

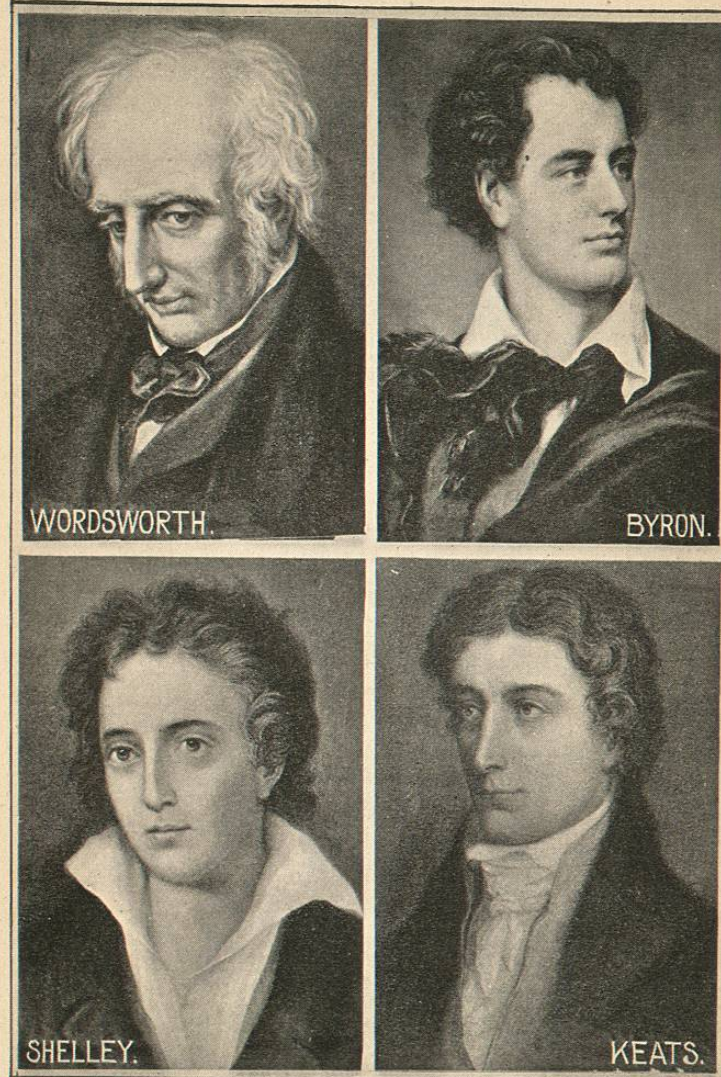
## CHAPTER VII.

FROM THE FRENCH REVOLUTION TO THE DEATH OF SCOTT.

1789-1832.

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 THE burst of creative activity at the opening of the 19th century has but one parallel in English literary history, namely, the somewhat similar flowering out of the national genius in the time of Elizabeth and the first two Stuart kings. The later age gave birth to no supreme poets, like Shakspeare and Milton. It produced no *Hamlet* and no *Paradise Lost*; but it offers a greater number of important writers, a higher average of excellence, and a wider range and variety of literary work than any preceding era. Wordsworth, Coleridge, Scott, Byron, Shelley, and Keats are all great names; while Southey, Landor, Moore, Lamb, and De Quincey would be noteworthy figures at any period, and deserve a fuller mention than can be here accorded them. But in so crowded a generation, selection becomes increasingly needful, and in the present chapter, accordingly, the emphasis will be laid upon the first-named group as not only the most important, but the most representative of the various tendencies of their time.

The conditions of literary work in this century have been almost unduly stimulating. The rapid advance in population, wealth, education, and the means of communication has vastly increased the number of readers. Every one who has any thing to say can say it in print, and is sure of some sort of a hearing. A special feature of the time is the multiplication of periodicals. The great London dailies, like the *Times* and the *Morning Post*, which were started during the



