

A brief history of English poetry (XIX–XX centuries)

Romanticiste poetry

A movement in philosophy but especially in literature, romanticism is the revolt of the senses or passions against the intellect and of the individual against the consensus. Its first stirrings may be seen in the work of William Blake (1757–1827), and in continental writers such as the Swiss philosopher Jean-Jacques Rousseau and the German playwrights Johann Christoph Friedrich Schiller and Johann Wolfgang von Goethe. The publication, in 1798, by the poets William Wordsworth (1770–1850) and Samuel Taylor Coleridge (1772–1834) of a volume entitled *Lyrical Ballads* is a significant event in English literary history, though the poems were poorly received and few books sold. The elegant latinisms of Gray are dropped in favour of a kind of English closer to that spoken by real people (supposedly). Actually, the attempts to render the speech of ordinary people are not wholly convincing. Robert Burns (1759–1796) writes lyric verse in the dialect of lowland Scots (a variety of English). After Shakespeare, Burns is perhaps the most often quoted of writers in English: we sing his *Auld Lang Syne* every New Year's Eve. The work of the later romantics John Keats (1795–1821) and his friend Percy Bysshe Shelley (1792–1822; husband of Mary Shelley) is marked by an attempt to make language beautiful, and by an interest in remote history and exotic places. George Gordon, Lord Byron (1788–1824) uses romantic themes, sometimes comically, to explain contemporary events. Romanticism begins as a revolt against established views, but eventually becomes the established outlook. Wordsworth becomes a kind of national monument, while the Victorians make what was at first revolutionary seem familiar, domestic and sentimental.

Victorian poetry

The major poets of the Victorian era are Alfred, Lord Tennyson (1809–1892) and Robert Browning (1812–1889). Both are prolific and varied, and their work defies easy classification. Tennyson makes extensive use of classical myth and Arthurian legend, and has been praised for the beautiful and musical qualities of his writing. Browning's chief interest is in people; he uses blank verse in writing dramatic monologues in which the speaker achieves a kind of self-portraiture: his subjects are both historical individuals (Fra Lippo Lippi, Andrea del Sarto) and representative types or caricatures (Mr. Sludge the Medium). Other Victorian poets of note include Elizabeth Barrett Browning (1806–1861) and Christina Rossetti (1830–1894). Gerard Manley Hopkins (1844–1889) is notable for his use of what he calls «sprung rhythm»; as in Old English verse syllables are not counted, but there is a pattern of stresses. Hopkins' work was not well-known until very long after his death.

Modern poetry

William Butler Yeats (1865–1939) is one of two figures who dominate modern poetry, the other being Thomas Stearns Eliot (1888–1965). Yeats was Irish; Eliot was born in the USA but settled in England, and took UK citizenship in 1927. Yeats uses conventional lyric forms, but explores the connection between modern themes and classical and romantic ideas. Eliot uses elements of conventional forms, within an unconventionally structured whole in his greatest works. Where Yeats is prolific as a poet, Eliot's reputation largely rests on two long and complex works: *The Waste Land* (1922) and *Four Quartets* (1943). The work of these two has overshadowed the work of the best late Victorian, Edwardian and Georgian poets, some of whom came to prominence during the First World War. Among these are Thomas Hardy, Rudyard Kipling (1865–1936), A. E. Housman (1859–1936),

Edward Thomas (1878–1917), Rupert Brooke (1887–1915), Siegfried Sassoon (1886–1967), Wilfred Owen (1893–1918) and Isaac Rosenberg (1890–1918). The most celebrated modern American poet, is Robert Frost (1874–1963), who befriended Edward Thomas before the war of 1914–1918. Between the two wars, a revival of romanticism in poetry is associated with the work of Wystan Hugh Auden (1907–1973), Louis MacNeice (1907–1963) and Cecil Day-Lewis (1904–1972). Auden seems to be a major figure on the poetic landscape, but is almost too contemporary to see in perspective. The Welsh poet, Dylan Thomas (1914–1953) is notable for strange effects of language, alternating from extreme simplicity to massive overstatement. Of poets who have achieved celebrity in the second half of the century, evaluation is even more difficult, but writers of note include the American Robert Lowell (1917–1977), Philip Larkin (1922–1985), R. S. Thomas (1913–2000), Thom Gunn (1929–2004), Ted Hughes (1930–1998) and the Nobel laureate Seamus Heaney (1939).