VIRGIL AND WORDSWORTH

THE POETRY OF ROMANTICISM

By A. J. RAYMER

EVERY creative age in history, since Greek times, has held some belief on the nature and purpose of poetry, and the results have varied from song for the joy of singing to verse as a medium for the propagation of Communist propaganda. The short and splendid flower of Greek lyric in Sappho and Alcman, the Homeric epic, Greek drama, Alexandrian pastoral, the love lyrics of Catullus, the imperial self-consciousness of Virgil, and the indignant satires of Juvenal, all these reflect some deep-rooted conviction of the true form and purpose of the poet's craft. Some people have thought of poetry as an 'accomplishment' like those of a polished young Victorian lady who had learnt deportment and a repertoire of sentimental drawing-room songs. Others, perhaps more profoundly, conceive of poetry as the hidden elixir of a mind aware of life, the reaction of a feeling, thinking person to the world of nature, human life, and the vast concourse of 'rebel powers that thee array'. These reactions, being concerned with the significance and enchantment of what the poet sees, can only find adequate expression in words so ordered and grouped in a significant form as to transfuse into the reader something of the poet's vision and emotion, 'to set up in the reader's sense a vibration corresponding to what was felt by the writer'.[1]

'Poetry', Aristotle reminded his students, 'is a more serious and philosophic matter than history, because poetry is concerned rather with general truths, and history with particular facts.'[2] He also divided poetry into two kinds according to the writer's nature. 'The more serious poets represented noble deeds, and the actions of noble men, while men of lesser calibre represented the actions of less commendable men, *adopting first the form of satire*.'[3] Now this second category—

[1] A. E. Housman, *Name and Nature of Poetry*.

[2] Aristot. *Poet.* ix. 3.

[3] Ibid. iv. 8.

the men of lesser gifts who turn to satire—stands, with Carlyle's epigram 'Soul extinct. Stomach well alive' as a very convenient judgement on most of the English eighteenth-century poets. One of their favourite expressions was 'wit', and their main pastime frivolity and intellectual gymnastics in metre. Memories of Dr. Johnson's brilliant drawing-room sallies fade into heroic couplets abounding in shepherds and swains, whose sackcloth and crooks concealed the cravats and buckled shoes of contemporary men of fashion. This age could produce criticism, epigrams, witty parodies, and semi-classical arcadias, but rarely any poetry worthy of a place beside Homer, Virgil, Milton, or Donne.

> Great things are done when men and mountains meet,
> That are not done by jostling in the street.

In the same way it was left to Catullus and Virgil to rise above the sterile Alexandrian tradition before the poetry of Romanticism entered fully into Latin literature.

The eighteenth century closed in chaos, like the end of the Roman Republic, and out of each poetry emerged into a Golden Age. The French Revolution, fostered by the spirits of Rousseau and Voltaire, upset the old standards of right and wrong. 'Liberty, Equality, and Fraternity' shook the old conventions, and among the English champions of the revolutionary cause was William Wordsworth. Nature and the supernatural, those keystones of Romantic poetry, asserted themselves openly with the publication of Wordsworth's preface to the second edition of *Lyrical Ballads* in 1798. Blake and Burns had paved the way, but the Preface was the first real intellectual justification of Romanticism in modern verse. The term 'Romantic' owes so much to Wordsworth that it will be worth while to examine its meaning, and the extent of its application to Virgil in the ancient world, and to many post-Wordsworthian lyric writers in the modern.

Wordsworth laid down for himself four principles in the writing of poetry. First, 'to choose incidents and situations from common life; and to relate or describe them throughout, as far as was possible, in a selection of language really used by

common men'. The third proposition was 'to throw over them a certain colouring of imagination, whereby ordinary things should be presented to the mind in an unusual way', and lastly, 'to make these incidents and situations interesting by tracing in them, truly, but not ostentatiously, the primary laws of our nature'.