last quarter of the 18th century, were something quite new in journalism. The first of the modern reviews, the *Edinburgh*, was established in 1802, as the organ of the Whig party in Scotland. This was followed by the London *Quarterly*, in 1808, and by *Blackwood's Magazine*, in 1817, both in the Tory interest. The first editor of the *Edinburgh* was Francis Jeffrey, who assembled about him a distinguished corps of contributors, including the versatile Henry Brougham, afterward a great parliamentary orator and lord chancellor of England, and the Rev. Sydney Smith, whose witty sayings are still current. The first editor of the *Quarterly* was William Gifford, a satirist, who wrote the *Baviad* and *Mæviad* in ridicule of literary affectations. He was succeeded in 1824 by John Gibson Lockhart, the son-in-law of Walter Scott, and the author of an excellent *Life of Scott*. *Blackwood's* was edited by John Wilson, Professor of Moral Philosophy in the University of Edinburgh, who, under the pen-name of "Christopher North," contributed to his magazine a series of brilliant imaginary dialogues between famous characters of the day, entitled *Noctes Ambrosianæ*, because they were supposed to take place at Ambrose's tavern in Edinburgh. These papers were full of a profuse, headlong eloquence, of humor, literary criticism, and personalities interspersed with songs expressive of a roystering and convivial Toryism and an uproarious contempt for Whigs and cockneys. These reviews and magazines, and others which sprang up beside them, became the *nuclei* about which the wit and scholarship of both parties gathered. Political controversy under the Regency and the reign of George IV. was thus carried on more regularly by permanent organs, and no longer so largely by privateering, in the shape of pamphlets, like Swift's *Public Spirit of the Allies*, Johnson's *Taxation No Tyranny*, and Burke's *Reflections on the Revolution in France*. Nor did politics by any means usurp the columns of the reviews. Literature, art,

science, the whole circle of human effort and achievement passed under review. *Blackwood's*, *Fraser's*, and the other monthlies published stories, poetry, criticism, and correspondence—every thing, in short, which enters into the make-up of our magazines to-day, except illustrations.

Two main influences, of foreign origin, have left their trace in the English writers of the first thirty years of the 19th century, the one communicated by contact with the new German literature of the latter half of the 18th century, and in particular with the writings of Goethe, Schiller, and Kant; the other springing from the events of the French Revolution. The influence of German upon English literature in the 19th century was more intellectual and less formal than that of the Italian in the 16th and of the French in the 18th. In other words, the German writers furnished the English with ideas and ways of feeling rather than with models of style. Goethe and Schiller did not become subjects for literary imitation as Molière, Racine, and Boileau had become in Pope's time. It was reserved for a later generation and for Thomas Carlyle to domesticate the diction of German prose. But the nature and extent of this influence can, perhaps, best be noted when we come to take up the authors of the time one by one.

The excitement caused by the French Revolution was something more obvious and immediate. When the Bastille fell, in 1789, the enthusiasm among the friends of liberty and human progress in England was hardly less intense than in France. It was the dawn of a new day; the shackles were stricken from the slave; all men were free and all men were brothers, and radical young England sent up a shout that echoed the roar of the Paris mob. Wordsworth's lines on the *Fall of the Bastille*, Coleridge's *Fall of Robespierre* and *Ode to France*, and Southey's revolutionary drama, *Wat Tyler*, gave expression to the hopes and aspirations of the English democracy. In after life, Wordsworth, looking back regretfully

to those years of promise, wrote his poem on the *French Revolution as it Appeared to Enthusiasts at its Commencement*.

Bliss was it in that dawn to be alive;  
But to be young was very heaven. O times  
In which the meager, stale, forbidding ways  
Of custom, law, and statute took at once  
The attraction of a country in romance.

Those were the days in which Wordsworth, then an undergraduate at Cambridge, spent a college vacation in tramping through France, landing at Calais on the eve of the very day (July 14, 1790) on which Louis XVI. signalized the anniversary of the fall of the Bastille by taking the oath of fidelity to the new constitution. In the following year Wordsworth revisited France, where he spent thirteen months, forming an intimacy with the republican general, Beaupuis, at Orleans, and reaching Paris not long after the September massacres of 1792. Those were the days, too, in which young Southey and young Coleridge, having married sisters at Bristol, were planning a "Pantisocracy," or ideal community, on the banks of the Susquehannah, and denouncing the British government for going to war with the French Republic. This group of poets, who had met one another first in the south of England, came afterward to be called the Lake Poets, from their residence in the mountainous lake country of Westmoreland and Cumberland, with which their names, and that of Wordsworth, especially, are forever associated. The so-called "Lakers" did not, properly speaking, constitute a school of poetry. They differed greatly from one another in mind and art. But they were connected by social ties and by religious and political sympathies. The excesses of the French Revolution, and the usurpation of Napoleon disappointed them, as it did many other English liberals, and drove them into the ranks of the reactionaries. Advancing years brought conservatism, and they became in time loyal Tories and orthodox churchmen.

