
THE ART OF ROMANTIC POETRY

COMMENTS ON THE POETIC PROCESS

WILLIAM BLAKE

1

Now I may say to you, what perhaps I should not dare to say to anyone else: That I can alone carry on my visionary studies in London unannoyed, and that I may converse with my friends in Eternity, See Visions, Dream Dreams, and prophesy and speak Parables unobserved and at liberty from the Doubts of other Mortals; perhaps Doubts proceeding from Kindness, but Doubts are always pernicious, Especially when we Doubt our Friends. Christ is very decided on this Point: "He who is Not With Me is Against Me."¹ There is no Medium or Middle state; and if a Man is the Enemy of my Spiritual Life while he pretends to be the Friend of my Corporeal, he is a Real Enemy—but the Man may be the friend of my Spiritual Life while he seems the Enemy of my Corporeal, but Not Vice Versa. * * *

But none can know the Spiritual Acts of my three years' Slumber on the banks of the Ocean,² unless he has seen them in the Spirit, or unless he should read My long Poem descriptive of those Acts; for I have in these three years composed an immense number of verses on One Grand Theme, Similar to Homer's *Iliad* or Milton's *Paradise Lost*, the Persons and Machinery entirely new to the Inhabitants of Earth (some of the Persons Excepted). I have written this poem from immediate Dictation, twelve or sometimes twenty or thirty lines at a time, without Premeditation and even against my Will; the Time it has taken in writing was thus rendered Non Existent, and an immense Poem Exists which seems to be the Labor of a long Life, all produced without Labor or Study. I mention this to show you what I think the Grand Reason of my being brought down here. * * *

[From letter to Thomas Butts, April 25, 1803]

2

We who dwell on Earth can do nothing of ourselves; everything is conducted by Spirits, no less than Digestion or Sleep. * * * When this Verse was first dictated to me, I considered a Monotonous Cadence, like that used by Milton and Shakespeare and all writers of English Blank Verse, derived from the modern bondage of Rhyming, to be a necessary and indispensable part of Verse. But I soon found that in the mouth of a true Orator such monotony was not only awkward, but as much a bondage as rhyme itself. I therefore have produced

1. Matthew xii.30.

2. Blake was preparing to return to London after having lived since September, 1800, at the seaside town of Felpham, Sussex, under the irksome

patronage of William Hayley. The "immense Poem" that Blake says he wrote at that time may have been *Milton*, or *The Four Zoas*, or both of these together.

a variety in every line, both of cadences and number of syllables. Every word and every letter is studied and put into its fit place; the terrific numbers are reserved for the terrific parts, the mild and gentle for the mild and gentle parts, and the prosaic for inferior parts; all are necessary to each other. Poetry Fettered Fetters the Human Race.

[From Preface to *Jerusalem*, 1804–20]

WILLIAM WORDSWORTH

1

* * * [These poems] were composed in front of Rydal Mount³ and during my walks in the neighborhood. Nine-tenths of my verses have been murmured out in the open air; and here let me repeat what I believe has already appeared in print. One day a stranger having walked round the garden and grounds of Rydal Mount asked one of the female servants who happened to be at the door, permission to see her master's study. "This," said she, leading him forward, "is my master's library, where he keeps his books, but his study is out of doors." After a long absence from home it has more than once happened that some one of my cottage neighbors has said—"Well, there he is; we are glad to hear him *booing* about again."

2

* * * Had I been more intimate with [the Reverend George Crabbe],⁴ I should have ventured to touch upon his office as a Minister of the Gospel, and how far his heart and soul were in it so as to make him a zealous and diligent laborer. In poetry, though he wrote much, as we all know, he assuredly was not so. I happened once to speak of pains as necessary to produce merit of a certain kind which I highly valued: his observation was—"It is not worth while." You are quite right, thought I, if the labor encroaches upon the time due to teach truth as a steward of the mysteries of God: if there be cause to fear that, write less: but, if poetry is to be produced at all, make what you do produce as good as you can.

