

Pre-romantic Age

1. An Overview

The Age of Samuel Johnson (1744-1784)

The later half of the eighteenth century, which was dominated by Dr. Samuel Johnson, is called the *Age of Johnson*. Johnson died in 1784, and from that time the Classical spirit in English literature began to give place to the Romantic spirit, though officially the Romantic Age started from the year 1798 when Wordsworth and Coleridge published the famous *Lyrical Ballads*. Even during the Age of Johnson, which was predominantly classical, cracks had begun to appear in the solid wall of classicism and there were clear signs of revolt in favour of the Romantic spirit. This was specially noticeable in the field of poetry. Most of the poets belonging to the *Age of Johnson* may be termed as the precursors of the Romantic Revival. That is why the *Age of Johnson* is also called the *Age of Transition* in English literature.

2. Introduction

The age of Samuel Johnson, from 1744 to about 1784, was a time of changing literary ideals. The developed classicism and literary conservatism associated with Johnson fought a rearguard action against the cult of sentiment and feeling associated in various ways with the harbingers of the coming age of romanticism. Johnson composed poetry that continued the traditions and forms of Pope, but he is best known as a prose writer and as an extraordinarily gifted conversationalist and literary arbiter in the cultivated urban life of his time. His conservatism and sturdy common sense are what might be expected given his intellectual tradition, but his individual quality has little to do with literary tendencies. His curiously lovable and upright personality, along with his intellectual preeminence and idiosyncrasies, have been preserved in the most famous of English biographies, the *Life of Samuel Johnson* (1791), by James Boswell, a Scottish writer with an appetite for literary celebrities.

Johnson worked his way up from poverty by honest literary labors, among which was his *Dictionary of the English Language* (1755). A great success, it was the first such work

prepared according to modern standards of lexicography. Like Addison and Steele, Johnson produced a series of journalistic essays, *The Rambler* (1750-1752), but because of their somewhat pedantic style and Latinate vocabulary, they lack the easy informality of the *Spectator* papers and serve to accentuate the opposition between his neoclassical formality and the succeeding romantic ideal of heart-to-heart communication. Johnson's philosophical tale *Rasselas* (1759), of which the moral is that “human life is everywhere a state in which much is to be endured, and little to be enjoyed,” is reminiscent of Swift in its perception of the vanity of human wishes. For all his pessimism, however, the amazing detail, independence, and intellectual facility of Johnson's critical biographies of English poets since 1600 (*Lives of the Poets*, 1779-1781), written in his old age, show what critical discrimination and intellectual integrity can accomplish.

Johnson's friend Oliver Goldsmith was a curious mixture of the old and the new. His novel *The Vicar of Wakefield* (1766) begins with dry humor but passes quickly into tearful calamity. His poem *The Deserted Village* (1770) is in form reminiscent of Pope, but in the tenderness of its sympathy for the lower classes it foreshadows the romantic age. In such plays as *She Stoops to Conquer* (1773) Goldsmith, like the younger Richard Sheridan in his *School for Scandal* (1777), demonstrated an older tradition of satirical quality and artistic adroitness that was to be anathema to a younger generation.

The signs of this newer feeling, which resulted in romanticism, can be traced in the poetry of William Cowper and of Thomas Gray. The cultivation of a pensive and melancholy sensibility and the interruption of the rule of the heroic couplet, as in Gray's “Elegy Written in a Country Churchyard” (1751), hint at the period to come, as does Gray's interest in medieval, nonclassical literature. New interests are even more obvious in the highly original poetry of the self-educated artist and engraver William Blake. His work consists in part of simple, almost childlike lyrics (*Songs of Innocence*, 1789), as well as of powerful but lengthy and obscure declarations of a new mythological vision of life (*The Book of Thel*, 1789). All Blake's poetry expresses a revolt against the ideal of reason (which he considered destructive to life) and advocates the life of feeling—but in a more vital and assertive sense than is the case with the other previously mentioned preromantics. Similarly

robust and passionate are the lyrics of the Scottish poet Robert Burns, which are characterized by his use of regional Scottish vernacular. The simplicity, forcefulness, and powerful emotion of the ancient ballads of the Scottish-English border region, as revealed in *Reliques of Ancient English Poetry* (1765), by Bishop Thomas Percy, were likewise influential in the development of romanticism.

