” BUT “organic sensibility” must be matched by thinking “long and deeply”; PLUS “influxes of feeling . . . modified by . . . thoughts, which are indeed the representatives of all our past feelings” – element of **memory**;
 - the origin of poetry: “emotion recollected in tranquillity” – cf. “Tintern Abbey”;
 - close resemblance of “the language . . . of life and nature”;
 - **“What is a Poet?”** – (i) “a man speaking to men . . . endowed with more lively sensibility, more enthusiasm and tenderness, who has a greater knowledge of human nature, and a more comprehensive soul, than are supposed to be common among mankind”; (ii) “pleased with his own passions and volitions” rejoicing “in the spirit of life that is in him”; (iii) delight in contemplating “similar volitions and passions as manifested in the goings-on of the Universe”; (iv) “habitually [creating] them where he cannot find them”; (v) “affected . . . by absent things as if they were present”; (vi) able to “conjure up” passions in himself; (vii) endowed with a “general sympathy”;
 - **Poet** differs from ordinary people not “in kind . . . but only in degree”;
 - **pleasure principle**: “it will be the wish of the Poet to bring his feelings near to those of the persons whose feelings he describes” – the greatest pleasure is “the perception of similitude in dissimilitude”; hence follow *taste and moral feeling, sexual appetite and all passions*;
 - **metre**: “tempering and restraining by an intertexture of ordinary feeling, and of feeling not strictly and necessarily connected with the passion”; *excitement vs. regularity; similitude vs. dissimilitude*.

Lyricism: personal tone, sometimes confessional (e.g. “Lines Written a Few Miles above Tintern Abbey,” “Simon Lee,” “The Nightingale” – conversational element).

Moral purpose: a side-effect of the pleasure principle; important but derived rather than primary.

Ballads

Of the *Lyrical Ballads*, a substantial portion is not written in a proper ballad form.

“We Are Seven”: ballad form without a typical ballad content. (Variations in editions.)

“Simon Lee”: a stanza pattern derived from the traditional ballad in metre and rhyme scheme BUT explicitly lacking a “plot”; disclaimer: “O Reader! had you in your mind / Such stores as silent thought can bring, / O gentle Reader! you would find / A tale in every thing.”

“The Rime of the Ancient Mariner”: fulfilling all the criteria of the ballad form.

- Ballad stanza with many variations in line number and rhyme pattern – all warranted by conventions:
 - basic form: x (iambic tetrameter) a (iambic trimeter) x (iambic tetrameter) a (iambic trimeter);
 - extensions: (i) x a bb a (185–189, end of “We Are Seven”); (ii) x a x a x a (97–102); (iii) a a b x b (45–50);
 - internal rhyme possible within the x lines.
- Vague and obscure plot with supernatural elements.
- Incremental repetition: expanding the meaning of phrases, though no proper refrain. Cf. “And I had done a hellish thing, / And it would work ’em woe: / For all averred, I had killed the bird [*internal rhyme*] / That made the breeze to blow. / Ah wretch! said they, the bird to slay, / That made the breeze to blow!” (91–96).
- Dramatic element: dialogues, conflicts, highly charged actions and decisions.

Coleridge's Philosophy and Poetics

- Adaptation of German philosophy (abstractions translated into a language accessible to the more empirical-minded British audiences).
- **Natural philosopher**: from nature to (the human) mind;
 - empirical (based on sense perception), a posteriori (from effects to causes), method of induction;
 - laws of nature into laws of the intellect;
 - extreme form (and pitfall): philosophical materialism (e.g. Marx);
- **Transcendental philosopher**: from the transcendental mind towards nature;
 - rationalist/intuitive, a priori (groundless axioms as the foundation), deduction (from causes to effects);
 - extreme form (and pitfall): idealism (in psychology: solipsism);
 - **Aim**: to synthesize the two – to meet in the middle; means to achieve this aim: through the **IMAGINATION**.

