

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.

(e) In *style* Wordsworth presents a remarkable contrast, for he ranges from the sublime (as in the extract last quoted) to the ridiculous:

In the sweet shire of Cardigan,  
 Not far from pleasant Ivor-hall,  
 An old Man dwells, a little man,—  
 'Tis said he once was tall.  
 Full five-and-thirty years he lived  
 A running huntsman merry;  
 And still the centre of his cheek  
 Is red as a ripe cherry.

Simon Lee

This verse illustrates the lower ranges of his style, when he is haggard with his theories of poetic diction. The first two lines are mediocre; the second pair are absurd; and the rest of the verse is middling. This is simplicity overdone; yet it is always to be remembered that at his best Wordsworth can unite simplicity with sublimity, as he does in the lyrics we have already quoted. He has a kind of middle style; at its best it has grace and dignity, a heart-searching simplicity, and a certain magical enlightenment of phrase that is all his own. Not Shakespeare himself can better Wordsworth when the latter is in a mood that produces a poem like the following:

"She shall be sportive as the fawn  
 That wild with glee across the lawn,  
 Or up the mountain springs;  
 And hers shall be the breathing balm,  
 And hers the silence and the calm,  
 Of mute insensate things.

"The floating clouds their state shall lend  
 To her; for her the willow bend;  
 Nor shall she fail to see  
 Even in the motions of the Storm  
 Grace that shall mould the Maiden's form  
 By silent sympathy.

"The stars of midnight shall be dear  
 To her; and she shall lean her ear  
 In many a secret place  
 Where rivulets dance their wayward round,  
 And beauty born of murmuring sound  
 Shall pass into her face."

*Three Years she grew in Sun and Shower*

## II. SAMUEL TAYLOR COLERIDGE (1772-1834)

1. **His Life.** Coleridge was born in Devonshire, and was the youngest of the thirteen children of the vicar of Ottery St Mary. As a child he was unusually precocious: "I never thought as a child," he says, "never had the language of a child." When he was nine years old his father died; he then obtained a place in Christ's Hospital, where he astonished his schoolmates, one of whom was Charles Lamb, with his queer tastes in reading and speculation. He went to Cambridge (1791), where he was fired with the revolutionary doctrines. He abandoned the university and enlisted in the Light Dragoons, but a few months as a soldier ended his military career. In 1794 he returned to Cambridge, and later in the year became acquainted at Oxford with Southey, with whom he planned the founding of an ideal republic in America. With Southey he lived for a space at Bristol, and there he met Southey's wife's sister, whom he eventually married. At Bristol Coleridge lectured, wrote poetry, and issued a newspaper called *The Watchman* (1796), all with the idea of converting humanity; yet in spite of it all humanity remained unperturbed in its original sin. At this time (1797) he met Wordsworth, and, as has already been noticed, planned their joint production of the *Lyrical Ballads*, which was published at Bristol.

After a brief spell as a Unitarian minister, Coleridge, who was now dependent on a small annuity from two rich friends, studied German philosophy on the Continent; returned to England (1799), and for a time lived in the Lake District. There followed a serious attempt at political journalism, which failed because of his constitutional incapacity to provide regular contributions. In 1800 he was at Keswick, and, during what was to be his final period of great

poetical inspiration, produced the second part of *Christabel* and his ode *Dejection*. By now he was in almost continual ill-health, and by 1803 he had become enslaved to the opium which was to have such disastrous effect upon him. Ill-health and an unhappy domestic life sent him abroad to Malta and Italy (1804-06), and on his return he began a period of restless wandering round the country, never staying very long anywhere. It was during these restless years that his lectures were given, starting with a very poor series at the Royal Institution in 1808. The year 1811 saw his finest series of lectures, those on Shakespeare and other poets, which were followed by a further series in 1812 and 1813. During this period he struggled with little success to break himself of the opium habit which was sapping his abilities, and then, in 1816, he entered the house of a Mr Gillman, in Highgate. This provided for him a kind of refined and sympathetic inebriates' home. Here he gradually shook himself free from opium-taking, and he spent the last years of his life in an atmosphere of subdued content, visited by his friends, and conversing interminably in that manner of wandering but luminous intelligence that marked his later years. From the house in Highgate he issued a few books that, with all their faults, are among the best of their class.