3. Origin of the Term

Pre-Romanticism

The word "**Pre-Romanticism**" itself was not introduced into English until the translation of Emile Legouis and Louis Cazamian's *Histoire de la littérature anglaise* (1921). Occasionally used in popular literary textbooks to this day, the term has long been out of fashion among critics, for its false **teleology**.

3.1. Preromanticism

Marshall Brown has attempted to revive the term in a major book boldly entitled **Preromanticism** (1991), where he argues that the prefix can be taken to mean not a prelude to something but as indicating a time before something has come into existence, since teleology implies a goal that is not yet realized. Thus these "pre-Romantic" writers, differ from earlier eighteenth-century poets in that they articulate in tentative fashion a new set of problems to which they can find no answer.

3.2. Post-Augustan

John Sitter is among those who have proposed the term "**Post-Augustan**" instead (Sitter 1982).

Samuel Johnson was a great opponent of many of the new trends in poetry, but he warmly praised what we might regard as the Augustan centrality of **Gray's** famous **Elegy**, and it is surely true that the new elements in the poem come in more obliquely than we might expect. **Smart and Chatterton** both write excellently in conventional Augustan modes, **Chatterton** returning to satire before his death. Edward Young imitated Pope's satires as well as the *Night Thoughts*, and **Cowper's** *The Task* (1785) is both the epitome of new sensibility, even subjectivism, and yet conversational and mock-heroic.

3.3. Early Romantics

A very exciting recent reassessment of the "Pre-Romantic" poets is indicated in the new label "**Early Romantics**," as used in Robert Griffin's *Wordsworth's Pope*. This term really grasps the nettle, emphasizing these writers' radicalism while refusing to patronize them or treat them as subordinate to the canonical Romantics.

Doubts about this terminology remain, however. "**Early Romantics**," despite all the advantages of the term, thus remain confusingly different from "**Later Romantics**."

The basic point, perhaps, is that there is a very distinctive difference between such "**Early Romantics**" and "**Later Romantics**," even though the earlier poets certainly influence the later and deal in part with similar issues.

3.4. Age of Sensibility

Another highly relevant development in eighteenth-century studies in recent years has been the growing recognition of the importance of sentiment and sensibility in the period.

Northrop Frye's essay "Towards Defining an Age of **Sensibility**" (1956) was an important harbinger (precursor) of this approach, and it also suggested a different label for the poetry of this transitional age. Frye's terminology has the advantages of linking the poetry of the period with the prose and of seeing it as equally distinct from both what precedes and what follows.

Wordsworth, for example, is as clearly writing in reaction against some aspects of sensibility, just as he is also opposed to polite classicism. His own attitudes toward both nature and the poor are self-consciously differentiated from the cult of sensibility, although it certainly influenced him.

The use of the term Preromanticism has been adamantly debated by scholars. Some prefer to call the period the age of sensibility, others the post-Augustan era, while others deny that it should be considered a separate period at all, viewing it as simply occurring late in the Augustan era. Bronson and other critics have pointed out the problems in defining the terms Augustan and Romantic, and therefore the difficulties in attempting to define either "post-Augustan" or "Preromantic." Even though Augustan and Romantic are theoretically

opposites, in practice, "post-Augustan" and "Preromantic" are often used interchangeably. Many scholars have pointed out, however, that the terms Romantic and Romanticism were not used by the writers in question themselves, but are of later origin, and the same is true of the term Preromanticism. A lively debate continues regarding Preromanticism, as does critical interest in the writers and works associated with the period.

4. Poetry of Pre-romanticism

4.1. Originality

The Preromantics also highly stressed the idea of **originality** in writing. Many poets of this period felt restricted by the precedents established by classic works of the past and the prevalent attitude that the greatest literature had already been written. Walter Jackson Bate has argued that it was because of having to face the question "What is there left to write?" that the Preromantics so emphasized the ideals of originality and sincerity. No one championed these ideals more than Edward Young, who extolled subjectivity in his *Conjectures on Original Composition* (1759), urging that poets look within for originality and not attempt to copy the ancients.

4.2. Nature

Nature served an important role in realizing these goals; for example, in James Thomson's nature poetry, the poet experiences the world primarily through his senses and eventually comes to realize his part in it. According to Margaret Sherwood, Thomson's work represents "a new self-consciousness in regard to nature.... Here is beauty, no longer an abstract conception of fitness of organism to its use, but a joy, brought home through the senses, which stir feeling and mild reflection."