Chapter XIII of *Biographia Literaria*

- “On the imagination, or esemplastic power”: εἰς+εν+πλάττειν (coined by Coleridge) = into+one+to-shape:

The Imagination then I consider either as primary, or secondary. The primary Imagination I hold to be the living power and prime agent of all human perception, and as a repetition in the finite mind of the eternal act of creation in the infinite I AM. The secondary Imagination I consider as an echo of the former, co-existing with the conscious will, yet still as identical with the primary in the kind of its agency, and differing only in degree, and in the mode of its operation. It dissolves, diffuses, dissipates, in order to recreate: or where this process is rendered impossible, yet still at all events it struggles to idealize and to unify. It is essentially vital, even as all objects (as objects) are essentially fixed and dead.

FANCY, on the contrary, has no other counters to play with, but fixities and definites. The fancy is indeed no other than a mode of memory emancipated from the order of time and space; while it is blended with, and modified by that empirical phaenomenon of the will, which we express by the word Choice. But equally with the ordinary memory the Fancy must receive all its materials ready made from the law of association.

- **Primary**: the creative but passive act inspired by divinity to perceive similitude in dissimilitude;
- **Secondary**: active process of breaking down and creating anew (raw inspiration transfused into a new and vital form, that is poetry);
- **Fancy**: a lower faculty that tosses around objects and ideas at hand or found in memory without revitalizing them (cf. “Kubla Khan”);

Poetic creation should produce:

- organic wholes in which
 - all elements symbiotically contribute to the unity of the whole; *pars pro toto* and *totum per partes*;
 - content incarnated into form, creating its own form (cf. Hegel and the liquid container);
 - leading to Coleridge's epoch-making vindication of Shakespeare (no longer a “wild genius”);
- symbols in which
 - the idea and its objective image are inherently and organically united (e.g. Last Supper, incarnation);
 - as opposed to allegories which are arbitrary and changeable (cf. Bunyan);
- concrete universals in which
 - the microcosm of a poem fully realizes a universal idea in a concrete form (e.g. Christ through the esemplastic power of the Incarnation became fully God and fully Man);
 - the end of the journey of the natural and the transcendental thinker, philosopher, or poet.

Chapter XIV of *Biographia Literaria*

- On the genesis of the *Lyrical Ballads* – Coleridge's version of the story;
- Wordsworth the natural, Coleridge the transcendental philosopher;
- introducing the term “willing suspension of disbelief”:

[I]t was agreed, that my endeavours should be directed to persons and characters supernatural, or at least romantic, yet so as to transfer from our inward nature a human interest and a semblance of truth sufficient to procure for these shadows of imagination that willing suspension of disbelief for the moment, which constitutes poetic faith. Mr. Wordsworth on the other hand was to propose to himself as his object, to give the charm of novelty to things of every day, and to excite a feeling analogous to the supernatural, by awakening the mind's attention from the lethargy of custom, and directing it to the loveliness and the wonders of the world before us...

William Blake (1757–1827)

Biography

Family: second child (of five) of a London hosier, lived most of his life in London.

Education: did not go to school; at 10 sent to drawing school; at 14 he was apprenticed to an engraver James Basire (influence of Gothic architecture and art); at 21 began studies at the Royal Academy – conflict with the classicism of Sir Joshua Reynolds, see:

Reynolds: “The disposition to abstractions, to generalizing and classification, is the great glory of the human mind.” **Blake:** “To Generalize is to be an Idiot; To Particularize is the Alone Distinction of Merit.”

Life largely uneventful, its events marking mainly his creative achievements.

Artistic output: almost 400 plates for his own illuminated books, 1,400 designs for commercial projects, over 1,000 pictures for patrons.

