

# Reading Romantic Poetry



*Fiona Stafford*

 WILEY-BLACKWELL



## Reading Romantic Poetry

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# Reading Romantic Poetry

Fiona Stafford

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# Preface

‘Reading Romantic Poetry’ may conjure up images of young lovers delighting each other with tender verses or perhaps consoling themselves with songs in the absence of their soul-mates. This book is not, however, a guide to poems that might be suitable for Valentine’s Day or for reciting at weddings, even though many of the works that feature are concerned with love in its most varied aspects. What it offers is an introduction to Romantic poetry in the sense used by those interested in literature – in other words, the poetry written during what has come to be known as the ‘Romantic period’, from around 1785 to 1830. It aims to encourage new readers to respond directly to the verse and to open up fresh approaches to those already familiar with Romantic literature.

At every turn, the reader of Romantic poetry is confronted with urgent questions about the human condition and the surrounding world. All the big questions that perennially confront philosophers, theologians and political theorists are to be found in this period and so reading the poetry encourages renewed engagement with the dilemmas of those who faced them so courageously during a time of revolutionary upheaval and prolonged warfare. Times when great public events are taking place are often times when personal questions seem most pressing; the Romantic period is no exception. Urgent debates over the nature and purpose of art or the state of the nation are to be found amidst personal effusions over falling in love, coming home, becoming a parent or experiencing fears of failure, ageing, loss or exile. Any anthology of Romantic verse offers apparently contradictory opinions on just about every aspect of human experience. Rather than retreat in confusion, or select only a handful of poems in order to establish some straightforward idea of ‘Romantic poetry’, however, it is much more rewarding to read widely among the different poets of the period and begin to share some of their profound, if often

complicated expressions and explorations of poetry, personal experience and the wider world. The chapters below make reference to a range of varied works in the hope of opening different avenues into the rich and remarkable field of Romantic poetry.

The volume of fine poetry written in the closing years of the eighteenth century and the opening decades of the nineteenth means that a book of this kind cannot hope to do justice to 'Romantic Poetry'. There will inevitably be readers who find a personal favorite has been omitted, or insufficient attention devoted to its intricate form, subtle language, or powerful sentiments. Rather than offer exhaustive readings of a few key poems, this book explores different aspects of reading in order to suggest the variety of ways in which any poem from the period might be read and enjoyed. This means that a greater number of poems can be introduced and that those of the better-known poets – William Cowper, Robert Burns, William Blake, William Wordsworth, Samuel Taylor Coleridge, Lord Byron, Percy Bysshe Shelley and John Keats – can be read alongside those by poets who received less attention for much of the twentieth century – Hannah More, Charlotte Smith, Anna Barbauld, Ann Yearsley, John Clare, Felicia Hemans. Since all were part of the same remarkable period of British history, their works are not only worth reading in themselves, but also for their mutual illumination. Collectively, they combine to allow modern readers a much richer and more varied sense of 'Romantic Poetry'.

Since this is an introduction to the poetry of the later eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries – the years represented in Michael O'Neill and Charles Mahoney (eds.) *Romantic Poetry: An Annotated Anthology* and Duncan Wu (ed.) *Romanticism* – the passages quoted have largely been taken from these two widely available anthologies, primarily from the former. Where the poems under discussion are not included in these anthologies, the editions quoted are clearly listed under 'Works Cited' at the end of the book. In the case of Wordsworth, for example, quotations from the poems and prose are largely from the two anthologies, but any not selected by Wu or O'Neill and Mahoney are taken from *William Wordsworth*, ed. Stephen Gill (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010). For Shelley, any texts that do not appear in the anthologies are from Timothy Webb's edition of the *Poems and Prose*, while for Keats, John Barnard's edition has been used. Throughout, ease of consultation has been a guiding principle and so while the critical discussion is informed by the scholarly editions and studies listed in the 'Further Reading sections', most of the quotations are from the more accessible editions easily available to students and general readers.