4.3. The self

Some scholars have gone so far as to state that the **concept of the self** was "invented" shortly after the middle of the eighteenth century, and that before that people thought of themselves mainly according to their set roles in society rather than as individuals. According to John O. Lyons, this self "first was treated as the whole organic complex of the perceiving being in sympathetic relation to the world around it. Such a concept of the self was expressed in the concern with the passions, the minute perception of human motive, and the reality of nature, for it assumed the efficacy of inductive science."

Yet the emphasis on self did not create self-centeredness to the detriment of others. To the contrary, the Preromantics believed that the person who sought self-knowledge would become more sympathetic to the suffering of others.

4.4. Feelings

Feelings were emphasized to such an extent that man began to relate to nature and animals on a different level than in previous times, to actually feel akin to them and sympathize with them. In the immensely popular "novels of sensibility" there was great emphasis on sentiment and sympathy, with plot being little more than a means of setting up a context for these feelings. Howard Mumford Jones has described the standard themes in novels of sensibility as "undeserved poverty, divine benevolence, or virtue in distress." He has enumerated some of the plot devices of this genre as "the orphan of mysterious but noble parentage, attempts at seduction or rape, imprisonment in jail or convent," forced exile, and many others, often shared with Gothic horror novels.

4.5 . Uniqueness of Individuals

Interest in the uniqueness of individuals also extended into respect for folk culture, and an area that gained great attention was the collection and preservation of folk songs. Robert Burns, for example, devoted much of his later life to transcribing and editing old Scottish airs. The Preromantic period also saw an unprecedented demand for **histories and**

biographies; personal details that would previously have been thought outside the proper scope of literature were now deemed acceptable.

5. Poets of Pre-romanticism

As has already been pointed out, the Age of **Johnson** in English poetry is an age of transition and experiment which ultimately led to the Romantic Revival. Its history is the history of the struggle between the old and the new, and of the gradual triumph of the new. The greatest protagonist of classicism during this period was Dr. Johnson himself, and he was supported by Goldsmith. In the midst of change these two held fast to the classical ideals, and the creative work of both of them in the field of poetry was imbued with the classical spirit. Johnson's two chief poems, *London* and *The Vanity of Human Wishes*, are classical on account of their didacticism, their formal, rhetorical style, and their adherence to the closed couplet.

Those who had made up their minds that Johnson was a poet so pretty clearly what kind he was. Most of his poetic qualities, they argued, reveal his neoclassical tendencies. Anna Seward considered Johnson as one of the best exemplars of neoclassical poetry. Boswell pointed out the silent features of "London" and "The Vanity of Human Wishes" by comparing them. Again the moral and ethical qualities mark Johnson's close association poetically with the first part of the century.

Oliver Goldsmith was equally convinced that the classical standards of writing poetry were the best and that they had attained perfection during the Augustan Age. All that was required of the poets was to imitate those standards. According to him "Pope was the limit of classical literature." In his opposition to the blank verse, Goldsmith showed himself fundamentally hostile to change. His two important poems, *The Traveller* and *The Deserted Village*, are classical in spirit and form. They are written in the closed couplet, are didactic, and have pompous phraseology. These poems may be described as the last great work of the outgoing, artificial eighteenth century school, though even in them, if we study them minutely, we perceive the subtle touches of the new age of Romanticism especially in their treatment of nature and rural life.

The poets who showed romantic leanings, during the Age of Johnson, and who may be described as the precursors or harbingers of the Romantic Revival were **James Thomson, Thomas Gray, William Collins, James Macpherson, William Blake, Robert Burns, William Cowper and George Crabbe.**

James Thomson (1700-1748) was the earliest eighteenth century poet who showed romantic tendency in his work. The main romantic characteristic in his poetry is his minute observation of nature. In *The Seasons* he gives fine sympathetic descriptions of the fields, the woods, the streams, the shy and wild creatures. Instead of the closed couplet, he follows the Miltonic tradition of using the blank verse. In *The Castle of Indolence*, which is written in form of dream allegory so popular in medieval literature, Thomson uses the Spenserian stanza. Unlike the didactic poetry of the Augustans, this poem is full of dim suggestions.