1779 professional engraver;

1780 meets Fuseli (Swiss-born painter and art theorist);
influenced by Swedenborg’s thought; Biblical mythology; visionary experiences;

1782 meets Flaxman (his subsequent patron) and Catherine Boucher;
marries Catherine – teaches her to read and write as well as to assist him in engraving;

Romantic ideology of the preference of the mind as a blank sheet to be filled with signs (cf. William Morris);
1783 *Poetical Sketches* – his first published work (the only one published in conventional print; all subsequent publications utilizing Blake’s idiosyncratic way of printing);

1789 *Songs of Innocence, The Book of Thel*;

1790–93 *The Marriage of Heaven and Hell* etched – prose overture to a canon of “prophetic works”;
Revolutionary poems/prophesies: *The French Revolution* (1791), *America: A Prophecy* (1793), *The Visions of the Daughters of Albion* (1793) – ideology: political liberation and spiritual liberation;

1794 *Songs of Innocence and of Experience* (no separate issues of *Experience* survive) – colours added;

1797–1804 *The Four Zoas*;

1800–1802 moves to Felpham, Sussex under the patronage of William Hayley, whose minor poetic works he is meant to illuminate – resentment over payments and the imposing artistic creed of Hayley; William and Catherine Blake move back to London;

When I had my defiance given,
The sun stood trembling in heaven;
The moon, that glow’d remote below,
Became leprous and white as snow;
And every soul of men on the earth
Felt affliction, and sorrow, and sickness, and dearth.
Los flam’d in my path, and the sun was hot
With the bows of my mind and the arrows of thought.
My bowstring fierce with ardour breathes;
My arrows glow in their golden sheaves;
My brothers and father march before;
The heavens drop with human gore.
Now I a fourfold vision see,
And a fourfold vision is given to me;
’Tis fourfold in my supreme delight,
And threefold in soft Beulah’s night,
And twofold always. – May God us keep
From single vision, and Newton’s sleep!

1804–1808 *Milton* (including the famous passage on “Jerusalem”; cf. *Chariots of Fire*);

1804–1820 *Jerusalem: The Emanation of the Giant Albion*.

- Moderate fame during his lifetime: 22 copies of *Songs of Innocence*, 27 copies of *Songs of Innocence and of Experience*, 5 copies of *Jerusalem* survive.
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Wordsworth: “There is no doubt that this poor man was mad, but there is something in the madness of this man which interests me more than the sanity of Lord Byron and Walter Scott.” **Blake:** “I fear Wordsworth loves Nature, and Nature is the work of the Devil. The Devil is in us as far as we are in

Nature. [...] I see in Wordsworth the Natural Man rising up against the Spiritual Man Continually, & then he is No Poet but a Heathen Philosopher at Enmity against all true Poetry or Inspiration.”

- 1809 exhibition failed.
- Rediscovered by the Pre-Raphaelites.
- Swinburne appreciated his poetry, William Michael Rossetti published his poems in 1874.
- William Butler Yeats edited his poems in three volumes in 1893.
- Throughout the 20th century, his reputation grew steadily: Northrop Frye, *Fearful Symmetry* (1947), Harold Bloom, *Blake's Apocalypse* (revised edition 1970), David V. Erdman, *Blake: Prophet Against Empire* (3rd edition 1977); Frye's theory based on the "fourfold vision."

Songs of Innocence and of Experience (1789/1794)

- Two opposite aspects/perspectives of experiencing the same reality.
- Pairs of poems that enter a meaningful dialogue with one another ("Introduction," "The Chimney Sweeper," "The Lamb" vs. "The Tyger," "Holy Thursday").
- Pairs within each collection (e.g. "Introduction" and "Earth's Answer" in *Songs of Experience*).
- Unity of art and poetry – contrary to Neo-Classical ideologies; cf. Lessing's and Blake's *Laocoön*.
- Criticism of religious establishment because of its oppressive nature.

The Marriage of Heaven and Hell (1790–1793)

- Attack on established, institutional religion.
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All Bibles or sacred codes have been the causes of the following Errors.

1. That Man has two real existing principles Viz: a Body & a Soul.
2. That Energy, call'd Evil, is alone from the Body, & that Reason, call'd Good, is alone from the Soul.
3. That God will torment Man in Eternity for following his Energies.

