***English Romanticism 1 – Wordsworth and Coleridge: Lyrical Ballads***

**I. “Romanticism”**

English romanticism: cc. 1780s/90s – cc. 1820s/30s (two generations)

“Romantic” derives from the term *romance*

-- middle ages: new vernacular languages derived from Latin; “to romance”: to write in the vernacular -- connotations of “popular,” “new,” divergent.”

-- a literary genre: fabulous, unlikely, fantastical, unrealistic elements. Cf. 18th century English “gothic romance”: exotic locations, supernatural events, scary, weird, psychologically deviant elements, horror, eccentricity, irrationalism

-- IN SUM: outlandish, strange, fantastical, exotic, weird, exaggerated, different from ordinary life, imaginative; in artistic terms: deviation from classical standards

“Romantic” in a literary historical sense: an interest in the hazy, the extraordinary, the irrational, including the mysteries of the psyche; deviations from classicist norms.

Opposition of classic and romantic:

clarity, balance, symmetry -- irregular, obscure, wild

imitates the known world -- creates new worlds and explores the unknown

Age of Reason -- the emotions dominate

traditionalism – individualism, creativity, originality

BUT BEWARE OF SUCH GENERALIZATIONS! – many features have precedence in 18th century literature (the irrationality of the sublime, the dominance of emotions, the call for imaginative writing as opposed to social commentary)

Romanticism often seen as a radical break with the past because of the historical context: an age of revolutions (American War of Independence, French Revolution) – innovations in art connected to political upheavals

An important context for assessing new developments in literature in England: the Revolution Controversy (c. 1789–1799)

-- Edmund Burke, *Reflections on the Revolution in France* (1790) – argues for tradition

-- Thomas Paine, *The Rights of Man* (1791) – “radical”; argues for “natural rights”

**II. The “Lake Poets”**

-- the circle of William Wordsworth (1170-1850) and Samuel Taylor Coleridge (1772-1834)

(Robert Southey, Charles Lamb, Dorothy Wordsworth, john Thelwall, Thomas Poole, etc)

-- Wordsworth and Coleridge: *Lyrical Ballads* (1798. 1800, 1802, 1805) – marks the beginning or Romantic poetry in England

-- Wordsworth, “Preface” to the *Lyrical Ballads* (1800, 1802) – “manifesto” of early romantic poetics

“The principal object, then, which I proposed myself in these poems, was to choose incidents and situations from common life, and to relate or to describe them throughout, as far as was possible, in a selection of language really used by men, and at the same time to throw over them a certain colouring of imagination, whereby ordinary things should be presented to the mind in an unusual way. And further, and above all, to make these incidents and situations interesting by tracing in them ... the primary laws of our nature … Low and rustic life was generally chosen because in that situation the essential passions of the heart find a better soil … because the manners of rural life germinate from those elementary feelings … and are … incorporated with the beautiful and permanent forms on nature … ”

“the feeling ... developed [in the poems] gives importance to the action and situation, and not the action and situation to the feeling.”

“poetry is the spontaneous overflow of powerful feelings; it takes its origin from emotions recollected in tranquillity.”

Examples of treating the new poetic as a version of revolutionary politics:

-- Francis Jeffrey (critic for the *Edinburgh Review*) gives the name Lake Poets to Wordsworth, Coleridge, Southy – critical of them, attacks Wordsworth’s Preface:

“Though they lay claim … to a creed and a revelation of their own … their doctrines … are probably of an earlier date, and seem to have been borrowed from the great apostle of Geneva.”

“they are dissenters from the established systems in poetry and criticism […] The disciples of this school … seem to value themselves very highly, for having broken loose from the bondage of ancient authority […]”

“The language of the higher and more cultivated orders may fairly be presumed to be better than that of their inferiors,”

-- William Hazlitt, writing in retrospect in 1815: Wordsworth’s poetry

“partakes of, and is carried along with, the revolutionary movement of our age: the political changes of the day were the model on which he formed and conducted his poetical experiments. His Muse … is a levelling one. It proceeds on a principle of equality, and strives to reduce all things to the same standard.”

**III. Elements of romantic poetics**

-- psychological interest (fundamental laws of human nature); elementary feelings reveal fundamental laws of the psyche and the moral and spiritual character of the human being.

-- subjects from low life: expansion of the “human”; critique of sentimental sympathy

-- language of nature

**nature / natural:**

-- contrast of the universal, permanent, and the artificial, man-made

-- pantheism / Colerige: “everything has a life of its own, and … we are all One Life, and this one life is God,”

-- philosophical background: separation between the external world and the mind; Colerige, *Biographia Literaria* (1817): a critique of “mechanical” philosophy, a demand of renuiting subject and object

-- “nature”: a sign of the presence of he divine in the world – mind united with nature enables participation in the One Life

-- recognition of the supernatural in the natural

-- “language of nature” a self-contradictory term – question of the primacy of the mind over the world or of the world over the mind

**Wordsworth’s definition of poetry**

**--** poetry is the expression of feeling (“spontaneous overflow of feelings”)

-- NOT instinctual outburst: “recollected in tranquility”: reflection, meditation, shaping of spontaneous feelings

-- thus: NOT a discarding of the intellectual or cultural for instinctual natural expression

-- thus: romantic poetry not a denial of culture, tradition, convention, replaced by nature, but reorientation of intellectual and poetic traditions towards psychological and metaphysical explorations of the relation of mind and nature