There is a vast body of critical work to match the richness of the primary material, so anyone intrigued by the discussions below will be able to consider the poems in greater depth through following up related criticism. Since the purpose of the book is to encourage direct responses to the poems themselves, suggestions for additional criticism are gathered into the short bibliographical sections that follow each chapter, along with and acknowledgement of any critical interpretation especially influential on the discussion.



# 1

## The Pleasures of Poetry

It is difficult to get very far, when pursuing Romantic poetry, without coming across references to pleasure – whether it is William Wordsworth explaining to readers of *Lyrical Ballads* that the purpose of poetry is ‘to produce excitement in coexistence with an overbalance of pleasure’ (Wu, 503), or John Keats describing the activity of writing to his friend, Charles Dilke:

Talking of Pleasure, this moment I was writing with one hand, and with the other holding to my Mouth a Nectarine – good god how fine – It went down soft pulpy, slushy, oozy – all its delicious embonpoint melted down my throat like a large beatified Strawberry.

(Keats, *Letters*, II, 179)

In early nineteenth-century Britain, it seems, the very thought of poetry was able to stimulate the most enjoyable ideas. For Samuel Taylor Coleridge, the test of a good poem was the pleasure it generated for readers. When he looked back on his school-days, trying to account for his longstanding love of literature, Coleridge recognized that ‘not the poem which we have *read*, but that to which we *return*, with the greatest pleasure, possesses the genuine power, and claims the name of *essential poetry*’ (*Biographia Literaria*, I, 23).

Poetry, for its great begetters in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries, was firmly associated with pleasure, from the conception of a new poem to the continuing attraction of the old. And what’s more, it was a pleasure to be shared and multiplied, experienced and revisited – something

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intensified, not wearied, by familiarity. For readers encountering Romantic poetry for the first time, therefore, the prospect is enticing, while those returning for the umpteenth do so with the assurance of deep delights in store. This book attempts to introduce new readers to the pleasures of Romantic poetry, but it also hopes to encourage those who already know the poems to return to them with renewed enthusiasm.

The emphasis on poetic enjoyment is evident in many works of the Romantic period, from Samuel Rogers's popular poem of 1792, *The Pleasures of Memory*, to Thomas Campbell's *The Pleasures of Hope*, published in 1809. Though little read today, the very titles of these poems reflect Romantic tastes and attitudes, and in particular, the readiness with which contemporary eyes turned fondly towards the past or gazed ahead into a brighter future. The impulse might be personal or political, and often, during this tumultuous period of history, private concerns had public dimensions – and vice versa, as we shall see. The vividness with which memories, moments and expectations were caught and conveyed in literature means that readers two centuries later can still enter the period, responding to enduring human situations and ethical concerns as well as to issues relating to the specific events in the decades immediately preceding and succeeding 1800.

Romantic poems often acknowledged the complementary satisfactions of the anticipated and the remembered, looking forward to moments of consummate pleasure, or back on experiences of life-changing significance. Keats recreated the intensity of anticipation in 'The Eve of St Agnes', as he presented both Madeline, the isolated young woman, praying for 'visions of delight' as she retires for the night, and 'burning Porphyro', the young man who hides in her bedroom, growing 'faint' with excitement as he watches her undress (47, 159, 224; O'Neill and Mahoney, 423–36). Keats was equally adept at conjuring up a sense of loss in the aftermath of powerful experience, as the pale knight in 'La Belle Dame Sans Merci' demonstrates, through his simple, but haunting words, 'And I awoke and found me here / On the cold hill's side' (43–4; O'Neill and Mahoney, 439). His ode, 'To Autumn', however, insistently directs attention towards the joys of the present, with its warnings against wistful longing for 'the songs of Spring', and wilfully restrained reference to 'full-grown lambs' and 'gathering swallows' (23, 30, 33; O'Neill and Mahoney, 457–8).