But the following Contraries to these are True

1. Man has no Body distinct from his Soul for that call'd Body is a portion of Soul discern'd by the five Senses, the chief inlets of Soul in this age.
 2. Energy is the only life and is from the Body and Reason is the bound or outward circumference of Energy.
 3. Energy is Eternal Delight.
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- Poetic creed, poet as prophet (cf. Shelley) – in keeping with the Hegelian *Spirit of the Age* or *Zeitgeist*.
- The separation of prophecy and poetry from institutionalized religion and the established church.
- Reference to Blake's own printing method (the fires of hell are a direct reference to *relief etching*).

The Four Zoas (1797–1804)

- Mythical framework: the Giant Albion's fall from Eternity into a nightmarish dream and his gradual reawakening from it. The four Zoas are Albion's primary attributes, and his fall consists in the war between these four attributes (which are presented as Titans with human personalities).
 - Urizen – cold reason;
 - Orc (Luvah in Eternity) – wild emotion;
 - Los (Urthona in Eternity) – imagination;
 - Tharmas – instinct.
- Titans were unified with their female counterpart (or Emanation) in Eternity from whom they become separated in the fall, this way further complicating the fallen situation.
- Albion can finally awake and reassume his life in Eternity with the help of Los (the imagination) who alone of the titans and their Emanations can preserve a vestige of the Divine Vision.
- *Potential readings*: literal (contemporary London/Britain); literal (Blake's biography); psychological (the characters being different aspects of the human mind, including Jungian animus/anima); mythical (transcendental, visionary prophecy).

The Second Generation of Romantic Poets

Historical background: no direct experience of the glory of the French Revolution; only the aftermath in the form of the Napoleonic wars.

Percy Bysshe Shelley (1792–1822)

Biography

Family: born to a very wealthy family of country gentry (his grandfather was made a baronet in 1806, his father Sir Timothy Shelley was a member of the House of Commons). Brought up in Horsham, Sussex.

Education: Eton; University College, Oxford – expelled after 6 months because of publishing “The Necessity of Atheism” (1811). Not to be confused with 20th-century atheism, however:

There is no God [but this] negation must be understood solely to affect a creative Deity. The hypothesis of a pervading Spirit coeternal with the universe remains unshaken.

Shelley led a life adventurous enough to be in keeping with the general image of “the Romantic poet” which would be epitomized by Lord Byron’s life. Pilgrimage throughout Europe. A life-long Grand Tour.

1811 elopes with and marries 16-year-old Harriet Westbrook;

joins the cultural circle in London of Leigh Hunt – radical political and aesthetic views;

1814 declares himself the faithful disciple of William Godwin – political writing and activism; anarchism;

elopes with William Godwin and Mary Wollstonecraft’s daughter Mary Wollstonecraft Godwin;

abandons his pregnant wife;

1816 second trip to Switzerland with Mary and Claire Clairmont; makes friends with Byron in Geneva;

“Mont Blanc” written inspired by but transcending Wordsworthian ideas of nature;

Harriet drowns herself; Shelley legally marries Mary Shelley;

1817 refused custody of his children by Harriet;

1818 self-chosen life-long exile to Italy;

1822 dies in a sailing accident (speculations about the possibility of suicide).

Love affairs: Shelley’s views of love were of a fleeting, unstable character. At the time of his death, he was in love with Edward Williams’s wife, Jane, with whom he and Mary were spending time together in what is called Shelley’s Pisan Circle. Percy Shelley and Edward Williams drowned together on their way back from Leigh Hunt’s place at Leghorn (Livorno).