2. His Poetry. The real blossoming of Coleridge's poetical genius was brief indeed, but the fruit of it was rich and wonderful. With the exception of a very few pieces, the best of his poems were composed within two years, 1797-98.

His first book was *Poems on Various Subjects* (1796), issued at Bristol. The miscellaneous poems that the volume contains have only a very moderate merit. Then, in collaboration with Wordsworth, he produced the *Lyrical Ballads* (1798). This remarkable volume contains nineteen poems by Wordsworth and four by Coleridge; and of these four by far the most noteworthy is *The Rime of the Ancient Mariner*.

Wordsworth has set on record the origin of *The Ancient Mariner*. He and Coleridge discussed the poem during their walks on the Quantock Hills. The main idea of the voyage, founded on a dream of his own, was Coleridge's; Wordsworth suggested details, and they thought of working on it together. Very soon, however, Coleridge's imagination was fired with the story, and his friend very sensibly left him to write it all. Hence we have that marvellous series of dissolving pictures, so curiously distinct and yet so strangely fused into one: the voyage through the polar ice; the death of the alba-

tross; the amazing scenes during the calm and the storm; and the return home. In style, in swift stealthiness of narrative speed, and in its weird and compelling strength of imagination the poem is without a parallel.

In 1797 Coleridge also wrote the first part of *Christabel*, but, though a second part was added in 1800, the poem remained unfinished, and lay unpublished till 1816. *Christabel* is the tale of a kind of witch, who, by taking the shape of a lovely lady, wins the confidence of the heroine Christabel. The tale is barely begun when it collapses. Already Coleridge's fatal indecision is declaring itself. Incomplete as it is, and with its second part somewhat inferior to its first, the poem is yet clear evidence of Coleridge's superlative power as a poet. The supernatural atmosphere is here less obviously created than in *The Ancient Mariner*; Coleridge relies on the most delicate and subtle suggestion, hidden in minute but highly significant details in the story. There are passages of wonderful beauty and of charming natural description, though they scarcely reach the heights of *The Ancient Mariner*. The metre, now known as the *Christabel* metre, is a loose but exceedingly melodious form of the octosyllabic couplet full of skilful rhythmic variations. It became exceedingly popular, and its influence is still unimpaired. We give a brief extract to show the metre, and also to give a slight idea of the poet's descriptive power:

There is not wind enough to twirl  
The one red leaf, the last of its clan,  
That dances as often as dance it can,  
Hanging so light, and hanging so high,  
On the topmost twig that looks up at the sky.

*Kubla Khan*, written in 1798, was, like *Christabel*, unfinished, and it also remained unpublished until 1816. It is the echo of a dream—the shadow of a shadow. Coleridge avers that he dreamt the lines, awoke in a fever of inspiration, threw the words on paper, but before the fit was over was distracted from the composition, so that the glory of the dream never returned and *Kubla Khan* remained unfinished. The poem, beginning with a description of the stately pleasure-dome built by Kubla Khan in Xanadu, soon becomes a dreamlike series of dissolving views, each expressed in the most perfect imagery and most magical of verbal music, but it collapses in mid-career.

In the same year Coleridge composed several other poems,



including the fine *Frost at Midnight* and *France: An Ode*. In 1802 he wrote the great ode *Dejection*, in which he already bewails the suspension of his "shaping spirit of Imagination." Save for a few fragments, such as the beautiful epitaph *The Knight's Tomb*, the remainder of his poems are of poorer quality and slight in bulk. His play *Remorse* was, on the recommendation of Byron, accepted by the management of the Drury Lane Theatre and produced in 1813. It succeeded on the stage, but as literature it is of little importance.