In 'Lines written a Few Miles above Tintern Abbey', Wordsworth was able to pay tribute to the competing attractions of past, present and future experience all at once, by pouring out the powerful feelings prompted by

returning to a favorite place. The passage of time is obvious from the opening lines ‘Five years have passed; five summers, with the length / Of five long winters!’ (1–2; O’Neill and Mahoney, 105), but at the same time, the delight of immediate physical experience is also there: ‘again I hear / These waters, rolling from their mountain-springs / With a sweet inland murmur’ (2–4). Throughout the poem, the double perspectives of present and past play together, until the final section when the speaker’s companion is welcomed into the poem, along with hopes for even greater happiness in the future. If the opening line leads readers to expect wistful recollections, ‘Tintern Abbey’ in fact draws on the evidence of enriching memories to magnify the enjoyment of new experience:

While here I stand, not only with the sense of  
Present pleasure, but with pleasing thoughts  
That in this moment there is life and food  
For future years.

(63–6; O’Neill and Mahoney, 107)

Present pleasure was not dependent on the eyes and ears alone, but deepened by memories of earlier, intense experience and amplified by the expectation of recalling this moment in years to come. For Wordsworth, as he gazed on the landscape with grateful recognition, immediate pleasure seemed capable of infinite expansion, even of transfiguration into religious joy.

‘Lines written a few miles above Tintern Abbey’ was a poem of self-conscious revisiting, but many poems of the period conveyed a similar sense of the long-term value of particularly memorable experiences. The very existence of the poem demonstrated that a fleeting pleasure could be caught and recreated for the benefit of the poet or a future readership. In his passionate essay on the nature and purpose of his chosen art, *A Defence of Poetry*, Percy Bysshe Shelley described poetry as ‘the record of the best and happiest moments of the best and happiest minds’ (Wu, 1196). When seen out of context, such a definition might provoke charges of self-aggrandisement, but it is an illuminating statement for anyone attempting to understand the experience and motivation of Romantic poets. For Shelley, as for many of his contemporaries, the impulse to create was ‘always arising unforeseen and departing unbidden’ and so the task of finding forms for such transient moments was fraught with a sense of impending vacancy (Wu, 1196). Not only was composition urgent, but the ensuing poem was somehow inherently elegiac – a mere trace of the original imaginative experience.

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Shelley's own poetry often conveyed the compulsion to capture heightened experience, whether in short lyrics such as 'Rarely, rarely comest thou, Spirit of Delight', or in more descriptive verse that seemed hurrying to record his powerful responses to the natural world. Shelley's passionate delight in the physical landscape of Italy, with its dazzling sunlight and strong colors, so different from his native England, is brilliantly caught in 'Julian and Maddalo', a poem written in Venice in 1818, when he was visiting Lord Byron:

This ride was my delight. – I love all waste  
And solitary places; where we taste  
The pleasure of believing what we see  
Is boundless, as we wish our souls to be:  
And such was this wide ocean, and this shore  
More barren than its billows; - and yet more  
Than all, with a remembered friend I love  
To ride as then I rode; – for the winds drove  
The living spray along the sunny air  
Into our faces; the blue heavens were bare,  
Stripped to their depths by the awakening North;  
And from the waves, sound like delight broke forth  
Harmonizing with solitude, and sent  
Into our hearts ærial merriment.

(14–27; Shelley, *Poems and Prose*, 89)

The sheer physical enjoyment of the ride, the warmth, the spray and the sounding waves are perfectly captured in couplets, whose regular beat matches the horses' hooves, with metrical variations to suggest the surges of speed along the beach. Such verse seems to carry readers out of their inevitably sedentary situation, transporting them to other places and others' pleasures. 'Julian and Maddalo' invites us to ride along the Adriatic shoreline with Shelley, stripped momentarily of normal concerns and abandoning thought to the bracing pleasures of the wind and sky. The ride is over soon enough, and the verse slows accordingly to match the return 'Homeward, which always makes the spirit tame', but still the intense experience is there on the page, in words that have lasted longer than the traces left by the horse's hooves on the Italian sand.