Unfortunately, in his passion for returning to nature for that primal simplicity of thought and speech he considered essential to his principles, Wordsworth assumed that rustic life and civilization were the purest and best. This, to any one at all familiar with rural pig-marketing, cottage life, or parochial meetings, is a rash assumption. It is difficult to reconcile the Lombardy shepherd or Wordsworth's crofter men, still less the modern farm hand on his motor tractor, with beings in whose condition 'the passions of men are incorporated with the beautiful and permanent forms of nature'. The same thought is implicit in Virgil's shepherds of the early poems. But be that as it may, Wordsworth claimed that his poems were written with a purpose, and their aim was to give pleasure to the reader, not as a lawyer, doctor, or seaman, but as a Man. 'Poetry', he added, 'is the breath and finer spirit of all knowledge; it is the impassioned expression which is in the countenance of all science', and it 'takes its origin from emotion recollected (and rekindled) in tranquillity', until it actually exists in the reader's mind. Fit subjects for poetry are everywhere.

Romantic poetry, then, must be drawn from the common life, written in intelligible speech, be coloured by a veil of imagination, and must reflect the primary laws of our nature. The last two claims really embody Wordsworth's greatness. We can now see more clearly into the common ground between the English and the Latin Romantic. Both were countrymen, both hailed the coming of a new age—Wordsworth of poetry, Virgil of empire and the *Pax Romana*—and in each writer we can trace a profound belief in a moral order that governs the world.

Wordsworth, born in 1770, found himself an orphan in the world with his sister, Dorothy, when he was nine. He was sent

to a school in north Lancashire, from which he went on to Cambridge. His visit to France in the throes of revolution developed his passion for liberty, and he returned to England full of schemes for a new poetry in revolt against the old accepted standards. It was at his country retreat in Alfoxden, together with Dorothy, that he met Coleridge, his future collaborator in the *Lyrical Ballads*. Amid the Somerset country-side, and later at Grasmere, Wordsworth became more conscious of his deep devotion to nature.

> The sounding cataract
> Haunted me like a passion; the tall rock,
> The mountain and the deep and gloomy wood,
> Their colours and their forms were then to me
> An appetite.

Earlier in *Tintern Abbey* he confessed his debt to the steep and lofty cliffs, the landscape with the quiet of the sky, for these brought peace to him in the noisy town, and to them he owed

> In hours of weariness, sensations sweet,
> Felt in the blood and felt along the heart.

The feeling aroused by the woods and rocks, when recollected in tranquillity, strengthened him in 'this strange disease of modern life, With its sick hurry, its divided aims'. They were more than a sop to the sensations, for he believed that

> One impulse from the vernal wood
> May teach you more of man,
> Of moral evil, and of good
> Than all the sages can.

To the stimulus of nature on his powers we must add his love for his sister, confessed in many poems. 'She gave me eyes, she gave me ears', and he expressed a wish that Dorothy, his beloved, should 'come forth into the sun'. Her love and devotion to her egoistical brother never wavered until a failing mind took her from his life. Virgil's stimulus was human as well as natural. The Italian country-side and the coming glory of Imperial Rome moved him to adoration, but behind this the discerning eye can see the friendship of Asinius Pollio, Maecenas, and the Emperor Augustus himself.

The second main quality of Romanticism seems to consist in a conviction that man and nature are, by some intangible yet apprehensible link, joined inseparably together. Now this manner of walking by faith rather than by sight borders on religious belief common to pantheist and Christian mystic alike. It can be traced in the Hebrew poetry of God the all-pervading who covers Himself with light as with a garment, and walks upon the wings of the wind,[1] or in Virgil's

> deum namque ire per omnes
> terrasque tractusque maris caelumque profundum.[2]

The linking of man, nature, and God runs through Cleanthes' Stoic hymn;[3] it is implicit in much of the English metaphysical poetry, and well known in Francis Thompson's *Mistress of Vision*, where he sees that all things

> To each other linkèd are,
> That thou canst not stir a flower
> Without the troubling of a star.