3. **Features of his Poetry.** Within its peculiar limits his poetical work, slight though it is, is of the highest.

(a) The most conspicuous feature of the poems is their intense *imaginative power*, superbly controlled, in his finest poems, by his unerring artistic sense. It exploits the weird, the supernatural, and the obscure. Yet, such is the power of true imagination, it can produce what Coleridge calls "that willing suspension of disbelief," and for the moment he can compel us to believe it all. He sees nature with a penetrating and revealing glance, drawing from it inspiration for the stuff of his poetry. He is particularly fine in his descriptions of the sky and the sea and the wider and more remote aspects of things.

(b) No poet has ever excelled Coleridge in *witchery of language*. His is the song the sirens sang. *The Ancient Mariner* has more than one passage like the following:

And now 'twas like all instruments,  
Now like a lonely flute;  
And now it is an angel's song,  
That makes the heavens be mute.

It ceased; yet still the sails made on  
A pleasant noise till noon,  
A noise like of a hidden brook  
In the leafy month of June,  
That to the sleeping woods all night  
Singeth a quiet tune.

The epitaph we have mentioned is another fine example:

Where is the grave of Sir Arthur O'Kellyn?  
Where may the grave of that good man be?  
By the side of a spring, on the breast of Helvellyn,  
Under the twigs of a young birch tree.  
The oak that in summer was sweet to hear,  
And rustled its leaves in the fall of the year,

And whistled and roared in the winter alone,  
Is gone,—and the birch in its stead is grown.—  
The knight's bones are dust,  
And his good sword rust:—  
His soul is with the saints, I trust.

The reader of such passages can discover something of the secret of their charm by observing the dexterous handling of the metre, the vowel-music, and other technical features, but in the last analysis their beauty defies explanation: it is there that genius lies.

(c) Along with his explosive fervour Coleridge preserves a fine *simplicity of diction*. He appeals directly to the reader's imagination by writing with great clearness. In this respect he often closely resembles Wordsworth. His meditative poem *Frost at Midnight* strongly shows this resemblance:

Therefore all seasons shall be sweet to thee,  
Whether the summer clothe the general earth  
With greenness, or the redbreast sit and sing  
Betwixt the tufts of snow on the bare branch  
Of mossy apple-tree, while the night thatch  
Smokes in the sun-thaw; whether the eave-drops fall  
Heard only in the trances of the blast,  
Or if the secret ministry of frost  
Shall hang them up in silent icicles,  
Quietly shining to the quiet moon.

4. **His Prose.** The same blight that afflicted Coleridge's poetry lies upon his prose. It is scrappy, chaotic, and tentative. In bulk it is large and sprawling; in manner it is diffuse and involved; but in its happier moments it possesses a breadth, a depth, and a searching wisdom that are as rare as they are admirable.

Most of his prose was of journalistic origin. In theme it is chiefly philosophical or literary. In 1796 he started *The Watchman*, a periodical, ambitious in scope, which ran to ten numbers only. To this journal Coleridge contributed some typical essays, which, among much that is both obscure and formless, show considerable weight and acuteness of thought. He followed with much more miscellaneous prose, some of it being written for *The Morning Post*, to which he was for a time a contributor. In 1808 he began a series of lectures on poetry and allied subjects, but already the curse of opium was upon him, and the lectures were failures. While he resided in the Lake District he started *The Friend* (1809), which was published at Penrith, but like *The Watchman* it had a brief career.

Then in 1817, when he had shaken himself free from opium, he published *Biographia Literaria* and *Sibylline Leaves*.