The capacity of the human spirit to expand in response to natural beauty and powerful sensory experience ('what we see / Is boundless, as we wish our souls to be') is a recurrent theme in Shelley's work – and Romantic poetry more widely. What now seems commonplace was an idea new to the late eighteenth century – that getting out and about in beautiful scenery



was good for physical, mental and moral health. Suddenly people were setting off on tours seeking not just historic sites, great houses, art galleries or classical remains, but also breathtaking views of waterfalls and wooded valleys, lofty hills and rocky shores. Nor were soul-expanding sights confined to what had come to be known in the period as 'sublime landscapes' – vast mountains, stormy seas, cliffs and crags. Wordsworth recorded the leap in his heart caused by something as simple as a rainbow, which affected him as strongly in adulthood as it had when he was a boy:

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 Rainbow’, 1–6, Wu, 528)

The survival of instinctive, childhood impulses into maturity affirmed Wordsworth’s sense of himself and many of his poems seemed to give thanks for the world and his place within it. They not only recorded special moments of personal meaning, which made internal pledges of continuity, but also offered the possibility of connection to his readers, who might be similarly uplifted by the verse.

Delight in the immediate world is a key-note of Romantic poetry. Travelling often prompted composition, as poets sought words to convey remarkable landscapes, buildings and people to British audiences: *Childe Harold’s Pilgrimage*, for example, appealed strongly to people for whom the Continent had long been cut off by years of war. Byron’s own trip to Portugal and Spain and then onwards to Albania and Turkey furnished him with a wealth of material for the first two Cantos of *Childe Harold* published in 1812, which he followed up in 1816 and 1818, with reflections drawn from his travels in Switzerland and Italy. Fascination with exotic places fanned the fashion for Orientalism, which is as evident in Coleridge’s ‘Kubla Khan’, Southey’s *Thalaba*, Byron’s *Eastern Tales*, or Moore’s *Lalla Rookh*, as it is in the flamboyant Royal Pavilion at Brighton, commissioned by the Prince Regent. Places remote from Britain offered both imaginative freedom and a relatively safe space in which domestic matters could be addressed under the guise of fantasy. At the same time, texts set in distant lands often reflected serious philosophical, sociological and cultural interests, inherited from the comparative approaches of the Enlightenment. The early nineteenth-century

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boom in travel literature, botany and international history meant that poets had rich resources for their narratives, which they often handled with considerable care.

Much Romantic literature, however, dealt with more familiar subject matter. John Clare, born and brought up in a Northamptonshire village, found endless variety in the surrounding fields and hedgerows and so his poems recorded the birds, animals and plants he had known all his life. Robert Burns published his first book of poetry when struggling to make a living as a farmer in Ayrshire, a situation reflected in poems that featured his friends, dogs, sheep, and local community. Mary Robinson, on the other hand, whose colorful existence as an actress and companion of men in high places meant a life spent largely in cities was equally inspired by the ‘busy sounds / Of summer morning in the sultry smoke / Of noisy London’ (‘A London Summer Morning’, 1–3; Wu, 249). It didn’t seem to matter where poets lived or at what level of society, as long as they shared the urge to record their best moments and possessed sufficient skill to do so convincingly. One of the best-selling poems of the age was Robert Bloomfield’s *The Farmer’s Boy*, an unassuming account of work as a farm labourer, which rapidly ran to six editions, selling some 27,000 copies within two years of its publication in 1800 (St Clair, 582).

