

# THE ROMANTIC POETRY AND BIOGRAPHY

Louis OBOU

Professor of literature, University Felix Houphouët-Boigny

## Objectives

- The main and purport of this seminar on Romantic Poetry is to provide the general reader with an authoritative types of poems and at the same time furnish the students with the way to apprehend the poems.

## INTRODUCTION

A literary survey of the romantic period is necessary, the description of its characteristics will clear the decks for the analysis of the poems of the outstanding poets of that period.

We shall answer the following questions:

- What are the characteristics of the English literature in that period?
- Who are the most influential writers ?
- Where does the strength of the poems lie?

Hence a detailed study of some of the chief writers and their works in the period. Poetry is the art of uniting pleasure with truth, by calling imagination to the help of reasoning. Poetry might be defined as a kind of language that says more and says it more intensely than does ordinary language. Its primary concern is not with beauty, not with persuasion, but with experience. Poetry as a whole is concerned with all kinds of experience- beautiful or ugly, strange or common, noble or ignoble, actual or imaginary. Moreover, art focuses and organizes experience so as to give us a better understanding of it. There is no sharp distinction between poetry and other forms of imaginative literature. The difference between poetry and other literature is only of degree. Poetry is the most condensed and concentrated form of literature. It is a language whose has a higher voltage than most language. Poetry is, finally, a kind of multidimensional language: to communicate experience, it is directed at the whole person, it involves your senses, emotions, and imagination (intellectual dimension, a sensuous dimension, an emotional dimension, and imaginative dimension). A poet can doctor a language as it pleased him and for a given purpose.

## **1. THE SOCIAL SETTING**

The Romantic Movement appeared in a transitional period (1798-1910): we find attempts to express unfamiliar experience, frequently in the form of autobiography, reminiscence, and confession. It would be misleading to give it any narrow meaning or to equate it with an escapist or a past-ward yearning.

All the Romantic writers were acutely aware of their environment, and their best works came out of their impulse to come to terms with it. The autocratic system was challenged at home. The need for reformation was expressed.

The milieu of the writer: poetry, works of scholarship, and belles-lettres were necessarily speculative. The writers considered their intellectual production sufficient justification for claiming a place in society.

## **II. STUDY OF OUTSTANDING WRITERS OF THE ROMANTIC PERIOD**

The romantic period favoured the emergence of the first and second generations of the romantic poets, the Victorian ones and later the Edwardians. The course is about the romantic poetry.

### **A) THE FIRST GENERATION OF THE ROMANTIC POETS: the contributions of William Wordsworth, Samuel Taylor Coleridge**

#### **WILLIAM WORDSWORTH (1770-1850)**

**Life:** Born and brought up in the Lake District, even as a child he was sensitive of its beauty. Orphaned at the age of thirteen, but owing to the kindness of an uncle was educated at Cambridge. Wordsworth found in his childhood experiences a source of material very much in keeping with this tendency in the temper age, and his introduction of autobiography into poetry as a central theme was much more of a new departure in literary history.

It has been said of William Wordsworth: “In verbal felicity scarcely any English poet has surpassed him at his best; and in verbal flatness no English poet of his rank has sunk so low”. – Everyone knows that Wordsworth was a “ worshipper of nature”. His introduction of autobiography into poetry as a central theme was much more of a new departure in literary history.

He made no secret of his desire to instruct. He believed in the didactic power of poetry. **“Every great poet is a teacher; I wish either to be considered as a teacher, or as nothing”** ( Letter to Beaumont). He wrote to Sir George Beaumont and to Lady Beaumont: **“ There is scarcely one of my poems which does not aim to direct the attention to some moral sentiment, or to some general principle, or law of thought, or of our intellectual constitution”**. Didacticism did not, of course, enter poetry with him or to leave it with him, but in his verse seems sometimes to be a disturbing willingness to achieve the moral purpose at the expense of the poetry itself. His desire to generalize his experience. He made no secret of his desire to instruct.

His two great themes were **Nature** and **Man**. Everyone knows that he was (to use his own phrase) “a worshipper of nature”. A self-conscious attitude towards nature is very much one of Wordsworth’s preoccupations and a readiness to moralize about, to draw moral conclusion from this attitude. The themes he adopted in his poetry, and his manner of expressing them, were not, of course, fortuitous.

He was a mystic and believed that the spiritual faculty in man gives access to divine reality through communion with Nature. **“No other than the very heart of man”** was his chosen concern, and he applied himself to singing of **“humble and rustic life... because in that condition the passions of men are incorporated with the beauty and permanent forms of nature”** ( Preface to Lyrical Ballads). The purpose is not something to be stated in general terms. It is to be carried along by descriptions of objects which strongly excite the poet’s feeling.