[From notes on his poems dictated to Isabella Fenwick, 1843]

SAMUEL TAYLOR COLERIDGE: [Spontaneous and Controlled Composition]

And, first, from the origin of meter. This I would trace to the balance in the mind effected by that spontaneous effort which strives to hold in check the workings of passion. It might be easily explained likewise in what manner this salutary antagonism is assisted by the very state which it counteracts; and how

3. A house on Rydal Water, in the English Lake Country, where Wordsworth lived from 1813 until his death.

4. 1754–1832; author of *The Village* and other realistic poems of rural life.

this balance of antagonists became organized into meter (in the usual acceptation of that term) by a supervening act of the will and judgment, consciously and for the foreseen purpose of pleasure. Assuming these principles as the date of our argument, we deduce from them two legitimate conditions which the critic is entitled to expect in every metrical work. First, that as the elements of meter owe their existence to a state of increased excitement, so the meter itself should be accompanied by the natural language of excitement. Secondly, that as these elements are formed into meter artificially, by a voluntary act, with the design and for the purpose of blending delight with emotion, so the traces of present volition should throughout the metrical language be proportionally discernible. Now these two conditions must be reconciled and co-present. There must be not only a partnership, but a union; an interpenetration of passion and of will, of spontaneous impulse and of voluntary purpose. * * * But if it be asked by what principles the poet is to regulate his own style, if he do not adhere closely to the sort and order of words which he hears in the market, wake, high-road or plowfield? I reply: by principles, the ignorance or neglect of which would convict him of being no poet, but a silly or presumptuous usurper of the name! By the principles of grammar, logic, psychology! In one word, by such a knowledge of the facts, material and spiritual, that most appertain to his art as, if it have been governed and applied by good sense and rendered instinctive by habit, becomes the representative and reward of our past conscious reasonings, insights, and conclusions, and acquires the name of taste. By what rule that does not leave the reader at the poet's mercy, and the poet at his own, is the latter to distinguish between the language suitable to suppressed, and the language which is characteristic of indulged, anger? Or between that of rage and that of jealousy? Is it obtained by wandering about in search of angry or jealous people in uncultivated society, in order to copy their words? Or not far rather by the power of imagination proceeding upon the *all in each* of human nature? By meditation, rather than by observation? And by the latter in consequence only of the former? As eyes, for which the former has predetermined their field of vision and to which, as to its organ, it communicates a microscopic power? There is not, I firmly believe, a man now living who has from his own inward experience a clearer intuition than Mr. Wordsworth himself that the last mentioned are the true sources of genial discrimination. Through the same process and by the same creative agency will the poet distinguish the degree and kind of the excitement produced by the very act of poetic composition. As intuitively will he know what differences of style it at once inspires and justifies; what intermixture of conscious volition is natural to that state; and in what instances such figures and colors of speech degenerate into mere creatures of an arbitrary purpose, cold technical artifices of ornament or connection. For even as truth is its own light and evidence, discovering at once itself and falsehood, so is it the prerogative of poetic genius to distinguish by parental instinct its proper offspring from the changelings which the gnomes of vanity or the fairies of fashion may have laid in its cradle or called by its names. Could a rule be given from without poetry would cease to be poetry and sink into a mechanical art. It would be μὀρφωσις not ποιησις.⁵ The rules of the imagination are themselves the very powers of growth and production. The words to which they are reducible present only the outlines

5. "Morphosis, not poesis," i.e., structuring, not creating.

and external appearance of the fruit. A deceptive counterfeit of the superficial form and colors may be elaborated; but the marble peach feels cold and heavy, and children only put it to their mouths.

[From *Biographia Literaria*, Chapter XVIII]

LORD BYRON

1

I told you long ago that the new Cantos [*Don Juan*, Cantos III and IV] were *not* good, and I also *told you a reason*: recollect, I do not oblige you to publish them; you may suppress them, if you like, but I can alter nothing. I have erased the six stanzas about those two impostors, Southey and Wordsworth (which I suppose will give you great pleasure), but I can do no more. I can neither recast, nor replace; but I give you leave to put it all into the fire, if you like, or *not* to publish, and I think that's sufficient. * * * I can't cobble: I must "either make a spoon or spoil a horn"—and there's an end; for there's no remeid: but I leave you free will to suppress the *whole*, if you like it.