William Wordsworth (1770-1850), the chief of the three, and, perhaps, on the whole, the greatest English poet since Milton, published his *Lyrical Ballads* in 1798. The volume contained a few pieces by his friend Coleridge—among them the *Ancient Mariner*—and its appearance may fairly be said to mark an epoch in the history of English poetry. Wordsworth regarded himself as a reformer of poetry; and in the preface to the second edition of the *Lyrical Ballads*, he defended the theory on which they were composed. His innovations were twofold: in subject-matter and in diction. "The principal object which I proposed to myself in these poems," he said, "was to choose incidents and situations from common life. Low and rustic life was generally chosen, because, in that condition, the essential passions of the heart find a better soil in which they can attain their maturity . . . and are incorporated with the beautiful and permanent forms of nature." Wordsworth discarded, in theory, the poetic diction of his predecessors, and professed to use "a selection of the real language of men in a state of vivid sensation." He adopted, he said, the language of men in rustic life, "because such men hourly communicate with the best objects from which the best part of language is originally derived."

In the matter of poetic diction Wordsworth did not, in his practice, adhere to the doctrine of this preface. Many of his most admired poems, such as the *Lines written near Tintern Abbey*, the great *Ode on the Intimations of Immortality*, the *Sonnets*, and many parts of his longest poems, *The Excursion* and *The Prelude*, deal with philosophic thought and highly intellectualized emotions. In all of these and in many others the language is rich, stately, involved, and as remote from the "real language" of Westmoreland shepherds as is the epic blank verse of Milton. On the other hand, in those of his poems which were consciously written in illustration of his theory, the affectation of simplicity,

coupled with a defective sense of humor, sometimes led him to the selection of vulgar and trivial themes, and the use of language which is bald, childish, or even ludicrous. His simplicity is too often the simplicity of Mother Goose rather than of Chaucer. Instances of this occur in such poems as *Peter Bell*, the *Idiot Boy*, *Goody Blake and Harry Gill*, *Simon Lee*, and the *Wagoner*. But there are multitudes of Wordsworth's ballads and lyrics which are simple without being silly, and which, in their homeliness and clear profundity, in their production of the strongest effects by the fewest strokes, are among the choicest modern examples of *pure*, as distinguished from decorated, art. Such are (out of many) *Ruth*, *Lucy*, *She was a Phantom of Delight*, *To a Highland Girl*, *The Reverie of Poor Susan*, *To the Cuckoo*, *The Solitary Reaper*, *We Are Seven*, *The Pet Lamb*, *The Fountain*, *The Two April Mornings*, *Resolution and Independence*, *The Thorn*, and *Yarrow Unvisited*.

Wordsworth was something of a Quaker in poetry, and loved the sober drabs and grays of life. Quietism was his literary religion, and the sensational was to him not merely vulgar, but almost wicked. "The human mind," he wrote, "is capable of being excited without the application of gross and violent stimulants." He disliked the far-fetched themes and high-colored style of Scott and Byron. He once told Landor that all of Scott's poetry together was not worth sixpence. From action and passion he turned away to sing the inward life of the soul and the outward life of nature. He said :

To me the meanest flower that blows can give  
Thoughts that do often lie too deep for tears.

And again :

Long have I loved what I behold.  
The night that charms, the day that cheers;  
The common growth of mother earth  
Suffices me—her tears, her mirth,  
Her humblest mirth and tears.

Wordsworth's life was outwardly uneventful. The companionship of the mountains and of his own thoughts, the sympathy of his household, the lives of the dalesmen and cottagers about him furnished him with all the stimulus that he required.

Love had he found in huts where poor men lie;  
His only teachers had been woods and rills,  
The silence that is in the starry sky,  
The sleep that is among the lonely hills.

He read little, but reflected much, and made poetry daily, composing, by preference, out of doors, and dictating his verses to some member of his family. His favorite amanuensis was his sister Dorothy, a woman of fine gifts, to whom Wordsworth was indebted for some of his happiest inspirations. Her charming *Memorials of a Tour in the Scottish Highlands* records the origin of many of her brother's best poems. Throughout life Wordsworth was remarkably self-centered. The ridicule of the reviewers, against which he gradually made his way to public recognition, never disturbed his serene belief in himself, or in the divine message which he felt himself commissioned to deliver. He was a slow and serious person, a preacher as well as a poet, with a certain rigidity, not to say narrowness, of character. That plastic temperament which we associate with poetic genius Wordsworth either did not possess, or it hardened early. Whole sides of life were beyond the range of his sympathies. He touched life at fewer points than Byron and Scott, but touched it more profoundly. It is to him that we owe the phrase "plain living and high thinking," as also a most noble illustration of it in his own practice. His was the wisest and deepest spirit among the English poets of his generation, though hardly the most poetic. He wrote too much, and, attempting to make every petty incident or reflection the occasion of a poem, he finally reached the point of composing

verses *On Seeing a Harp in the shape of a Needle Case*, and on other themes more worthy of Mrs. Sigourney. In parts of his long blank-verse poems, *The Excursion*, 1814, and *The Prelude*—which was printed after his death in 1850, though finished as early as 1806—the poetry wears very thin and its place is taken by prosaic, tedious didacticism. These two poems were designed as portions of a still more extended work, *The Recluse*, which was never completed. *The Excursion* consists mainly of philosophical discussions on nature and human life between a school-master, a solitary, and an itinerant peddler. *The Prelude* describes the development of Wordsworth's own genius. In parts of *The Excursion* the diction is fairly Shaksperian:

