



## **The Romantics - Audio**

### *The Self*

#### **Nicola Watson**

Hello, I'm Nicola Watson. This section of the programme is about how Romantic writers represented the self. What you are going to hear is four short conversations with four experts in Romantic literature. They each chose a poem or a passage and talked about how it represents a distinctively Romantic self. We are going to start with Wordsworth's poem 'To the Cuckoo', chosen by Simon Bainbridge, who is Professor of English at Lancaster University.

#### **Simon Bainbridge**

I think what's interesting about 'To the Cuckoo' is this, like many Romantic poems, is a poem which starts as an address or an apostrophe to a natural subject. You know, we're familiar with Wordsworth's 'Daffodils', in this case it's 'the Cuckoo'. But as the poem then progresses, what becomes important is the poet's own reaction to this natural subject. And Wordsworth uses the cuckoo as an object through which he can consider his own development, his development from his school days, up to his current position as a poet. And ultimately, I think, the cuckoo becomes an important inspiration for the writing of poetry.

#### **Nicola Watson**

So the cuckoo marks the relationship between the past and the present selves of the poet?

#### **Simon Bainbridge**

I think that's right. I think the cuckoo is both an indicator of how the poet has changed from his school days until the present moment, so there's a strong sense of growth as there is in all Wordsworth's writing. But also a marker of continuity, that this is something Wordsworth has returned to time and again in his life. And indeed, that act of returning to the cuckoo song enables him to 'beget / That golden time again'. Now that's a slightly ambiguous phrase, but I think certainly one of the suggestions there is that the golden time is the time of his own youth, the time of his school days when he first listened to the cuckoo.

#### **Nicola Watson**

And the other suggestion that occurs to me is that there is a way in which this poem comes out of being able to 'beget / That golden time again'.

### **Simon Bainbridge**

Absolutely, I think the poem is itself a celebration of that poetic process for Wordsworth, and that sense of revisiting the past and keeping the past alive through the act of writing is absolutely central to his poetics.

### **Nicola Watson**

And so here we have a lyric poem, almost by definition there's going to be a lot of the lyric 'I' in it. What though is distinctively Romantic about this lyric, poetic persona?

### **Simon Bainbridge**

I think what's distinctively Romantic about the 'I' is the way in which the 'I's own response to nature is foregrounded. So in the very opening of the poem we have 'I have heard, / I hear thee and rejoice'. So it's the ability to celebrate and also to connect with a natural object that I think is distinctive of the Romantic 'I' in this poem.

### **Nicola Watson**

Yes, it feels familiar, doesn't it, and I think that's partly because 'To a Skylark', which is Shelley's own poem which is much more famous than this one, nonetheless seems in some ways to be a rewrite of it.

### **Simon Bainbridge**

It does indeed. I mean the links with Shelley are very clear from that opening phrase: 'O blithe newcomer' in this poem. I think what both of them are interested in as well is the issue of birdsong and what birdsong might mean. And birdsong is a metaphor as a symbol for poetry itself. The bird is something that's able to spontaneously pour forth its own music, it's a very powerful symbol for the Romantic poet of the kind of poet that they might like to be.

### **Nicola Watson**

Simon Bainbridge.

I also discussed Shelley's 'To a Skylark' with Professor Andrew Bennett from the University of Bristol. We talked about how Shelley represents the Romantic poet in this poem.

### **Andrew Bennett**

Yes, well I think Shelley is one of the Romantic poets who is particularly interested in the question of what it means to be a poet and how the poet might represent himself within poems. His *Defence of Poetry* has a lot to say about what it means to be a poet, the role of the poet in society in relation to the political and the social. It's a text that tries to define the poet as a special kind of person with a special kind of role in relation to society.

**Nicola Watson**

So to what extent would you say that the skylark is a model for the poet?

**Andrew Bennett**

Well I think that's the key idea of this poem in a sense. It comes right in the first stanza and it runs throughout the poem and he comes back to that idea right at the end. So when he talks about the poet in the first stanza as 'Pourest thy full heart / In profuse strains of unpremeditated art', in a sense he's there describing what it means for him to be a certain kind of poet, doing it in a way that's unpremeditated. Like Wordsworth, Shelley's interested in the idea that poetry just comes, just comes out, without prior thought.