Here one recognizes as a common element the faith by which man the microcosm is a tiny but living and significant part of the macrocosm. In this friendly, interconnected world Wordsworth found his—

> sense sublime
> Of something far more deeply interfused
> Whose dwelling is the light of setting suns,
> And the round ocean and the living air . . .
> A motion and a spirit that impels
> All thinking things, all objects of all thought,
> And rolls through all things.

The same faith animates the ghost of Anchises as he reveals the meaning of the world, in Hades, to his son.

> Principio caelum ac terras camposque liquentes
> Lucentemque globum Lunae, Titaniaque astra
> Spiritus intus alit; totamque infusa per artus
> Mens agitat molem, et magno se corpore miscet.[4]

[1] Psalm 104.

[2] Virgil, *Georgics*, iv. 221 f.

[3] Cleanthes:

> ἐκ σοῦ γὰρ γενόμεσθα, θεοῦ μίμημα λαχόντες
> μοῦνοι, ὅσα ζώει τε καὶ ἕρπει θνήτ' ἐπὶ γαῖαν.

[4] *Aen.* vi. 724 ff.

To Wordsworth this pantheism becomes a 'cheerful faith that all which we behold is full of blessings', and at the same time it induces a mood of mystery in which the motion of the blood is stilled, and our bodies are laid asleep. Then we see into the life of things, and become a living soul. In this state of ecstasy we realize that 'imperial palace whence we came', and in spite of the obstinate questionings, misgivings, and shadowy apprehensions roused by thoughts of our destiny, the light of the world of our fore-being can

> uphold us, cherish, and have power to make
> Our noisy years seem moments in the being
> Of the eternal silence.

Death is no longer an annihilation to *pulvis et umbra*, for in the ecstasy we come to learn of the faith that looks through death, to inherit the philosophic mind. Overruling Providence is apprehended and gives meaning to everything, even to the 'meanest flower that blows', which rouses memories of the world of our fore-being, and yet leaves us dumb to expression, as Plato said. *Sunt lacrimae rerum.*

Poetry, then, provides Wordsworth with a new and living way to enter into the mysteries of which man is a part, and in which he hears the still, sad music of humanity. 'Poetry is the breath and finer spirit of all knowledge, the impassioned expression which is in the countenance of all science.'

A love of nature and a belief in the union of all life, human and divine, are not the only tenets of Romanticism. In both Wordsworth and Virgil we find human romance and a profound patriotism. The veil of imagination shed over the commonplace could lead Wordsworth to the lyrical music of his poem *To My Sister*, to the majesty of *Lucy*, or the *Solitary Reaper* in the Highlands—

> Will no one tell me what she sings?
> Perhaps the plaintive numbers flow
> For old, unhappy, far-off things,
> And battles long ago.

The echo comes back from the magic country of Keats's nightingale where casements open on the foam of perilous seas.

For romance at its highest we turn to *Lucy*—a poem for Dorothy:

> 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.

It seems incongruous that sublimity of this order ('the true ring of a noble mind', as Longinus would say) should come from a poet who can be trivial to weariness. In his preface Wordsworth dismissed with an airy wave Dr. Johnson's parody:

> I put my hat upon my head
> And walked into the Strand,
> And there I met another man
> Whose hat was in his hand.

This, he says, is 'superlatively contemptible'. We unhappily do not know what Dr. Johnson thought of his critic's flight:

> I've measured it from side to side
> 'Tis three foot long and two foot wide,

or other rubbish like his stanzas on Goody Blake. *Quandoque bonus dormitat Homerus. . . .*

Of his patriotism there is little need to speak. Wordsworth loved England as deeply as Shakespeare, Milton, Shelley, and William Cobbett. His sonnets on Westminster Bridge; his proud assertion of the flood of British freedom pouring on unchecked for those who speak Shakespeare's tongue and hold Milton's faith and morals; and the sonnet on King's Chapel, Cambridge, are typical examples of a patriotism rarely jingoistic, and deeper than flagrant imperialism. As Augustus looked to Horace and Virgil to assist in the moral restoration of their time, so Wordsworth called on Milton to restore the altar, sword, and pen to their rightful place in the English heritage.