A Defence of Poetry

- Reply to Thomas Love Peacock’s “The Four Ages of Poetry”:

Now when we consider that it is not the thinking and studious, and scientific and philosophical part of the community, not to those whose minds are bent on the pursuit and promotion of permanently useful ends and aims, that poets must address their minstrelry, but to that much larger portion of the reading public, whose minds are not awakened to the desire of valuable knowledge, and who are indifferent to any thing beyond being charmed, moved, excited, affected, and exalted: charmed by harmony, moved by sentiment, excited by passion, affected by pathos, and exalted by sublimity: harmony, which is language on the rack of Procrustes; sentiment, which is canting egotism in the mask of refined feeling; passion, which is the commotion of a weak and selfish mind; pathos, which is the whining of an unmanly spirit; and sublimity, which is the inflation of an empty head: when we consider that the great and permanent interests of human society become more and more the main spring of intellectual pursuit; that in proportion as they become so, the subordinacy of the ornamental to the useful will be more and more seen and acknowledged; and that therefore the progress of useful art and science, and of moral and political knowledge, will continue more and more to withdraw attention from frivolous and uncondusive, to solid and condusive studies: that therefore the poetical audience will not only continually diminish in the proportion of its number to that of the rest of the reading public, but will also sink lower and lower in the comparison of intellectual acquirement: when we consider that the poet must still please his audience, and must therefore continue to sink to their level, while the rest of the community is rising above it: we may easily conceive that the day is not distant,

when the degraded state of every species of poetry will be as generally recognized as that of dramatic poetry has long been: and this not from any decrease either of intellectual power, or intellectual acquisition, but because intellectual power and intellectual acquisition have turned themselves into other and better channels, and have abandoned the cultivation and the fate of poetry to the degenerate fry of modern rhymesters, and their olympic judges, the magazine critics, who continue to debate and promulgate oracles about poetry, as if it were still what it was in the Homeric age...

- Poetics based on creation (cf. Plato, *Symposium*).
- Inspiration (“influencing” in *Mont Blanc*).
- Sharing Blake’s view that desires should be cherished and appreciated:

For the end of social corruption is to destroy all sensibility to pleasure. [...] It begins at the imagination and the intellect as the core, and distributes itself thence as a paralyzing venom, through the affections into the very appetites, until all become a torpid mass in which sense hardly survives. At the approach of such a period, Poetry ever addresses itself to those faculties which are the last to be destroyed. [...] Poetry ever communicates all the pleasure which men are capable of receiving; it is ever still the light of life; the source of whatever of beautiful, or generous, or true can have place in an evil time. [...] [C]orruption must have utterly destroyed the fabric of human society before Poetry can ever cease.

- Enlargement of the mind.
- Christianity praised for social improvements:
[The medieval world] would have fallen into utter anarchy and darkness, but that there were found poets among the authors of the Christian and Chivalric systems of manners and religion, who created forms of opinion never before conceived. [...] if the error which confounded diversity with inequality of the powers of the two sexes has become partially recognized [...] we owe this great benefit to the worship of which Chivalry was the law, and poets the prophets...
- The poet as a prophet, a “trumpet” who has a purpose that is not clear even to themselves (cf. “Ode to the West Wind”).
- Merging all realms of artistic creation (drama, music, poetry); cf. *The Cenci*; *Prometheus Unbound*.
- Legislators; the basis for human society at large.

Poets are the unacknowledged legislators of the World.

- Related to Imlac’s definition in Johnson’s *Rasselas*:

But *the knowledge of nature* is only half the task of a poet; he must be acquainted likewise with all the modes of life. His character requires that he estimate the happiness and misery of every condition... [...] He must divest himself of the prejudices of his age or country; he must consider right and wrong in their abstracted and invariable state; he must disregard present laws and opinions, and rise to *general and transcendental truths*, which will always be the same: he must therefore content himself with the slow progress of his name; condemn the applause of his own time, and commit his claims to *the justice of posterity*. He must write as *the interpreter of nature*, and *the legislator of mankind*, and consider himself as presiding over the thoughts and manners of future generations; as a being superiour to time and place.

(Chapter 10; my emphasis)

- Merging poetics, politics, and poetry proper; e.g. Part V of “Ode to the West Wind”:

Make me thy lyre, even as the forest is:
What if my leaves are falling like its own!
The tumult of thy mighty harmonies
Will take from both a deep, autumnal tone,
Sweet though in sadness. Be thou, Spirit fierce,
My spirit! Be thou me, impetuous one!
Drive my dead thoughts over the universe
Like wither’d leaves to quicken a new birth!
And, by the incantation of this verse,
Scatter, as from an unextinguish’d hearth
Ashes and sparks, my words among mankind!
Be through my lips to unawaken’d earth,
The trumpet of a prophecy! O Wind,
If Winter comes, can Spring be far behind?

