

## Wordsworth's Poetry

### *My Heart Leaps Up When I Behold (1802)*

**My heart leaps up when I behold  
A rainbow in the sky:  
So was it when my life began;  
So is it now I am a man;  
So be it when I shall grow old,  
Or let me die!  
The Child is father of the Man;  
I could wish my days to be  
Bound each to each by natural piety.**

The Romantics made revolutionary changes not only in thinking but also in the **form** of poetry and other arts.

There was great experimentation in poetic forms among the English Romantics: Wordsworth would write blank verse, ballad stanzas, sonnets, irregular odes, and more. In America, Whitman took it one step further, throwing out meter altogether and writing free verse. Even poetic diction was revolutionized, in accord with the championing of democracy and the simple folk: Wordsworth called for poetry in the language of the "common man," and Whitman occasionally used words whose coarseness was shocking to 19th-century readers.

The beliefs and spirit of the Romantics carry through to modern English Literature.

### *The Rainbow*

**Even the rainbow has a body  
made of the drizzling rain  
and is an architecture of glistening atoms  
built up, built up  
yet you can't lay your hand on it,  
nay, nor even your mind.**

(From Last Poems D H Lawrence 1885- 1930)

In 1798 Wordsworth & Coleridge published the *Lyrical Ballads*. This work became a sort of manifesto and in the preface to the second and third editions, Wordsworth laid down the principles on which he thought the composition of poetry should be founded:

- the language of poetry was the language of ordinary men and women, by which he meant the speech of rural people; poetry- **"the metrical arrangement of the ordinary language of men"**
- against "poetic" diction, meaning elevated, literary language
- against rational content
- return to imagination, legend, the human heart
- poetry is **"emotion recollected in tranquility"** (e.g. *I Wandered Lonely as a Cloud*)

- the poet is a prophet. He is not a medium of other people's truth, but an initiator of his own truth. To be a poet means carrying a great responsibility, because the poet has the key to the hidden mysteries of the human heart and the mysteries of life itself. The poet does not add decoration to everyday life: he gives life its meaning.
- in the 18th century poetry was seen as a gentlemanly occupation. The romantics however saw poetry as vocation

Wordsworth took his vocation very seriously: poetry became his profession. In his early days he had been interested in philosophy and advocated a rationalist system of politics and morals. Once a poet he was no longer interested in philosophy. The publication of 1798 shows Wordsworth had turned from rationalism to intuition and a kind of mysticism. He realised that Nature meant more to him than all other political systems. Wordsworth's attitude to Nature is remarkable and original:

- Nature is the great teacher of morals, also the most important bringer of happiness.
- Wordsworth lived in the Lake District. The presence of God could be felt in the beauty and the ruggedness of Nature: in Nature resides God.

From *Tintern Abbey* (p. 10-15 in text)

**".....For I have learned  
To look on nature, not as in the hour  
Of thoughtless youth; but hearing oftentimes  
The still, sad music of humanity,  
Nor harsh nor grating, though of ample power  
To chasten and subdue. And I have felt  
A presence that disturbs me with the joy  
Of elevated thoughts; a sense sublime  
Of something far more deeply interfused,  
Whose dwelling is the light of setting suns,  
And the round ocean and the living air,  
And the blue sky, and in the mind of man;  
A motion and a spirit, that impels  
All thinking things, all objects of all thought,  
And rolls through all things.**

Wordsworth believes Nature and Man become fused because they are both creations of God. The result is that the most elemental natural objects become humanized and the natural universe becomes identified with God.

This leads him also to revere the simple humans who live close to Nature, in the eye of Nature. To him they are purer and wiser than 'town dwellers'. Also, the language of these people is less "corrupt". Wordsworth also had a particular attitude to children: he saw them, unspoilt by education and uncorrupted by the world, as having virtue and wisdom.