**Nicola Watson**

One of the things that I notice is that along with describing or effectively describing the poet like the skylark, quite a lot of these similes are natural. The glow worm, the rose. Can you comment a bit on the way in which the poet seems to be imagined in natural terms?

**Andrew Bennett**

Well I think this is a very interesting aspect of what Shelley is trying to do here. Because on the one hand, with the Romantic period you have an idea of the poet as the ultimate human being in a sense, expressing his or her – usually his – own subjectivity and agency. And on the other hand, you have an idea of the genius, the poet, as somehow super human, and even non-human. And so what Shelley does is he equates himself with the skylark, but then he gives a series of images and analogies of the poet. So like a high-born maiden who's in love. But then like a glow worm, like a rose, and even like showers, not even animal but mineral objects I suppose. So he's interested in both asserting the poet as human, as having agency and subjectivity, but also he's interested in the opposite of that, which is the idea of art coming from something which is not human – is animal and even matter itself.

**Nicola Watson**

Andrew Bennett.

With De Quincey we move from depictions of the Romantic self in poetry to prose autobiography. I talked with Julian North of Leicester University about De Quincey's *Confessions of an English Opium-Eater* – specifically about the passage in which he describes remembering being destitute as a teenager in London.

**Julian North**

Well I chose this passage because it shows De Quincey looking back at his teenage self when he was a runaway from school, a down-and-out on the streets of London. He's looking back at his earlier self and he finds the house again in 1821 and looks through the window.

### **Nicola Watson**

How do you think that he mythologises himself here?

### **Julian North**

Well he mythologises his suffering in the line “‘the world was all before us’; and we pitched our tent for the night in any spot we chose’. He’s describing how he and the little girl had in their huge empty house the whole world before them. But he’s quoting there from the last lines of *Paradise Lost* where Milton describes Adam and Eve leaving paradise for the suffering fallen world. So he’s mythologising himself as Adam entering the world of adulthood and suffering. He brings it right up to date. He says that on the very night that he’s writing this passage, which is his birthday in fact, August 15th 1821, he turned aside from Oxford Street to look into the window of this house. And that makes it very immediate, and the contrast between this and the past very poignant. But also it individualises the whole experience. It makes the mythic story of Adam and Eve completely relevant to that individual De Quincey.

### **Nicola Watson**

Julian North.

Finally, we’re going to look at a passage from E.T.A. Hoffman’s story ‘The Sandman’. Michael Baron from Birkbeck College, London talked to me about the letter written by Nathanael, which appears at the very beginning of the story.

### **Michael Baron**

Nathanael is characterised here very much as someone who is introspective, thinking about his own life, his own condition, and also writing about it. And there’s an emphasis here on the fact that he is using the act of writing, writing in fact a letter to, as he puts it, ‘compose himself’ and I think there’s a slight pun on that which I think works in the German as well, that we’re introduced here to someone who is a mystery to himself and is trying to understand himself and doing it through writing. And so the character Nathanael is, in this scene at least, a writer as well as a character. And I think that’s interesting that Hoffmann starts from that point. Because it alerts us to the fact that characters are, as it were, potential writers, they write their own fantasies, they write their own lives, whether on paper or not. And that I think is something which is deep in the Romantic psyche, the relationship between self-exploration and writing.

### **Nicola Watson**

So to what extent is this a Romantic self and a Romantic writer?

### **Michael Baron**

By virtue of this kind of introspection in the first place. He is a problem to himself. Like Wordsworth at the beginning of his great epic *The Prelude*, he doesn’t understand how he

came to be what he is. And he spends 10,000 lines finding out. What Hoffmann is doing, like many other Romantic writers, is to use the idea of fantasy to understand the self through its imaginings, its writings, its self writings.

**Nicola Watson**

I'm very interested in that you compare it with Wordsworth because it does occur to me very much that this is another story about a childhood and about the roots of adult vision within childhood.

**Michael Baron**

Yes. He talks about something a very long while back. And this is something it seems to me that is deep in the Romantic psyche, that we are, as it were, in some sense, what we were, even if we don't know it. And discovering what we were is a way of discovering what we are.