The themes he adopted in his poetry, and his manner of expressing them, were not, of course, fortuitous. The principal objet proposed in his poems was to choose incidents and situations from common life, and to relate or describe them, throughout in a selection of language really used by men.

He made these incidents and situations interesting by tracing in them primary laws of our nature. The essential passions of the heart find a better soil in which they can attain their maturity.

A very unequal writer, his moral bent often marred the aesthetic quality of his poems and he gains by selection. He died in 1850 but the work of his later years is very unequal and sometimes lacking in inspiration.

Complaints can be made of strained simplicity, banality, or rhetoric; and even when these positive vices are absent, it is often felt to be a deficiency of concreteness conveyed by the play of imagery of the kind associated with, say,, Shakespeare, Donne, or Keats.

### ❖ **Poems for study**

How does the poet build the atmospheric setting?

What are the words/adjectives used to describe the scene?

How does he use them to equally describe a state of mind as to describe a scene?

How does he make effective communication and richness of experience, which are essentially poetic creation for the reader?

a) Poem 1: the daffodils- I wandered lonely as a cloud (P. 34)

b) Poem2:The Solitary Reaper( p.35)

c) Poem3: The world is too much with us p.46

#### Poem 1- **THE DAFFODILS**

I wandered lonely as a cloud  
That floats on high o'er vales and hills  
When all at once I saw a crowd,  
A host of golden daffodils;  
Beside the lake, beneath the tree,  
Fluttering and dancing in the breeze.

Continuous as the stars that shine  
And twinkle on the Milky Way,  
They stretched in never-ending line  
Along the margin of a bay

Ten thousand saw I at a glance,  
Tossing their heads in sprightly dance.

For oft, when on my couch I lie  
In vacant or in a pensive mood,  
They flash upon that inward eye  
Which is the bliss of solitude;  
And then my heart with pleasure fills,  
And dances with the daffodils.

Poem2: **THE SOLITARY REAPER**

Behold her, single in the field,  
Yon solitary Highland lass!  
Reaping and singing by herself;  
Stop here, or gently pass!  
Alone she cuts and binds the grain,  
And sings a melancholy strain;  
O listen! for the vale profound  
Is overflowed with the sound.

No nightingale did ever chaunt  
More welcome notes to weary bands  
Of travelers in some shady haunt

Among Arabian sands.  
A voice so thrilling ne'er was heard  
In springtime from the cuckoo-bird,  
Breaking the silence of the seas  
Among the farthest Hebrides.

Will no one tell me what she sings? -  
Perhaps the plaintive numbers flow  
For old, unhappy, far-off things,  
And battles long ago.  
Or is it some more humble lay,  
Familiar matter of today?  
Some natural sorrow, loss, or pain  
That has been, and may be again?

Whate'er the theme, the maiden sang  
As if her song could have no ending;  
I saw her singing at her work,  
And o'er the sickle bending -  
I listened, motionless and still;  
And, as I mounted up the hill,  
The music in my heart I bore  
Long after it was heard no more.

## II.

### **Samuel Taylor Coleridge: Poet and Philosopher ( 1772-1834)**

**Life:** Born in Devon, educated at Christ's Hospital and Cambridge. With his friend Southey he formed a plan to establish a "pantisocracy" (which was to provide a model for social regeneration in the founding of a communal farm beside the Susquehanna) in the New World, a settlement in accordance with his extreme democratic ideas. More than any other of the English romantics, he brought about the revolution in literary thought that consists in regarding the imagination as the sovereign creative power, expressing the growth of a whole personality. Imagination is different from fancy. Imagination dissolves, diffuses, dissipates, in order to recreate. For the Greek, "all natural Objects were dead". So poetic creation evidently springs from self-identification with Nature, and it is a product of the autonomous will. Both theories involve the co-operation of the poet's whole personality.

Besides all this, he wrote and talked incessantly about politics and religion, biology and language and education. His ideal poet is not a dreamer at all, but a man of rounded character: "The poet, described in ideal perfection, brings the whole soul of man into activity..." he added " the poet brings the whole soul of man into activity, with the subordination of its faculties to each other, according to their relative worth and dignity".

Poet, philosopher, writer moralist, and gifted conversationalist. Coleridge, though ill-health and infirmity of ill, achieved very little of what he proposed. His mind was erratic his nature indolent, and the opium habit very quickly paralysed his intellect. One of the great masters of word-music, he succeeded in linking romance with deep psychological truth. His cardinal doctrine was the freedom ad

initiative of the moral will- the divine spark in each of us, the I of every rational Being. The corner-stone of Logosophia was to be the idea that life begins in detachment from Nature and ends in unities with God.