Despite the contemporary vogue for sensational Gothic fiction, poetry did not seem to need much in the way of extraordinary stimulation to please an audience, as William Cowper demonstrated in *The Task*, with its domestic descriptions of everything from weather-vanes to window-boxes. In its wonderful account of the pleasures of sitting alone at twilight, watching the fireplace, Cowper introduced one of the major literary topics of the Romantic age:

Me oft has fancy ludicrous and wild  
Soothed with a waking dream of houses, tow’rs,  
Trees, churches, and strange visages expressed  
In the red cinders, while with poring eye  
I gazed, myself creating what I saw.

(*The Task*, IV, 286–290; Wu, 20)

The plain language was well suited to the homely scene and, though simple enough to speak to anyone, demonstrated just how rich an imaginative life was open to those who allowed their minds to wander freely. In his gently self-teasing recollection, Cowper was introducing a concern which would exercise all the major poets of the period, by revealing that he was ‘creating’

what he saw in the cinders, rather than merely reflecting a fixed external object. As M.H. Abrams argued in a wide-ranging analysis that dominated many critical readings during the second half of the twentieth century, the Romantic mind was more like a lamp than a mirror, shedding its own light on the outside world, rather than being merely reflective. In the Romantic period, the most everyday experience could therefore prove to be the stuff of art: Anna Barbauld was even able to transform the ‘dreaded Washing-Day’ into poetry (‘Washing Day’, 8; Barbauld, *Poems*, 133).

There was a strong tendency nevertheless to emphasise the benefits of natural surroundings, especially for growing minds and bodies. Barbauld’s sense of the world being big with creative possibility, for example, is abundantly evident in a poem urging an unborn child towards birth:

Haste, little captive, burst thy prison doors!  
Launch on the living world and spring to light!  
Nature for thee displays her various stores,  
Opens her thousand inlets of delight.  
(‘To a little invisible Being who is expected  
soon to become visible’, 29–32;  
Barbauld, *Poems*, 131–2)

Confident that the natural world was overflowing with delight, Barbauld imagined countless blessings in store for the new baby. Her poem did not probe neonatal psychology as fully as Wordsworth would in *The Prelude*, where the infant mind is considered at length as ‘creator and receiver both, / Working but in alliance with the works / Which it beholds’ (II, 273–5, *William Wordsworth*, 325). Her poem nevertheless reveals a willingness that began to emerge in the later eighteenth century to seek positive natural influences for children’s rapidly developing minds.

Coleridge similarly looked forward to seeing his baby son grow up in a beautiful rural environment, writing in ‘Frost at Midnight’:

*thou*, my babe! shalt wander like a breeze  
By lakes and sandy shores, beneath the crags  
Of ancient mountain and beneath the clouds  
(54–56; O’Neill and Mahoney, 223)

In such surroundings, a child must surely thrive spiritually and physically; and Coleridge, conscious that his own youth had been blighted by years at a London boarding school, felt confident in predicting that for his son, ‘all seasons’ would ‘be sweet’ (65).

Though familiar enough to modern readers, the tendency to see children as innocent beings, full of creative potential, is another defining characteristic of Romantic poetry, reflecting the influence of eighteenth-century educational theory. The Genevan philosopher, Jean-Jacques Rousseau, had emphasized the benefits of a natural upbringing in his well-known work, *Émile, ou l'Éducation*, 1762, which built on British empirical theories about the effects of sensory experience and habits of association on intellectual development. Coleridge himself was so impressed with the ideas of the Yorkshire psychologist, David Hartley, that he named his son – the baby in ‘Frost at Midnight’ – after him. The poem addresses little Hartley Coleridge, while also paying tribute to David Hartley’s theory that healthy minds developed from positive associations established in early life, which led eventually to strong faith in God. The ‘secret ministry of frost’, though sometimes read in more sinister terms, can helpfully be understood as a quiet, but active, natural force, through which the ‘Great Universal Teacher’ touches those open to his all-embracing love.