*Biographia Literaria* is his most valuable prose work. It pretends to record his literary upbringing, but as a consecutive narrative it is quite worthless. After sixteen chapters of philosophizing, almost entirely irrelevant, he discusses the poetical theory of his friend Wordsworth, and then in the last seven chapters of the book he gives a remarkable demonstration of his critical powers. He analyses the Wordsworthian theory in masterly fashion, and, separating the good from the bad, upon the sounder elements bases a critical dogma of great and permanent value. These last chapters of the book, which are the most enduring exposition of the Romantic theory as it exists in English, place Coleridge in the first flight of critics.

Second only in importance to *Biographia Literaria* in establishing Coleridge as the greatest of English critics are his lectures on Shakespeare and other poets, delivered at intervals between 1808 and 1819. It is unfortunate that they were never prepared for publication by Coleridge himself, and that we have to rely on the imperfect records, prepared from notes and reports by his daughter in 1836, and by Payne Collier in 1856. As a result, the lectures, as we have them, lack the finish of works properly prepared for publication. None the less they show Coleridge as a giant in the ranks of English critics. His examination of Shakespeare's plays and of poems by other writers gives us something more than an acute, logical dissection according to certain predetermined canons; it is subtly suggestive, stimulating the reader to keener perceptions, and formulating for him his own vague, half-crystallized reactions. Every work of art he sees as an organic, developing whole, subject only to the laws of its own existence. A true romantic, Coleridge revolts against the Augustan conception of poetry as an art to instruct. For him the aim of poetry is to provide pleasure—pleasure "through the medium of beauty."

In addition, he wrote (1825) *Aids to Reflection*. But he seemed to be incapable of writing a work of any size. After his death his *Table Talk* was published (1835), giving fleeting glimpses of a brilliant and erratic mind.

We give a short extract from his prose. This shows not only his sincere and temperate admiration for the poems of Wordsworth, but also the nature of his prose style. As a style it is not wholly commendable. It is too involved, and clogged with qualifications

and digressions; but, though he develops his ideas in a curious indirect fashion, he makes rapid progress. At its best Coleridge's prose has much of the evocative suggestiveness of his finest poetry, and is an admirable stimulus to keener perception in the reader, while his choice of language is discriminating, particularly in the fine distinctions he makes while describing the processes of artistic creation.

Had Mr Wordsworth's poems been the silly, the childish things, which they were for a long time described as being; had they been really distinguished from the compositions of other poets merely by meanness of language and inanity of thought; had they indeed contained nothing more than what is found in the parodies and pretended imitations of them; they must have sunk at once, a dead weight, into the slough of oblivion, and have dragged the preface along with them. But year after year increased the number of Mr Wordsworth's admirers. They were found, too, not in the lower classes of the reading public, but chiefly among young men of strong sensibility and meditative minds; and their admiration (inflamed perhaps in some degree by opposition) was distinguished by its intensity, I might almost say, by its *religious* fervour. These facts, and the intellectual energy of the author, which was more or less consciously felt, where it was outwardly and even boisterously denied, meeting with sentiments of aversion to his opinions, and of alarm at their consequences, produced an eddy of criticism, which would of itself have borne up the poems by the violence with which it whirled them round and round. With many parts of this preface, in the sense attributed to them, and which the words undoubtedly seem to authorise, I never concurred; but on the contrary objected to them as erroneous in principle, and as contradictory (in appearance at least) both to other parts of the same preface, and to the author's own practice in the greater part of the poems themselves. Mr Wordsworth in his recent collection has, I find, degraded this prefatory disquisition to the end of his second volume, to be read or not at the reader's choice. But he has not, as far as I can discover, announced any change in his poetic creed.

*Biographia Literaria*

### III. LORD BYRON (1788-1824)

1. *His Life.* George Gordon Byron, sixth Lord Byron, was as proud of his ancestry as he was of his poetry, and his ancestors were as extraordinary as was his poetry. They stretched back to the Norman Conquest, and included among them a notorious admiral, Byron's grandfather. The poet's father was a rake and a scoundrel. He married a Scottish heiress, Miss Gordon of Gight, whose money he was not long in squandering. Though the poet was born in London, his early years were passed in Aberdeen, his mother's