Thomas Gray (1716-1771) is famous as the author of *Elegy Written in a Country Churchyard*, “the best-known in the English language.” Unlike classical poetry which was characterised by restraint on personal feelings and emotions, this poem is the manifestation of deep feelings of the poet. It is suffused with the melancholy spirit which is a characteristic romantic trait. It contains deep reflections of the poet on the universal theme of death which spare no one. Other important poems of Gray are *The Progress of Poesy and The Bard*. Of these *The Bard* is more original and romantic. It emphasises the independence of the poet, which became the chief characteristic of romantic poetry. All these poems of Gray follow the classical model so far as form is concerned, but in spirit they are romantic.

William Collins (1721-1759). Like the poetry of Gray, Collin’s poetry exhibits deep feelings of melancholy. His first poem, *Oriental Eclogues* is romantic in feeling, but is written in the closed couplet. His best-known poems are the odes *To Simplicity, To Fear, To the Passions*, the small lyric *How Sleep The Brave*, and the beautiful “*Ode to Evening*”. In all these poems the poet values the solitude and quietude because they afford opportunity for contemplative life. Collins in his poetry advocates return to nature and simple and unsophisticated life, which became the fundamental creeds of the Romantic Revival.

James Macpherson (1736-1796) became the most famous poet during his time by the publication of Ossianic poems, called the *Works of Ossian*, which were translations of

Gaelic folk literature, though the originals were never produced, and so he was considered by some critics as a forger.

William Blake (1757-1827). In the poetry of Blake we find a complete break from classical poetry. In some of his works as *Songs of Innocence and Songs of Experience* which contain the famous poems—*Little Lamb who made thee?* and *Tiger, Tiger burning bright*, we are impressed by their lyrical quality. In other poems such as *The Book of Thel*, *Marriage of Heaven and Hell*, it is the prophetic voice of Blake which appeals to the reader. In the words of Swinburne, Blake was the only poet of “supreme and simple poetic genius” of the eighteenth century, “the one man of that age fit, on all accounts, to rank with the old great masters”. Some of his lyrics are, no doubt, the most perfect and the most original songs in the English language.

Robert Burns (1759-96), who is the greatest song writer in the English language, had great love for nature, and a firm belief in human dignity and quality, both of which are characteristic of romanticism. He has summed up his poetic creed in the following stanza:

*Give me a spark of Nature's fire,
That is all the learning I desire;
Then, though I trudge through dub and mire
At plough or cart,
My Muse, though homely in attire,
May touch the heart.*

The fresh, inspired songs of Burns as *The Cotter's Saturday Night*, *To a Mouse*, *To a Mountain Daisy*, *Man was Made to Mourn* went straight to the heart, and they seemed to be the songs of the birds in spring time after the cold and formal poetry for about a century. Most of his songs have the Elizabethan touch about them.

William Cowper (1731-1800), who lived a tortured life and was driven to the verge of madness, had a genial and kind soul. His poetry, much of which is of autobiographical interest, describes the homely scenes and pleasures and pains of simple humanity—the two important characteristics of romanticism. His longest poem, *The Task*, written in blank verse, comes as a relief after reading the rhymed essays and the artificial couplets of the Age of Johnson. It is replete with description of homely scenes, of woods and brooks of

ploughmen and shepherds. Cowper's most laborious work is the translation of Homer in blank verse, but he is better known for his small, lovely lyrics like *On the Receipt of My Mother's Picture*, beginning with the famous line, 'Oh, that those lips had language', and *Alexander Selkirk*, beginning with the oft-quoted line, 'I am monarch of all I survey'.

George Crabbe (1754-1832) stood midway between the Augustans and the Romantics. In form he was classical, but in the temper of his mind he was romantic. Most of his poems are written in the heroic couplet, but they depict an attitude to nature which is Wordsworthian. To him nature is a "presence, a motion and a spirit," and he realizes the intimate union of nature with man. His well-known poem, *The Village*, is without a rival as a picture of the working men of his age. He shows that the lives of the common villager and labourers are full of romantic interest. His later poems, *The Parish Register*, *The Borough*, *Tales in Verse*, and *Tales of the Hall* are all written in the same strain.

Another poet who may also be considered as the precursor of the Romantic Revival was **Thomas Chatterton (1752-70)**, the Bristol boy, whose *The Rowley Poems*, written in pseudo-Chaucerian English made a strong appeal of medievalism. The publication of Bishop Percy's *Reliques of Ancient Poetry* in 1765 also made great contribution to the romantic mood reviving interest in ballad literature.