> Milton! thou shouldest be living at this hour;
> England hath need of thee; she is a fen
> Of stagnant waters . . .

Implicit in his Romanticism we find the qualities that are his glory—a profound sense of natural beauty, a power of transforming the commonplace by linking man's destiny with a divine purpose. Wordsworth is always conscious, too, that he is a citizen of no mean country. A distinguished modern critic writes that the Wordsworths, brother and sister, found the secret of 'linking up Nature, in the full Greek sense of the term . . . with high philosophical generalizations', and it is hard to deny the claim. William's powers failed him as old age came on, but after death, Matthew Arnold set the Romantic alongside of Byron and Goethe; time might bring back 'Goethe's sage mind and Byron's force', but

> Where will Europe's latter hour
> Again find Wordsworth's healing power?

That is not only rhetorical, but unanswerable. For another such whose 'healing power' has an equal place in poetry we may well look to Virgil.

The Roman poet, like Wordsworth, was born in the country, the son of a gentleman farmer, near Mantua. Virgil also had a good school and university education, at Cremona, Milan, Naples, and Rome, after which he returned to Mantua, with a good grounding in philosophy, rhetoric, and literature. His first contact with politics came after the Civil War to avenge Julius Caesar's death. On the defeat of Brutus and Cassius at Philippi, Octavius Caesar and his colleagues allotted Virgil's farm to some of their disbanded legionaries. Threatened with the loss of his beloved farm, Virgil managed to save it through the intervention of his friends Asinius Pollio and Alfenus Varus. His gratitude to Octavius Caesar he wove into the first of his pastoral poems, in allegorical dress. Gradually he was drawn into the circle of literary figures at Octavius's court, and under imperial patronage his talent unfolded. The pastoral Idylls were followed by the *Georgics*, and these in turn by his national epic, probably at the Emperor's suggestion. By the time of Virgil's death at the age of 51 in 19 B.C., the Imperial Julio-Claudian dynasty was firmly established in place of the worn-out Roman Republic.

A deep-rooted love of nature demands time in which to reach mature expression. Virgil spent many of his early years, like Wordsworth's pygmy child, 'as if his whole vocation were endless imitation'. Great ideas and great style do not spring like Athena, full grown from their author's head. Romantic qualities grow by stages. First comes the pure delight in nature and landscape, then the quest for a meaning, and last of all a vision of human destiny. The stiff and china-painted shepherds and swains of Virgil's Watteau landscape lived and loved in a country-side partly Sicilian (after the tradition of his master Theocritus) and partly Italian. But there is more than mere imitation of the Greek pastoral in the *Eclogues*. Virgil's feeling for the reedy banks of Mincio, for sunshine and shadow, meadow and woodland, darting lizards in the sun, and the shrill music of the cicadas, are all a reaching out towards a worthy form in which to immortalize his Italy. Happy is the man who loves such a country-side.

> Fortunate senex, hic inter flumina nota
> Et fontes sacros frigus captabis opacum.

Bees sip honey in the willow hedge, and their live murmur

> Saepe levi somnum suadebit inire susurro;
> Hinc alta sub rupe canet frondator ad auras;
> Nec tamen interea raucae tua cura palumbes
> Nec gemere aeria cessabit turtur ab ulmo.[1]

There is sweet music here, too, like that the Lotos Eaters heard, softer than petals from blown roses on the grass. The sun shines day-long, and at nightfall the shepherd Tityrus invites his comrade home—

> Et iam summa procul villarum culmina fumant
> Maioresque cadunt altis de montibus umbrae.[2]

Virgil united in himself a deep love of the country-side with his strong feeling for Italy, panegyrics on which abound in the *Georgics*.

