

A major change in thinking occurred in the late eighteenth century. The other important aspect of the poem, however, is the vividness of its imaginative picture: as with Wordsworth, Coleridge can create an intense imaginative vision, even if the poem as a whole undercuts and questions it. Keats is another poet who uses his imagination to create make-believe worlds, the world of the nightingale or the Grecian Urn in his odes – and again the vividness of the imaginative picture is important. If one looks closely at 'Tintern Abbey', however, it becomes clear that Wordsworth is less concerned to present his imaginative perception than to talk about, examine and even question his imagination. Thus, instead of being a relative, straightforward poem in which Wordsworth is concerned to present his almost religious insight into the life of things, 'Tintern Abbey' is in fact a much more complex and hesitant work which begins by setting up the idea that an order can be found in nature, but then questions the imaginative process that creates that idea. Many of Wordsworth's finest poems follow a similar pattern. He presents us with a picture of something natural (either landscape or a character) on which he imposes an imaginative interpretation, but then questions whether the order he creates can be trusted. In an encounter with a leech-gatherer in 'Resolution and Independence' (1807) we have a typical Wordsworth character: Pathetic but also courageous. He inspires the poet. What we might feel in reading the poem as a whole, though, is that there is a gap between the reality of the leech-gatherer's lot and the rather too confident uplifting sentiments Wordsworth draws from the encounter. Again we are confronted with a hesitant, romantic, distrusting and questioning his own imaginative interpretation of experience. The poem does not have a message: on the contrary, it makes us feel that any interpretation the poet impose on life can not be totally trusted. The point being made here is that romantic poets do not have a simple philosophy to offer. In the end, their good poems, like all good poems, show us that reality is more complex and confusing than any order that the poet might create. Wordsworth's poems only work so well, however, because he does give such serious consideration to his own imaginative search for order: the self-doubts and hesitations of his poems are so effective only because they are played off against his ability to create a sense of an almost mystical insight into the life of things. Coleridge is another poet who often turns to nature, and writes of how the imagination can perceive a harmony and order in the natural world. In his 'conversation poems', however, such as 'Frost at Midnight' (1802), his theme is most commonly the failure of his imagination to detect this pattern. Coleridge is also relevant to another aspect of romantic poetry: the emphasis on the imagination suggests how the mind is central in romanticism, and the awareness of how the poet creates ideas in his imagination puts a new importance on the fantasies that can be created in the mind. Romantic poets also attribute a tremendous importance to childhood, feeling that the child possesses an innocent wisdom which disappears as maturity approaches. 'Tintern Abbey' (1798) opens with a description of a rural landscape. Here we have the poet turning to nature, and Wordsworth continues by writing about the effect of the scene: it enables him to see a pattern in the world ('We see into the life of things'). This is most evident in the publication in 1798 of the Lyrical Ballads by Wordsworth and Coleridge, which provides the effective starting point for romantic poetry. Most readers encountering Blake for the first time begin to extract a philosophy from his work: that he is for innocence and freedom and against authority, discipline and restraint. Shelley has never been as highly regarded as the other romantic poets mainly because he did tend to believe in his

own imagination, so that his ideas and ideals are not sufficiently measured against things as they really are. The romantic poets had been lost sight of by rational man (romanticism in many ways was a reaction against the prevailing rational mentality of the eighteenth century). Such thinking finds expression in an extraordinary flood of great poetry from Blake, Wordsworth, Coleridge, Keats, Byron and Shelley. Indeed, there are numerous lines in Coleridge where a vision of harmony is offered to us, but the main stress of the poems is on how he would like things to be. If Wordsworth's most repeated theme could be said to be his distrust of his own imagination, Coleridge's is the failure of his imagination. This is important in Coleridge, especially in 'Kubla Khan' (1816), where he creates a sort of fairytale kingdom. Their work is very popular, but it is a common failing to underestimate the poetic sophistication of these writers. It is often assumed that a romantic poet has a positive philosophy centring on simple, natural values, but, for the most part, the major poets are very hesitant romantics. We can begin with Blake, whose most celebrated poems were in fact published before the Lyrical Ballads.