



The Romantics - Audio

Romantic timelines

Nicola Watson

In this section of the programme, I'm talking to Dr Julian North of Leicester University about two exercises in Victorian literary biography. Both of the passages that she's chosen are promoting an idea or even a mythology of the Romantic poet, and both are interested in explaining the poetry with reference to the poet's life. Mary Shelley writes about Shelley in the Preface to her edition of his poems. And De Quincey (as we'll hear first) writes about Wordsworth in a biographical essay for publication in *Tate's* magazine.

Julian North

Well in this passage De Quincey is writing about Wordsworth as a poet, having just given us a long, long description of what Wordsworth looked like as a man. And he begins the passage by apologising for this long intimate description of Wordsworth's appearance on the grounds that these possibly seemingly trivial details will in fact be of great interest to the coming generations. De Quincey says that the remembrance that Wordsworth will be held in: 'Is the kind that has as its shrine, the heart of man.' And what he means by that is that, because Wordsworth is a poet, he touches our feelings: 'That world of fear and grief, of love and trembling hope which constitutes the essential man' as De Quincey puts it. De Quincey wants us to have, as it were, our own vicarious intimate relationship with Wordsworth the man in his biographical writing. Of course, there is an irony in this passage, in that he's claiming for the poet 'an access to the grand Catholic feelings', as he puts it, that is universal feelings that belong to all mankind. Yet what De Quincey seems interested in as a biographer for much of the time, are very individual, quirky details rather than Catholic universal details. He wants us to know about Wordsworth's personal habits at the breakfast table, which hardly seems to cohere with this vision of grandeur that is the poet.

Nicola Watson

So I suppose that in a way this shrine to the human heart is where we get Dove Cottage, a composite really of the idea of the poet as writing about universal feelings with the idea of the poet as situated in place and time?

Julian North

I think that's a very good way to put it. It also implies a place of religious veneration, doesn't it, that poetry is a kind of new religion. We visit the house as if we are worshippers at the shrine.

Nicola Watson

De Quincey was writing about Wordsworth while he was still very much alive and in fact would be made Poet Laureate some years later. But Mary Shelley was writing after the death of a husband whose life and work were both regarded as scandalous.

Julian North

This extract shows how Mary Shelley, writing in the early Victorian period, is looking back on her husband as a Romantic poet, and how she's really trying to excuse him to her contemporary readers. She clearly feels that they're going to be alienated from some aspects of his poetry, which she therefore has to explain. The first of these is the metaphysical strain, as she talks of it, that is what she sees as being an obscure interest in difficult ideas in some of his work. And she feels that this mystic subtlety, as she calls it, will be very strange to most readers and will only appeal, as she says, to the few. Therefore, she says: Well the many readers will like other aspects of his work. What they will like is his appeal to feelings and emotion. And this is what will, as it were, 'sell' his poetry to the early Victorian readership.

Nicola Watson

And I see that she then goes on to worry about virtue. About the stamp of inexperience. What's all of that about?

Julian North

The other thing that she is worried that readers will be alienated from is of course Shelley's politics. She does mention in the first paragraph that much of his poetry was written in order to awaken mankind, to aspirations for what he considered the true and the good. So she's talking about his political reforming poetry there. But she feels that in 1839, which is of course after the 1832 Reform Bill, some caution needs to be exercised in presenting his radicalism to the audience. She does this, therefore, by emphasising Shelley's youth, his immaturity, the fact that he died at the age of twenty-nine, and therefore had no chance, as she sees it, to become more reflective, to think about reform rather than revolution. Although I think that this doesn't fit with our modern conception of Shelley. We still very much value now the idea of his youthfulness, his political commitment, the excitement and passion of his youth.

Nicola Watson

Absolutely fascinating, thank you so much Julian.