Coleridge’s eager anticipation of future blessings for his baby, however, is based in reflection on his own, less happy education, ‘in the great city, pent ‘mid cloisters dim’ (52). A boyhood deprived of physical beauty and freedom seemed to have produced to an adult with a mind, restless and self-punishing, as portrayed in the opening depiction of the sleepless speaker, and confirmed abundantly in Coleridge’s notebooks and letters. Where Cowper had extolled the pleasures of gazing alone into the fireplace, Coleridge virtually rewrote the lines from *The Task* in ‘Frost at Midnight’ to show a much less contented response to dying embers:

The thin blue flame  
Lies on my low-burnt fire, and quivers not;  
Only that film, which fluttered on the grate,  
Still flutters there, the sole unquiet thing.  
Methinks, its motion in this hush of nature  
Gives it dim sympathies with me who live,  
Making it a companionable form,  
Whose puny flaps and freaks the idling Spirit  
By its own moods interprets, every where  
Echo or mirror seeking of itself,  
And makes a toy of Thought.

(13–23)

Coleridge was just as adept as Cowper at finding subjects for poetry in everyday domestic experience, but instead of peaceful, creative, day-dreaming, ‘Frost at Midnight’ shows a sleepless, isolated spirit, interpreting the film

on the grate as an image of himself, ‘the sole, unquiet thing’. Despite the apparent emptiness of the late night scene, however, Coleridge still manages a vivid imaginative ascent by pursuing the associated memory of watching the fireplace at school, and using his own troubled experience as the pathway to somewhere far better for his child. The poem is as transformative as the frost on the ‘eave-drops’, because it reveals just how much is going on in the quiet confines of home. Whatever the speaker’s fears over the consequences of negative childhood experience, the poem was in itself a testament to Coleridge’s powerful imagination and remarkable ability to recreate some of his inner life for readers.

Coleridge’s interest in the relationship between childhood and adult well-being was intensified by becoming a father in 1796, but it also deepened through his conversations with Wordsworth during the same period. His new friend and writing companion had enjoyed just the kind of ideal, unrestricted, rural childhood that Coleridge imagined for his son, as acknowledged in Wordsworth’s remarkable autobiographical poem, *The Prelude*. Here, Wordsworth showed that though his faith in the long-term benefits of the natural world, gratefully acknowledged in ‘Tintern Abbey’, had been sorely tested in the difficult years following the Revolution in France, it had eventually been proved beyond doubt. Wordsworth’s long poem recalls the hopeful mood of the early Revolution, when the extreme social injustices of French society were swept away and a new age of liberty, equality and fraternity seemed to be dawning. The ensuing bloodshed, power-struggle and war, however, rapidly destroyed the hopes of the young British idealist, whose personal turmoil was intensified by a passionate relationship and subsequently, an enforced separation from Annette Vallon, the young French woman whom he left behind in France with their baby. Wordsworth, forced to return to England, suffered political disillusionment and private disintegration. When he turned, a few years later, to ponder over his psychological recovery, he began to identify moments from his earliest years, which had somehow provided lifelines in the chaos of his adult experiences. ‘There are in our existence spots of time’, he wrote in *The Prelude*, through whose lasting impact on the memory,

our minds  
Are nourished and invisibly repaired;  
A virtue by which pleasure is enhanced,  
That penetrates, enables us to mount  
When high, more high, and lifts us up when fallen.

(XI, 258, 264–268; *William  
Wordsworth*, 491)

Such moments, crucial to healthy imaginative development, were ‘most conspicuous’ in early childhood memories (XI, 277).