[From a letter to his publisher, John Murray, April 23, 1820]

2

* * * With regard to what you say of retouching [*Don Juan*], it is all very well; but I can't *furbish*. I am like the tiger (in poesy), if I miss my first Spring, I go growling back to my Jungle. There is no second. I can't correct; I can't, and I won't. * * * You must take my things as they happen to be: if they are not likely to suit, reduce their *estimate* then accordingly. I would rather give them away than hack and hew them. I don't say that you are not right: I merely assert that I cannot better them. I must either "make a spoon, or spoil a horn." And there's an end.

[To John Murray, September 18, 1820]

EDWARD J. TRELAWNY: [Shelley on Composing]

The day I found Shelley in the pine forest he was writing verses on a guitar.⁶ I picked up a fragment, but could only make out the first two lines:

Ariel to Miranda: Take
This slave of music.

It was a frightful scrawl; words smeared out with his finger, and one upon the other, over and over in tiers, and all run together "in most admired disorder";⁷ it might have been taken for a sketch of a marsh overgrown with bulrushes, and the blots for wild ducks; such a dashed-off daub as self-conceited artists mistake for a manifestation of genius. On my observing this to him, he answered:

6. *With a Guitar: To Jane* (1822).

7. Altered from *Macbeth* III.iv.110. "Admired"

here means "strange, extraordinary."

“When my brain gets heated with thought, it soon boils, and throws off images and words faster than I can skim them off. In the morning, when cooled down, out of the rude sketch, as you justly call it, I shall attempt a drawing. If you ask me why I publish what few or none will care to read, it is that the spirits I have raised haunt me until they are sent to the devil of a printer. All authors are anxious to breech their bantlings.”⁸

[From *Records of Shelley, Byron, and the Author*, 1858]

THOMAS MEDWIN: [Shelley’s Self-Hypercriticism]

But to return to *Charles I.*⁹ Other causes besides doubt as to the manner of treating the subject operated to impede its progress. The ever growing fastidiousness of his taste, had, I have often thought, begun to cramp his genius. The opinion of the world too, at times shook his confidence in himself and generated doubts that he was unprofitably wasting his energies, that produce what he might, he was doomed to be unread. I have often been shown the scenes of this tragedy on which he was engaged; like the MS. of Tasso’s *Gerusalemme Liberata*, in the library of Ferrara, his were larded with word on word, till they were scarcely decipherable. I remember a printed copy of his *Revolt of Islam*, that was similarly interlined. The *Queen Mab* in the possession of Mr. Brooks, which I have spoken of, had innumerable *pentimenti*;¹ and when I one day objected to this self-hypercriticism, he replied, “The source of poetry is native and involuntary, but requires severe labor in its development.”

[From *The Life of P. B. Shelley*, 1847]

RICHARD WOODHOUSE: [Keats on Composing]

* * * He has repeatedly said in conversation that he never sits down to write, unless he is full of ideas—and then thoughts come about him in troops as though soliciting to be accepted and he selects—one of his Maxims is that if Poetry does not come naturally it had better not come at all.² The moment he feels any dearth he discontinues writing and waits for a happier moment. He is generally more troubled by a redundancy than by a poverty of images, and he culls what appears to him at the time the best.—He never corrects, unless perhaps a word here or there should occur to him as preferable to an expression he has already used.—He is impatient of correcting and says he would rather burn the piece in question and write another or something else. “My judgment,” he says, “is as active while I am actually writing as my imagination. In fact all my faculties are strongly excited, and in their full play.—And shall I afterwards, when my imagination is idle, and the heat in which I wrote has gone off, sit down coldly to criticize when in possession of only one faculty what I have written when almost inspired.”—This fact explains the reason of the perfectness, fullness, richness, and completion of most that comes from

8. Infants, especially illegitimate ones.

9. An unfinished tragedy by Shelley, written 1819–22.

1. Italian: second thoughts.

2. See Keats’s letter to John Taylor, Feb. 27, 1818.

him. He has said that he has often not been aware of the beauty of some thought or expression until after he had composed and written it down.—It has then struck him with astonishment, and seemed rather the production of another person than his own.—He has wondered how he came to hit upon it. This was the case with the description of Apollo in the 3rd book of *Hyperion*, “white melodious throat.”³ . . . It seemed to come by chance or magic—to be as it were something given to him.

[From Notes on Keats]

3. The reference is to Keats's *Hyperion* III.79–82: “Apollo then, / With sudden scrutiny and gloom-

less eyes, / Thus answered, while his white melodious throat / Throbbled with the syllables.”