The good die first,  
And they whose hearts are dry as summer dust  
Burn to the socket;

a passage not only beautiful in itself but dramatically true, in the mouth of the bereaved mother who utters it, to that human instinct which generalizes a private sorrow into a universal law. Much of *The Prelude* can hardly be called poetry at all, yet some of Wordsworth's loftiest poetry is buried among its dreary wastes, and now and then, in the midst of commonplaces, comes a flash of Miltonic splendor—like

Golden cities ten months' journey deep  
Among Tartarian wilds.

Wordsworth is, above all things, the poet of nature. In this province he was not without forerunners. To say nothing of Burns and Cowper, there was George Crabbe, who had published his *Village* in 1783—fifteen years before the *Lyrical Ballads*—and whose last poem, *Tales of the Hall*, came out in 1819, five years after *The Excursion*. Byron called Crabbe "Nature's sternest painter, and her best." He was a minutely accurate delineator of the harsher aspects of rural life. He photographs a Gypsy camp; a common, with

its geese and donkey; a salt marsh, a shabby village street, or tumble-down manse. But neither Crabbe nor Cowper has the imaginative lift of Wordsworth,

The light that never was, on sea or land,  
The consecration, and the poet's dream.

In a note on a couplet in one of his earliest poems, descriptive of an oak-tree standing dark against the sunset, Wordsworth says: "I recollect distinctly the very spot where this struck me. The moment was important in my poetical history, for I date from it my consciousness of the infinite variety of natural appearances which had been unnoticed by the poets of any age or country, and I made a resolution to supply, in some degree, the deficiency." In later life he is said to have been impatient of any thing spoken or written by another about mountains, conceiving himself to have a monopoly of "the power of hills." But Wordsworth did not stop with natural description. Matthew Arnold has said that the office of modern poetry is the "moral interpretation of Nature." Such, at any rate, was Wordsworth's office. To him Nature was alive and divine. He felt, under the veil of phenomena,

A presence that disturbs me with the joy  
Of elevated thought: a sense sublime  
Of something far more deeply interfused.

He approached, if he did not actually reach, the view of pantheism which identifies God with Nature; and the mysticism of the Idealists, who identify Nature with the soul of man. This tendency was not inspired in Wordsworth by German philosophy. He was no metaphysician. In his rambles with Coleridge about Nether Stowey and Alfoxden, when both were young, they had, indeed, discussed Spinoza. And in the autumn of 1798, after the publication of the *Lyrical Ballads*, the two friends went together to Germany, where Wordsworth spent half a year. But the literature and philosophy of Germany made little direct impression upon

Wordsworth. He disliked Goethe, and he quoted with approval the saying of the poet Klopstock, whom he met at Hamburg, that he placed the romanticist Bürger above both Goethe and Schiller.

It was through Samuel Taylor Coleridge (1772-1834), who was pre-eminently the *thinker* among the literary men of his generation, that the new German thought found its way into England. During the fourteen months which he spent in Germany—chiefly at Ratzburg and Göttingen—he had familiarized himself with the transcendental philosophy of Immanuel Kant and of his continuators, Fichte and Schelling, as well as with the general literature of Germany. On his return to England, he published, in 1800, a free translation of Schiller's *Wallenstein*, and through his writings, and more especially through his conversations, he became the conductor by which German philosophic ideas reached the English literary class.

Coleridge described himself as being from boyhood a book-worm and a day-dreamer. He remained through life an omnivorous, though unsystematic, reader. He was helpless in practical affairs, and his native indolence and procrastination were increased by his indulgence in the opium habit. On his return to England, in 1800, he went to reside at Keswick, in the Lake Country, with his brother-in-law, Southey, whose industry supported both families. During his last nineteen years Coleridge found an asylum under the roof of Mr. James Gilman, of Highgate, near London, whither many of the best young men in England were accustomed to resort to listen to Coleridge's wonderful talk. Talk, indeed, was the medium through which he mainly influenced his generation. It cost him an effort to put his thoughts on paper. His *Table Talk*—crowded with pregnant paragraphs—was taken down from his lips by his nephew, Henry Coleridge. His criticisms of Shakspeare are nothing but notes, made here and there, from a course of lectures delivered before the Royal