Italy is to him a place where an almost perpetual spring gives

[1] *Eclog.* i. 53 ff. [2] *Eclog.* i. 83 f.

place to long and lovely summer. He remembers with affection the little hill towns, and creeping rivers by rocky crags.

> Tot congesta manu praeruptis oppida saxis
> Fluminaque antiquos subterlabentia muros.[1]

Not only is Italy his homeland; it is a hardy nurse of heroes, such as the Marsi, Sabelli, and the wild Ligurians. All this heritage is his province in poetry.

> Salve, magna parens frugum, Saturnia tellus,
> Magna virum; tibi res antiquae laudis et artis
> Ingredior, sanctos ausus recludere fontes. . . .[2]

And so Virgil unsealed the fountains of holy song and gave Italy her calendar of seed-time and harvest, as Hesiod had done for the Greeks, in the four books of the *Georgics*. There is nothing in Wordsworth to parallel this technical treatise on husbandry, stock-rearing, ploughing, and bee-keeping. It does not seem the most suitable subject for poetry. Virgil had a precedent in Hesiod's *Works and Days*, and in Lucretius' *De Rerum Natura*, for instruction in technical language conveyed through the medium of verse, *musaeo contingens cuncta lepore*.

The second Romantic characteristic, the linking of nature and man, was foreshadowed in the fourth *Eclogue*. There Virgil could feel heaven and earth waiting with joy and song for the new age now coming in at the birth of Pollio's child:

> Ultima Cumaei venit iam carminis aetas,
> Magnus ab integro saeclorum nascitur ordo.

Romantic allegory passed over into religious mysticism as the poet grew older, and we read of the all-pervading spirit of God, pulsing through land, sea, and sky.[3] It is Jupiter who makes the farmer's way hard, on purpose, he tells us elsewhere.

As Virgil's vision and powers ripened, he set to work on a national epic that should embody the glorious, if legendary, ancestry of Rome, exalt the virtues of the early heroes, and by reflection add glory to Augustus, his patron and friend. To this he gave the last years of his life. The story told of Aeneas' escape from Troy, his divine command to found a kingdom

[1] *Georg.* ii. 156 f. [2] *Georg.* ii. 167 ff. [3] *Georg.* iv. 221 f.

for the refugees who accompanied him, and the perils of land and sea through which Aeneas passed safely to found his kingdom in Latium. The hero of the *Aeneid* is a man of Destiny driven by the will of heaven, and careless of anybody's feelings (even those of Dido who loved him deeply) provided he can fulfil Jupiter's will. 'Always I am pious Aeneas.' As an embodiment of Rome's destiny, he can never be checked. The result is far more of a dull puppet than a man. But Rome is greater than Aeneas, and the story of Augustus' ruthless rise to the throne was no more above reproach than Aeneas' behaviour. In the first book of the *Aeneid* Jupiter says of the Romans:

> His ego nec metas rerum nec tempora pono,
> Imperium sine fine dedi.[1]

And Anchises in Hades foretells to his son the same greatness for the people of Rome. Others may fashion marble statues better than the Roman, others may plead better in court, or make astronomical calendars, but the Roman's work is governing a mighty empire, imposing the rule of Law, Peace, and Justice:

> Tu regere imperio populos, Romane, memento;
> Hae tibi erunt artes, pacisque imponere morem,
> Parcere subiectis, et debellare superbos.[2]

Virgil is confident that the new age of Augustan peace will set to rest all the war and crime with which he saw the world afflicted. Civilization, good government, and family religion will help. He has a 'strong confidence in the service which his country must render to the world'.

The human qualities of his Romanticism have endeared Virgil to the lovers of poetry. He felt deeply about the meaning of birth and death, and in man's short transit from the cradle to the grave found a sadness too deep for coherent expression. Aeneas in Carthage cries out to Priam's shade:

> Sunt lacrimae rerum et mentem mortalia tangunt;
> Solve metus; feret haec aliquam tibi fama salutem.[3]

[1] *Aen.* i. 278 f. [2] *Aen.* vi. 851 ff. [3] *Aen.* i. 462 f.