*The Prelude* not only analyzes the growth of the mind, but also recreates many of Wordsworth’s own memories in passages of breath-taking descriptive verse, effectively proving its own point. The vivid accounts of wandering among the fells, skating with friends, playing cards or rowing out onto a star-lit lake are told with such energy that readers cannot doubt the poet’s assessment,

happy time  
It was, indeed, for all of us; to me  
It was a time of rapture  
(I, 456–8;  
*William Wordsworth*, 313)

For Wordsworth, as for many of his contemporaries, there was no sharp distinction between the physical and the psychological. Mental experience was largely dependent on physical experience – on the sensory data that poured into the receptive mind from birth. To talk of poetry as a kind of pleasure, then, meant something physical and emotional as well as intellectual, and it is helpful for a modern readership to remember the fullness of experience embodied in the word. The poet who could write of minds being ‘nourished’ and ‘repaired’ was not imagining an abstract, spiritual entity, but an essential part of the whole human being. Wordsworth’s language may be more restrained than Keats’s ‘soft, pulpy, slushy, oozy’ celebration of literary pleasure, but his understanding of poetry was just as firmly rooted in the senses.

If the idea of ‘rapture’ in *The Prelude* was largely associated with childhood, however, many other poems of the period celebrated the ecstasies that might occur a little later on. The visionary pursuit of the Poet-protagonist in Shelley’s ‘Alastor’, for example, reaches an explicitly erotic climax when the ‘veiled maid’ of his dream eventually reveals

her outspread arms, now bare,  
Her dark locks floating in the breath of night,  
Her beamy bending eyes, her parted lips  
Outstretched, and pale, and quivering eagerly.  
(177–80; O’Neill and  
Mahoney, 325)

In ‘The Eve of St Agnes’, Keats explored raptures both imaginary and real, as Madeline not only dreams of her lover and but also wakes to find

Porphyro, 'Ethereal, flush'd, and like a throbbing star' and more than ready to melt 'into her dream' (318–20; O'Neill and Mahoney, 434–5).

Often the creative and the sexual impulses were closely allied, as Robert Burns admitted when he described the motivation behind his first composition – a love song inspired by Nelly, the girl he had worked beside in the harvest field. In his 'Epistle to Davie', the '*Pleasures of the Heart*' are far more important than thoughts of wealth or worldly power, and Burns pays tribute to the inspiration of his 'darling Jean!' (*Poems and Songs*, I, 68). It was perhaps not the thought of an individual woman so much as sexual experience that proved so stimulating to Burns's creative spirit, however, as one of other poems in the same volume celebrated a rapturous evening with Annie, 'I kiss'd her owre and owre again, / Among the rigs o' barley' (*Poems and Songs*, I, 14). Burns continued to express the pleasures of the heart in poems that often combined love and laughter, satire and sentiment. If many of his songs, such as the famous 'Red, Red Rose', delighted those nurturing tender feelings in the drawing room, others entertained people in Clubs and taverns with more explicit suggestions about what might please a lady.

Burns's variety as a love poet was matched only by Byron, who was just as ready to see both the funny and intensely serious sides of youthful passion – at least by the time he wrote *Don Juan*. In the opening Canto, young Juan may be presented as a comical figure as he wanders 'by the glassy brooks / Thinking unutterable things', but the narrator's later comment on the unsurpassed sweetness of 'first and passionate love' still carries emotional conviction (I, 713–4, 1010; Wu, 958, 990). This is a poem that can switch from farce to tragedy in a matter of stanzas, its digressive, conversational narration flexible enough to capture the full range of human experience. Juan's first love for Donna Julia is passionate enough, albeit treated very differently from the idyllic episode with Haidée in Canto II. Since the physical nature of the relationship is emphasised so frankly, it seems entirely fitting that its demise should also be brought about by the uncontrollable body:

'And oh! if e'er I should forget, I swear –  
But that's impossible, and cannot be –  
Sooner shall this blue ocean melt to air,  
Sooner shall earth resolve itself to sea,  
Than I resign thine image, oh! my fair!  
Or think of any thing excepting thee;  
A mind diseased no remedy can physic –'  
(Here the ship gave a lurch, and he grew seasick.)