For further information on Shelley’s poetics, consult my brief survey of *A Defence of Poetry* [here](#).

George Gordon, Lord Byron (1788–1824)

Biography

- Romantic hero-poet: antithetical character in unison with poetry.
 - Handsome and attractive but disabled from his birth.
 - Athletic but struggling with a tendency to grow fat.
 - Idol of women and of sexuality but in fact passive towards women; bisexual with strong homoerotic bonds.
 - Man of adventure but of melancholy temperament.
 - Revolutionary character but passive in politics.
 - Champion of Greek liberty but hostile towards the Greeks themselves.
 - Considered a war hero but in fact died of a banal illness.
 - Highest of high romantics with a thoroughly Neo-Classical poetic creed; cf. "Thou shalt believe in Milton, Dryden, Pope; / Thou shalt not set up Wordsworth, Coleridge, Southey..." (*Don Juan* l.205).
 - Aristocratic but déclassé (he unexpectedly inherited his title of a Baron).
 - Brought up by his weak-nerved mother and a governess who allegedly seduced him.
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- Good schools (Harrow, 1801–1805), studies at Cambridge (Trinity College, 1805).
 - Grand Tour of Europe (Spain, Greece, Albania) commemorated in a verse diary in Spenserian stanzas: published in 1812 as *Childe Harold's Pilgrimage*, Cantos I and II.
Result: "I awoke one morning and found myself famous."
 - **1795**: Baron Byron of Rochdale – title inherited from his great uncle.
 - **1798**: titled Lord Byron.
 - **1815**: Marriage: Annabella Milbanke; soon ends in separation. (Cf. present-day celebrity stories.)
 - **1816**: leaves England for good. Geneva: friendship with Shelley – *Childe Harold*, Canto III composed.
 - **1817**: Venice – finishes Canto IV of *Childe Harold* as well as *Manfred*.
 - **1819**: settles with the Countess Teresa Guiccioli (as a cavalier servante).
 - **1820**: involvement in the Carbonari movement; Teresa's family banished to Pisa in 1821 (after the defeat of the Carbonari) – Byron moves to Pisa with them. The Pisan circle is formed with Byron, Shelley, and friends.
 - **1823**: goes to Greece.
 - **1824**: dies of a fever at Missolonghi.
 - **Spleen**: used differently than in Neo-Classical times;
 - 18th century: imbalance of the humours (e.g. anger, hysteria, lack of peace of mind) – cf. the Cave of Spleen in Pope's *Rape of the Lock* ("Pain"; "Megrim"; "Ill-nature"; "Affectation"); "violent ill-nature or ill-humour; irritable or peevish temper"; "a fit of temper; a passion"; "a grudge, a spite or ill-will"; "indignation" (*OED*);
 - Byron: "craving void," cf. a letter dated 6 September 1813:

The great object of life is sensation – to feel that we exist, even though in pain. It is this "craving void" which drives us to gaming – to battle – to travel – to intemperate, but keenly felt pursuits of any description, whose principal attraction is the agitation inseparable from their accomplishment.

"Excessive dejection or depression of spirits; gloominess and irritability; moroseness; melancholia" (*OED*).

Don Juan

- 16 complete cantos; 17th begun but never finished. Fragmentary nature.
- **Plot**: loose, often inconsistent, digressive, suggests a Grand Tour
- **Parodies** epic conventions:
 - argument at the end of Canto I;
 - invocation in a casual style;
 - address to "Bob Southey";
 - self-references disclosing the secrets of the epic poet's trade (e.g. *in medias res* beginning; forced rhymes).
- **Epic totality** (as opposed to Wordsworth's *Prelude*, an epic based on Wordsworth's "egotistical sublime," cf. Keats): "omnium gatherum" of contemporary life in the digressions.
- **Romantic epic**: epic totality achieved through the synthesizing presence of the narrator's personality (Byron as the real hero). Cf. T. S. Eliot's views:

What makes the tales interesting is first a torrential fluency of verse, and a skill in varying it from time to time to avoid monotony; and second, a genius for digression. Digression, indeed, is one of the

valuable arts of the story-teller. The effect of Byron's digressions is to keep us interested in the story-teller himself, and through this interest to interest us more in the story.