*Composed upon Westminster Bridge (September 3, 1802)*

1 Earth has not anything to show more fair:  
Dull would he be of soul who could pass by  
    A sight so touching in its majesty:  
    This City now doth, like a garment, wear  
5 The beauty of the morning; silent, bare,  
Ships, towers, domes, theatres, and temples lie  
    Open unto the fields, and to the sky;  
All bright and glittering in the smokeless air.  
    Never did sun more beautifully steep  
10 In his first splendour, valley, rock or hill;  
    Ne'er saw I, never felt, a calm so deep!  
    The river glideth at his own sweet will:  
    Dear God! the very houses seem asleep;  
    And all that mighty heart is lying still

Westminster Bridge symbolizes the poet's vision of London. He records a moment of vision in which he is able to achieve an understanding of all the complexities of the city. He looks at the city and sees it as a complex and unified entity. The city is described in the silence of the morning.

1-3: these first lines record the arousing of imagination, not only a vision of the town.

4: the imagination is fully awake and he sees the beauty of the morning covering the city like a garment (piece of clothing). The city is represented as an organic, living thing. The garment provides unity to the whole.

10: valley, rock, hill: typically natural Wordsworthian elements.

The stillness of the city is so touching because we know it will later be disturbed. The poet captures his moment of vision.

13-end: he returns to the city as an organic whole (see: 'mighty heart' in 14)

The city has 2 aspects:

- the city is the mighty heart of the country, the centre from which life floods through the country.

- the city is a collection of individual persons and families ('houses')

The poem succeeds in uniting a particular time-setting with something more general, in referring to the historical past of the town with a geographical dimension. (these form the background of the city)

14: also suggests that the city, like all living beings, will come to an end.

*She dwelt among the untrodden ways*

She dwelt among the untrodden ways  
Beside the springs of Dove,  
A Maid whom there were none to praise  
And very few to love:  
A violet by a mossy stone  
Half hidden from the eye!  
-Fair as a star, when only one  
Is shining in the sky.  
She lived unknown, and few could know  
When Lucy ceased to be;  
But she is in her grave, and, oh,  
The difference to me!

This poem is one of the "Lucy poems". There is much speculation about who Lucy might be. One possibility is that Lucy is Dorothy Wordsworth, his sister. A second one is that it

is Annette Vallon, the French woman, who bore him a daughter. Probably Wordsworth would have gone back, but the reign of terror had started in France. Some claim Lucy is just a simple country-girl, whom Wordsworth had fallen in love with.

Whoever it might be, the Lucy poems are not merely personal confessions. They were also published in *Lyrical Ballads*. Each present a story and a vision of the world.

This poem tells the story of Lucy's growth, perfection and death. She is thought of as a flower, a modest flower, a violet.

l-6: suggests she lived a remote life. Lucy was valued by few, although she was beautiful. She is not only compared with a violet but also with the most public beauty: Venus l7-8 Venus = the planet and goddess of love)

Last stanza: typical of all Lucy-poems, having a pattern of antithesis (l11: but) What is contrasted is the general indifference to Lucy's life and death with the feelings of the narrator, who feels a painful loss.

5: the 'mossy stone' is a reference to her grave

The poem shows the importance of individual and subjective understanding.

### ***A Slumber Did My Spirit Seal (1799)***

**A slumber did my spirit seal;  
I had no human fears:  
She seemed a thing that could not feel  
The touch of earthly years.**

**No motion has she now, no force;  
She neither hears nor sees;  
Rolled round in earth's diurnal course,  
With rocks, and stones, and trees.**

A slumber - a sleep; diurnal -daily

Underline all the "negative" words ("no", "not" etc.)

In what way is "she" a "thing" ?

What is the connection between "I" and "she"?

Is the "slumber" a positive or negative thing?

List words associated with the "human" and the "non-human"

What is the central tension of the poem ?



### **The Lake District**

"Who comes not hither ne'er shall know how beautiful the world below..." Wordsworth