‘Sooner shall heaven kiss earth’ – (Here he fell sicker)  
 ‘Oh Julia, what is every other woe? –  
 (For God’s sake let me have a glass of liquor,  
 Pedro, Battista, help me down below!)  
 Julia, my love! – you rascal, Pedro, quicker –  
 Oh Julia! – this cursed vessel pitches so –  
 Beloved Julia, hear me still beseeching!’  
 (Here he grew inarticulate with reaching.)  
 (II, 145–60; Wu, 992)

Byron was only too aware of how rapidly the pleasures of the flesh could turn to pain, but it was ironies such as this that drove his own fecund imagination. As Juan succumbs to the pains of his first voyage, his creator revels in the cleverness of his poem, its brilliant dramatic comedy and escalating rhymes combining to prompt laughter rather than tears, when love disappears overboard.

## **Painful Pleasures**

Byron knew that pleasurable poetry was not dependent on cheerful subjects and his work, like that of many other fine poets in the Romantic period, also dealt with memories of loss, sadness, despair or disappointment. Indeed, ‘the joy of grief’ became a critical touchstone in the later eighteenth-century, following the extraordinary, international success of James Macpherson’s ancient, isolated, and deeply despondent bard, Ossian. According to some Enlightenment thinkers, including David Hume, sad recollections were generally more pleasurable than happy ones, because of the mind’s natural tendency to compare the past with the present. While a bad memory might prompt gratitude for current well-being, thoughts of happier times now gone were likely to produce more melancholy reflections. To gaze back obsessively on ‘the times of old’, was to emphasise the uncongenial nature of the present, or to deny any hope for a better future. The enormous international popularity of Ossian, however, suggests that many late eighteenth-century readers were deriving deep pleasure from the poems of an old man, left with nothing but memories of a better world now gone. Ossianic gloom appealed partly because it was seen to affect those overflowing with sensibility – the widely admired capacity for fine feeling. Readers moved to tears by an affecting lament were readers possessed of a soul. With the mid-eighteenth-century



cult of feeling, poems that dwelled on graveyards, darkness and ruin became very popular, and so the pleasures of memory seemed closely allied to the pleasures of melancholy.

During the Romantic period, however, many of the prevailing cultural trends were questioned, complicated or even rejected, and although the taste for ruins and melancholy was by no means forgotten, the forms it assumed were rather different. Ruined castles and abbeys, no longer necessarily sites for meditations on the transience of human life or vanished societies, were now seized as settings for exciting Gothic narratives, with room for supernatural elements difficult to accommodate in more realistic, modern situations. Poems such as Coleridge's 'Christabel', Scott's *The Lay of the Last Minstrel* or Keats's 'The Eve of St Agnes' all included medieval architecture to create an otherworldly atmosphere, in which anything seemed possible. Darkness and gloom often seemed the most congenial conditions for imaginative freedom, so even a tale filled with terrors offered pleasurable reading, if well told.

From a radical perspective, too, the ruins of monumental buildings might be a cause for celebration as much as sorrow. The great castle of the Bastille in Paris roused passionate feelings across the Channel, long before the start of the French Revolution. In the fifth book of *The Task*, published in 1785, for example, Cowper included an impassioned apostrophe:

Ye horrid tow'rs, th'abode of broken hearts,  
Ye dungeons and ye cages of despair,  
That monarchs have supplied from age to age  
With music such as suits their sov'reign ears,  
The sighs and groans of miserable men!  
There's not an English heart that would not leap  
To hear that ye were fall'n at last

(*Task*, V, 384–90)

Though Cowper's prediction turned out to be more sweeping than actual events warranted, it is indicative of a growing desire to banish the practices of unenlightened ages and with them the symbols of inhumanity.

If aspects of the past seemed less than admirable, symbols of their distance from the present had strong appeal. In his best known meditation on ruin, Shelley offered contrasting perspectives on the eighteenth-century fascination with ruin and despair. For in the sonnet, 'Ozymandias', the defiant words of an ancient Egyptian king, 'Look on my works, ye mighty, and despair!', are shown to have taken on a new, ironic resonance over centuries of gradual erosion in the desert (11; Wu, 1080). If the words