Cf. Laurence Sterne's writing style in *A Sentimental Journey* and *Tristram Shandy*.

I would to heaven that I were so much clay,
As I am blood, bone, marrow, passion, feeling—
Because at least the past were pass'd away—
And for the future—(but I write this reeling,
Having got drunk exceedingly to-day,
So that I seem to stand upon the ceiling)
I say—the future is a serious matter—
And so—for God's sake—hock and soda water!

- **Technique:** conscious use of form suggesting control (*ottava rima* instead of blank verse; loose ode forms);
- ironic distancing.

John Keats (1795–1821)

Biography

- first of four children in the family of a prosperous coachman (mother the daughter of a judge – Jennings);
- lost his parents early: his father died in 1804 – mother re-married: children were looked after by the grandparents and later by guardians; mother died of tuberculosis in 1810;
- decisive experience in youth: death of relatives and friends;
- Enfield, John Clarke's school (1803–1811);
- **1811:** surgeon's apprentice with Thomas Hammond;
- **1814:** grandmother died; Richard Abbey became the siblings' guardian;
- **1815–1816:** Guy's Hospital; eligible to practice as apothecary, physician, or surgeon;
- **1818:** met Fanny Brawne, his future fiancée; his brother Tom died (shock and personal fate);
- **October 1818 to October 1819:** the annus mirabilis (year of wonder) – Keats's greatest poems composed;
- **1820:** signs of advanced tuberculosis;
- Keats was sent to Italy to recover; he offered to cancel his engagement with Fanny, but the girl refused;
- **1821:** died in Rome; buried in the Protestant Cemetery there.

Poetry

- first attempts at the age of 19; influence of Spenser (early poetry mawkish, sentimental);
- other influences: Chatterton, Milton, Shakespeare, Wordsworth, William Hazlitt (lectures on Shakespeare);
- his thoughts on poetry (documented in his letters) anticipated his practice;
- programme works (*Sleep and Poetry*, many of the letters sketching out poetic ideals);
- hence the rapid development from the Autumn of 1818 (ripening and maturity);
- epic endeavours seen as the height of his career (*Endymion*, *Hyperion*, *The Fall of Hyperion*);
- great formal innovator BUT also classically conservative:
 - comfortable with both the Italian and the English sonnet tradition;
 - "After Dark Vapours": abba abba cdc ede (Italian);
 - "When I Have Fears": abab cdcd efef gg (Shakespearean); see contextual survey [here](#);
 - Keatsian ode stanza: English quatrain + Italian sestet, with variations;
 - "Ode to a Nightingale": the 8th line of each stanza iambic trimeter instead of pentameter;
 - "Ode on a Grecian Urn": "dost tease us out of thought / As doth eternity...";
 - "To Autumn": extra line added after the 9th line of each stanza (delay);
 - the ballad tradition;
 - "La Belle Dame Sans Merci": variation of the Scottish ballad form, e.g. Thomas Rymer;
- defined himself in opposition to Wordsworth's "egotistical sublime" (letter to Reynolds, 3 May 1818);
- Negative Capability: "several things dovetailed in my mind, & at once it struck me, what quality went to form a Man of Achievement especially in Literature & which Shakespeare possessed [sic] so enormously – I mean *Negative Capability*, that is when man is capable of being in uncertainties, Mysteries, doubts, without any irritable reaching after fact & reason..." (letter to George and Tom Keats, 21/27 December 1817);
- ultimate ideal of detachment and disinterestedness (NOT the lack of interest!).