

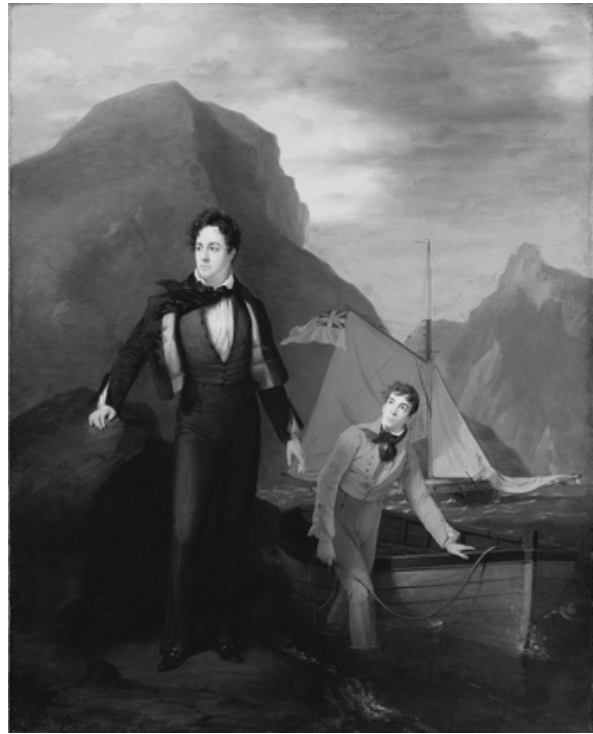
# The (Mis)fortune of Poetry: Romantic Poetry in *Persuasion*

Context Corner IV

By Taras V. Mikhailiuk, UNC-CH

*"...she thought it was the misfortune of poetry, to be seldom safely enjoyed by those who enjoyed it completely; and that the strong feelings which alone could estimate it truly, were the very feelings which ought to taste it but sparingly."*

– Anne Elliot (Jane Austen, *Persuasion*, p. 94)



George Gordon, 6<sup>th</sup> Lord Byron (1788-1824), by George Sanders, 1807-1809. Image courtesy of The Royal Collection Trust.

## British Romanticism

<b>British Neoclassicism (ca. 1660-1789)</b>	<b>British Romanticism (ca. 1789-1832)</b>
Traditionalism of form: genres of classical literature as models	Innovation of form: crossing, mixing, and improvisation with genres
Poetry as a product of individual talent, but also of study and adherence to rules	Poetry as an outgrowth of the poet's imagination—spontaneous and organic
Poetry as the imitation/reflection of human life	Poetry as the expression of the poet's mind and imagination
Emphasis on the universal experience, truth, and human characteristics	Emphasis on the subjective experience, insight, and vision of human life
Social and political conservatism: every human occupies a fixed place in the cosmic order determined by Providence.	Social and political egalitarianism: humanity is most glorious when it strives past its limits after the impossible.
Key figures: John Dryden, Alexander Pope, Joseph Addison, Jonathan Swift, Samuel Johnson, Oliver Goldsmith, and Edmund Burke	Key figures*: William Blake, Walter Scott, William Wordsworth, Samuel Taylor Coleridge, Percy and Mary Shelley, Lord Byron, John Keats, and Jane Austen

\*These writers exhibit characteristics of Romantic thought in varying degrees.

## Poetry

“[A]ll good poetry is the overflow of powerful feelings.”  
– William Wordsworth, Preface to *Lyrical Ballads*, 1800

“Poetry is the language of the imagination and the passions. . . . Poetry is the universal language which the heart holds with nature and itself.”  
– William Hazlitt, *Lectures on the English Poets*, 1818

“Poetry, in a general sense, may be defined to be ‘the expression of the Imagination.’”  
– Percy Bysshe Shelley, *A Defence of Poetry*, 1821

### Key Passages in *Persuasion*

- Pages 78-79: Anne recalling lines of poetry while walking to Winthrop
- Pages 93-94: Anne and Captain Benwick explicitly discuss the poems of Scott and Byron; Benwick “had rather the appearance of feelings glad to burst their usual restraints.”
- Page 100-101: Talks of Byron and Scott (100) and Lord Byron’s “dark blue seas” (101)
- Page 157: “[Benwick] would gain cheerfulness, and [Louisa Musgrove] would learn to be an enthusiast for Scott and Lord Byron.”
- Pages 172-73: Wentworth describes Benwick’s attachment to Fanny Harville as “perfectly spontaneous, untaught feeling” (172).
- Pages 226-27: Wentworth “poured out his feelings” in his love letter to Anne.

### Discussion Questions

- A. Read the passage beginning with “Her *pleasure* in the walk” (78) and ending with “But nobody heard, or, at least, nobody answered her” (79).

After re-reading this passage, how would you describe the attitude of Austen’s narrator toward poetry in this instance?