There are indeed tears at the heart of things, but Priam should nevertheless be of good cheer, for in life he was a great man. In Hades the vision was granted to Aeneas of the stray ghosts clamouring in spectral hosts for a passage across the river of release:

> Stabant orantes primi transmittere cursum
> Tendebantque manus ripae ulterioris amore
> Navita sed tristis nunc hos nunc accipit illos.[1]

To appreciate the Romantic quality of this, it should be set side by side with Lucian's business-like burlesque of Charon haggling with the pompous or impecunious arrivals at his landing-stage, in the *Dialogues of the Dead*. Wordsworth proposed to cover things with a veil of imagination. Virgil's powers in this direction created a wonderful picture of death when Euryalus the young warrior fell in battle:

> Purpureus veluti cum flos, succisus aratro
> Languescit moriens, lassove papavera collo
> Demisere caput pluvia cum forte gravantur.[2]

Not even the critic who gleefully points to the same image of young life shorn down like the poppy, in Homer and Catullus, can detract from the true Virgilian pathos of that. The story of Dido, in the fourth book, is full of the same touches.

The conception of Rome's destiny, of which Aeneas is the visible embodiment, follows of necessity in one who was both a poet and a Stoic pantheist. Wordsworth wrote of the overruling Providence immanent in nature, and to this belief, in main outline, Virgil would probably assent. Destiny that 'waits in the hands of God, and not in the hands of statesmen' directs our going and coming, and to it we must submit. Says Nautes to Aeneas:

> Nate dea, quo fata trahunt retrahuntque sequamur.
> Quidquid erit, superanda omnis fortuna ferendo est.[3]

We must follow where fate leads, and troubles can be overcome by endurance. It is the note of Stoicism in Seneca and Tennyson rather than the Epicurean creed of Virgil's youth

[1] *Aen.* vi. 313 ff.
[2] *Aen.* ix. 435 ff.; cf. Catullus xi; *Iliad*, viii. 306.
[3] *Aen.* v. 709 f.

that shines through. There is little consolation through belief in immortality, and the journey to the next world is through a dim, half-lit landscape that offers no return.

> Ibant obscuri sola sub nocte per umbram
> Perque domos Ditis vacuas et inania regna
> Quale per incertam lunam sub luce maligna
> Est iter in silvis ubi caelum condidit umbra.[1]

This may be rather the magic of shadow-threaded night in the poet's mind than a religious vision according to his lights. If not, then our term of *lacrimae rerum* would be well ended. 'High peace, calm death's near image' (*alta quies*).

Death is a morbid note on which to leave Virgil, the poet of Italian summer and harvest, and of the Augustan imperial régime. It would be better to surrender ourselves to the magic of his poetry, and let it, like the night wind breathing on Aeneas' vessel, bear us along of its own accord.

> Aequatae spirant aurae; datur hora quieti.
> Pone caput, fessosque oculos furare labori . . .
> Iamque vale; torquet medios Nox umida cursus
> Et me saevus equis Oriens adflavit anhelis.
> Dixerat et tenuis fugit ceu fumus in auras.[2]

Whether or no it is true that Virgil received a tribute from St. Paul at his tomb, he needs few tributes, though these have been paid to him countless times since his death. He remains as one of the great poetic lights of the world, a Romantic, an imperial artist, and a consummate story-teller. The tribute of the Victorian Stoic to the Roman rings true:

> Thou that seest Universal Nature moved by Universal Mind;
> Thou majestic in thy sadness at the doubtful doom of human kind, . . .
> I salute thee, Mantovano.

Virgil's poetry, like the best of Wordsworth's, echoed the pathos that is the common denominator to man's life in all ages, and if it was not 'the impassioned expression in the face of all science', at least it cast over common life a veil of imagination and beauty, in which successive generations of readers have perpetually found something new and enduring.

[1] *Aen.* vi. 268 ff. [2] *Aen.* v. 844 f., 728 ff.