### ❖ Poem for study

Poem1: **AN ODE**

My genial spirits fail;

And what can these avail

To lift the smothering weight from off my breast?

It were a vain endeavor,

Though I should gaze for ever

On that green light that lingers in the west: I may not hope from outward forms to win

The passion and the life, whose fountains are within.

O Lady! we receive but what we give,

And in our life alone does Nature live:

Ours is her wedding-garment, ours her shroud!

And would we aught behold, of higher worth

Than that inanimate cold world allowed

To the poor loveless anxious crowd,

Ah! From the soul itself must issue forth,

A fight, a glory, a fair luminous cloud

Enveloping the Earth,

And from the soul itself must there be sent

A sweet and potent voice, of its own birth



Of all sweet sounds the life and element!

B) **THE SECOND GENERATION** of the romantic poets: John Keats, Percy Bysshe SHELLEY

### **JOHN KEATS (1795-1821)**

**Life:** Born in London and sent to school in Enfield. Keats held that poetry should be the incarnation of beauty, not the vehicle of philosophy. He abhorred didactic literature and held that the poet's function was that of artist, not prophet. "With a great poet the sense of beauty overcomes every other consideration, or rather obliterates all consideration" (Letter to his brother). There is message to be found in Keats' work. He was a pure poet who reveled in beauty for its own sake. He had an acute susceptibility for forms, for the particular self and structure of a thing, even when it was smothered with accidents. Keats believed in the theory that the excellence of an art lay in its intensity.

#### **❖ Poem for study**

#### **TO AUTUMN**

Season of mists and mellow fruitless,

Close bosom-friend of the maturing sun;

Conspiring with him how to load and bless

With fruit the vines that round the thatch-eaves run;

To bend with apples the mossed cottage-trees,

And fill all fruit with ripeness to the core;

To smell the gourd, and plump the hazel shells

With a sweet kernel; to set budding more,

And still more, later flowers for the bees,

Until they think warm days will never cease,

For summer has o'er-brimmed their clammy cells.

Who hath not seen thee oft amid thy store?

Sometimes whoever seeks abroad may find

Thee sitting careless on a granary floor,  
    Thy hair soft-lifted by the winnowing wind;  
Or on a half-reaped furrow sound asleep,  
    Drowsed with the fume of poppies, while thy hook  
    Spare the next swath and all its twined flowers:  
And sometimes like a gleaner thou dost keep  
    Steady thy laden head across a look;  
    Or by a cider-press. With patient look,  
        Thou watchest the last oozy hours by hours.

### **PERCY BYSSHE SHELLEY ( 1792-1822)**

**Life :** Born of a family of rural gentry, Shelley was educated at Eton and Oxford, from which he was expelled for circulating a pamphlet on the Necessity of Atheism.

By far the greatest of the English romantic poets, and perhaps the greatest lyrical poet of all times. Didactic poetry is his abhorrence. His purpose has hitherto been simply to familiarize the highly refined imagination of the more select classes of poetical readers with beautiful idealisms of moral excellence: aware that until the mind can love, and admire, and trust, and hope, and endure, reasoned principles of moral conduct are seeds cast upon the highway of life. Shelley's enthusiasm for humanity expressed itself in the theme of creative love. For him Nature was the incarnation of the divine. Shelley's pantheism was the passionate expression of his pantheistic faith.

For him "Poetry is indeed something divine. It is once the centre and circumference of knowledge. Poetry is the record of the best and happiest moments of the happiest and best minds"

#### **❖ Poem for study**

Poem 1: **QUEEN MAB**

Throughout this varied and eternal world

Soul is the only element: the block  
That for uncounted ages has remained  
The moveless pillar of a mountain's weight  
Is active. Living spirit. Every grain  
Is sentient both in unity and part,  
And the minutest atom comprehends  
A world of loves and hatred; these beget  
Evil and good: hence truth and falsehood spring;  
Hence will and thought and action, all the germs  
Of pain or pleasure, sympathy or hate,  
That variegate the eternal universe.  
Soul is not more polluted than the beams  
Of Heaven's pure orb, ere round their rapid lines  
The taint of earth-born atmospheres arise.

## **POETIC LANGUAGE RESOURCES**

- **Denotation and connotation**
- **Imaginary vs image**
- **Figurative language 1: simile, metaphor, personification, apostrophe, metonymy**
- **Figurative language 2: symbol, allegory**
- **Figurative language 3: paradox, overstatement, understatement, irony**
- **Allusion**
- **Meaning and idea**
- **Tone musical devices**

## **CONCLUSION**

This course begins with an account of the social and intellectual context of English literature during the Romantic period, followed by a survey of the literature itself. is made up of a series of study dealing in detail with Wordsworth, Coleridge, Keats, and Shelley.