How might shifts from Anne’s internal monologue to an overheard dialogue and back to monologue emphasize this attitude?

How would you describe Anne’s emotional state in this instance?

- B. Read the excerpt starting with “While Captains Wentworth and Harville led the talk” (93) and closing with “she had been eloquent on a point in which her own conduct would ill bear examination (94).

How would you describe the narrator’s attitude toward Romantic poetry, particularly Byron’s poetry, in this passage? What details from Austen’s text suggest this attitude?

What human tendencies might Anne and Captain Benwick exhibit in this scene? How does the novel comment on these tendencies?

With Anne's recommendation of "a larger allowance of prose," how does this passage treat prose? How do the details from Austen's text comment on the reading of prose and its influence?

- C. Read the passage beginning with "the Cobb itself, its old wonders and new improvements (middle of 89) and ending with "these places must be visited, and visited again, to make the worth of Lyme understood" (89) and "Anne found Captain Benwick again drawing near her. Lord Byron's 'dark blue seas' could not fail of being brought forward by their present view" (101).

How might the landscape in these passages influence mental and emotional state of Captain Benwick? Anne Elliot?

As a major location in *Persuasion*, what larger significance might Lyme Regis have for the development of characters in the novel?

- D. How does the novel comment on the apparent tendency of Romantic literature to stimulate—and in figures like Byron, exemplify—individuality and self-focus?

### References

- Abrams, M. H. and Geoffrey Galt Harpham. "Neoclassic and Romantic." In *A Glossary of Literary Terms*. 10<sup>th</sup> ed. Boston: Wadsworth, 2012. 236-41.
- "Bride of Abydos, The." In *The Oxford Companion to English Literature*, 7<sup>th</sup> ed. Edited by Dinah Birch. Oxford University Press, 2009. *Oxford Reference*. Accessed June 1, 2017. <http://www.oxfordreference.com.libproxy.lib.unc.edu/view/10.1093/acref/9780192806871.001.0001/acref-9780192806871-e-1044>.
- Clarke, Eric O. "Lord Byron, George Gordon." In *The Oxford Encyclopedia of British Literature*. Edited by David Scott Kastan. Oxford University Press, 2006. *Oxford Reference*. Accessed June 1, 2017. <http://www.oxfordreference.com.libproxy.lib.unc.edu/view/10.1093/acref/9780195169218.001.0001/acref-9780195169218-e-0075>.
- Duncan, Ian. "Scott, Walter." In *The Oxford Encyclopedia of British Literature*. Edited by David Scott Kastan. Oxford University Press, 2006. *Oxford Reference*. Accessed June 1, 2017. <http://www.oxfordreference.com.libproxy.lib.unc.edu/view/10.1093/acref/9780195169218.001.0001/acref-9780195169218-e-0417>.
- "Giaour, The." In *The Oxford Companion to English Literature*, 7<sup>th</sup> ed. Edited by Dinah Birch. Oxford University Press, 2009. *Oxford Reference*. Accessed June 1, 2017. <http://www.oxfordreference.com.libproxy.lib.unc.edu/view/10.1093/acref/9780192806871.001.0001/acref-9780192806871-e-3073>.
- Hazlitt, William. *Lectures on the English Poets*. London: Taylor & Hessey, 1818. *Internet Archive*. Accessed June 1, 2017. <https://archive.org/stream/cu31924102775354#page/n11/mode/2up>

Shelley, Percy Bysshe. *A Defence of Poetry*. In *Shelley's Poetry and Prose*. Norton Critical Edition. Edited by Donald H. Reiman and Neil Fraistat. New York: Norton, 2002. 509-35.

Wordsworth, William. *Lyrical Ballads with Other Poems*, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed, Vol 1. London: T. N. Longman and O. Rees, 1800. *HathiTrust*. Accessed June 1, 2017. <https://hdl.handle.net/2027/dull.ark:/13960/t3806dv7x>

### Further Reading

Deresiewicz, William. "Persuasion: Widowhood and Waterloo." In *Jane Austen and the Romantic Poets*. New York: Columbia University Press, 2004. 127-58.

Franklin, Caroline. "'The Interest is Very Strong, Especially for Mr. Darcy': Jane Austen, Byron, and Romantic Love." In *The Female Romantics: Nineteenth-century Women Novelists and Byronism*. New York: Routledge, 2013. 83-102.

Knox-Shaw, Peter. "Persuasion, Byron, and the Turkish Tale." In *The Review of English Studies* 44:173 (Oct. 1993): 47-69.

Robinson, Peter. "Captain Benwick's Reading." In *Essays in Criticism* 44:57 (2007): 147-70.

Thompson, James. "Authority in *Mansfield Park* and *Persuasion*: Durkheim, Weber, and Parsons." In *Jane Austen and Modernization: Sociological Readings*. New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2015. 19-53.