6. Graveyard Poetry

The "Graveyard Poets", also termed "Churchyard Poets", were a number of pre-Romantic English poets of the 18th century characterised by their gloomy meditations on mortality, "skulls and coffins, epitaphs and worms" elicited by the presence of the graveyard.

Moving beyond the elegy lamenting a single death, their purpose was rarely sensationalist. As the century progressed, "graveyard" poetry increasingly expressed a feeling for the "sublime" and uncanny, and an antiquarian interest in ancient English poetic forms and folk poetry. The "graveyard poets" are often recognized as precursors of the Gothic literary genre, as well as the Romantic movement.

"Graveyard School" refers to four poems: **Thomas Gray's** *Elegy Written in a Country Churchyard*, **Thomas Parnell's** "Night-Piece On Death", **Robert Blair's** *The Grave* (poem), and **Edward Young's** *Night-Thoughts*.

Thomas Gray's *Elegy Written in a Country Churchyard* is a poem completed in 1750 and first published in 1751.

it was partly inspired by Gray's thoughts following the death of the poet Richard West in 1742.

Originally titled *Stanzas Wrote in a Country Church-Yard*,

The poem was completed when Gray was living near St Giles' parish church at Stoke Poges.

Horace Walpole, who popularised the poem among London literary circles.

The poem embodies a meditation on death.

The poem argues that the remembrance can be good and bad, and the narrator finds comfort in pondering the lives of the obscure rustics buried in the churchyard.

The two versions of the poem, *Stanzas* and *Elegy*, approach death differently; the first contains a stoic response to death, but the final version contains an epitaph which serves to repress the narrator's fear of dying.

On 3 June 1750, Gray moved to Stoke Poges, and on 12 June he completed *Elegy Written in a Country Churchyard*. Immediately, he included the poem in a letter he sent to Walpole.

Thomas Parnsell's 'Night-Piece,' often regarded as the original graveyard poem. Parnell's poetic narrator conducts his tour of the graveyard by 'the blue trembling taper's light', while the poem invites imaginative participation by prescribing befitting solemnity. All in all, there is little to fear up to this point. But in the fading moonlight, and with the narrator's exclamation of surprise—'Ha!' (47)—comes the supernatural machinery; the 'visionary crouds' of the dead, are accompanied by a cacophony of tolling bells, croaking ravens, and hollow groans from the charnel-house, before the voice of Death himself commands the reader's attention:

When men my scythe and darts supply,

How great a King of Fears am I!

They view me like the last of things:

They make, and then they dread, my stings.
Fools! If you less provok'd your fears,
No more my spectre-form appears.
Death's but a path that must be trod,
If a man would ever pass to God;
A port of calms, a state of ease,
From the rough rage of swelling seas. (61–70)

The spectral imaginings of the narrator, designed to pique the reader's dread, are swiftly undercut by Death's own consoling sense of reason. Fear is elicited only briefly by Parnell before it is attenuated, firstly, by a voice of reason, and secondly, by the promise of heavenly rapture, when our souls 'tow'r away' to 'mingle with the blaze of day' (89–90).

What happens, though, when the consolation of rapture is withdrawn? Nothing but fear, anxiety and melancholy remains—the reader is left in a liminal state. These emotional states, dwelling within them, are central to graveyard poetry's affective power, and to the Gothic's enduring power and appeal.

Robert Blair's *The Grave*, a poem that invests so heavily in the 'supernumerary horror' of the scene that the concluding vision of salvation shines dimly in comparison. Blair assaults the senses much more vigorously than his predecessors. Blair's poem is vivid and sensory, paving the way to the more confronting and chaotic horrors of late-eighteenth-century Gothic fiction such as Matthew Lewis' *The Monk* (1796).

As a label, 'graveyard poetry' encourages us to view this mode as an aesthetic precursor to the Gothic tradition. While there is some merit in this, it overlooks the pivotal role of religion, and the various ways graveyard poetry exploited the aesthetics of the night and of death for theological objectives via the psychology of fear and melancholy. Only with this in mind we can fully grasp graveyard poetry's enduring contribution to the Gothic, from Walpole, to Radcliffe and Lewis, and beyond.