



## Reflections on the Empirical Metacritical Interpretations of the Poets of the Romantic Revival through the Ages

Dr. Pratap Kumar Dash\*

\*Associate Professor in English, Rajendra University, Balangir, Odisha

ORCID ID: 0000-0002-5875-7933

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**Abstract:** This article employs metacriticism as the critical examination of literary theory's principles, methods, and assumptions in order to trace interpretations of the poets of Romantic Revival such as William Wordsworth, S.T. Coleridge, P.B. Shelley, and John Keats from their era to postmodern times. Firstly, it discusses their own critical perspectives on the poetry they have written, and evaluates their universality. Then, it analyzes key critics like Ernest de Sélincourt, Helen Darbishire, A.C. Bradley, Maurice Bowra, Graham Hough, F.R. Leavis, Paul de Man, and J.H. Miller those who have evaluated the strengths and biases in applying Romantic theories (e.g., Wordsworth's "spontaneous overflow," Coleridge's imagination vs. fancy, Keats's Negative Capability). Empirical focus highlights evolving hermeneutics, that is from textual-historical editing and philosophical optimism to New Critical formalism, modernist anti-Romanticism, and post-structuralist deconstruction of language's instability. Finally, it focuses on the Romantic epistemology that inculcates privileging imagination over reason and thus emerges as a persistent core, challenged yet enduring across ages. This metacritical lens underscores the Revival's intellectual vitality amid shifting interpretive paradigms.

**Key words:** Metacriticism, Romantic Revival, critical perspectives, Romantic theories, hermeneutics, deconstruction, Romantic epistemology

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### 1. Introduction

Metacriticism is often considered a scope of scholarly interpretation of the critiques of literature. It examines the methods and ideas that literary critics use. It endeavours to know if these methods and ideas are good or bad; looks at the tools that critics use to understand works; examines if these tools are useful or not; and questions the assumptions that critics make. It also considers the context in which critics write which might entail the social and cultural background of the critics as well.

In this context, evidently it is noticed that the Romantic Revival was a productive period in literary history. During this time, great poets like William Wordsworth, S.T. Coleridge, P.B. Shelley and John Keats wrote masterpieces of poetry. What's more, they have greatly been acknowledged as the masters of developing critical sensibilities to understand their mechanism of poetry. This not only presupposes their advocacy of their own poetic craft but also quite precocious about the characteristics of poetry as a form of creative art. So, these poets helped create a philosophy of poetry that is known as Romantic Philosophy.

### 2. Looking Closely at Wordsworth's Poetry

Many critics have written about William Wordsworth's poetry. Some known critics are Ernest de Selincourt, Helen Darbishire, A.C. Bradley, Maurice Bowra and Graham Hough. William Wordsworth wrote a preface to his book *Lyrical Ballads*. This preface is like a statement of



what he thinks poetry should be. He says that poetry should be about life and should use simple language. He believes that poetry should express emotions.

Wordsworth says that poetry is when people express their feelings. He thinks that poets should write about everyday things. He does not like language. Instead, he wants poets to use the language that ordinary people use. According to him a poet is a person who talks to other people. A poet should have an understanding of human nature. The goal of poetry is to give people pleasure. It should help people understand themselves better. Wordsworth also says that poetry involves stages. These stages are observing the world remembering things thinking about them and using your imagination. He believes that the language of poetry is not very different from the language of writing. A poet should try to connect people with nature. The poet should try to make people feel emotions than just following rules.

Now, while looking closely at the analysis of Wordsworth by Ernest de Selincourt and Helen Darbishire, we find that they highly valued his poetry. They claim that *The Prelude* is the pinnacle of Wordsworth's poetical creation. They studied the evolution of this poem, noting the ironic situation where Wordsworth himself deemed his masterpiece a "minor" work while focusing on *The Recluse*. Their analysis often examined how Romantic poets, specifically Wordsworth recorded the growth of their own minds, focusing on subjective experience, imagination, and emotion as the core of their poetic power. Both of them are known for their scrupulous editing and close reading of the poets' works, aiming to understand the poet's original intent rather than relying on later, altered versions. Their work supports the view of the Romantic Revival as a reaction against 18th-century artificiality, favoring the "voice of the common man" and the "sublime" in nature, which she identified in the works of the key poets.

Basically, Darbishire says clearly that she touches on the poet's life and character only where they help us understand the poems more deeply. Her method is practical and textual. She does not start with big philosophical ideas like Bradley. She starts with the poems themselves and with the evidence from manuscripts. She wants to show how Wordsworth actually created his art. She believes that Wordsworth's greatness lies in his honest and deep response to nature and to human life. He had a special power to feel the living spirit in the natural world and to connect it with the growth of the human mind. Darbishire shows this through careful reading of the texts rather than through abstract arguments. She pays special attention to the process of composition. By looking at early drafts, she reveals how Wordsworth sometimes struggled with words but often found exactly the right simple and powerful expression. It was the result of long thought and many revisions. Her overall view is that Wordsworth's best poetry is that they come from pure and intense experiences of life. It is not decoration or teaching in a narrow sense. It is the record of a mind growing through contact with nature, memory, and simple human feelings. This makes his work fresh and lasting.

Darbishire uses manuscript evidence to show how Wordsworth's early attempts at poetry gradually developed into something new and original. He moved away from the artificial styles of the eighteenth century and began to write in a language closer to real human speech. She gives examples of early lines and later revisions to illustrate this growth. She also notes the importance of friendship with Samuel Taylor Coleridge. The two poets inspired each other during the period of composition of *Lyrical Ballads*. Darbishire explains that Coleridge's philosophical mind complemented Wordsworth's deep feeling for nature. Together they experimented with new subjects and new ways of writing. By the end of this chapter, Darbishire presents Wordsworth as a poet who was "made" through a combination of natural



surroundings, personal experiences, family support, and creative friendship. His genius did not appear suddenly. It grew slowly through honest observation and patient work.

In fact, Wordsworth believed poetry should use “the real language of men” words that real people actually speak rather than artificial poetic diction. She shows how he put this into practice in poems like “The Idiot Boy,” “We Are Seven,” “The Thorn,” and “Michael.” She gives special attention to “Lines Composed a Few Miles above Tintern Abbey.” Darbishire analyses how the poem moves from description of the landscape to deep thoughts about memory, nature’s healing power, and the growth of the mind. She uses manuscript variants to show how Wordsworth refined the lines to make the feeling more exact and moving. Next, she turns to the 1807 Poems, in Two Volumes. This collection contains many of Wordsworth’s finest short lyrics. Darbishire highlights poems such as “I Wandered Lonely as a Cloud” (the daffodils poem), “The Solitary Reaper,” “Ode: Intimations of Immortality,” and the sonnets. She explains how these poems show Wordsworth’s power to find universal meaning in small moments. In the “Immortality Ode,” Darbishire discusses the theme of childhood glory and its loss. She shows how Wordsworth uses simple yet powerful images to express a complex feeling of joy mixed with sadness. She notes the musical quality of the verse and how the changing rhythms match the changing moods.

The critic pays special attention to famous episodes such as the “spots of time,” the crossing of the Alps, the ascent of Snowdon, and the boat-stealing incident. She shows how these moments reveal the power of imagination and memory. She uses manuscript evidence to show how Wordsworth worked hard to capture exactly the right feeling in words. She also discusses the poem’s structure. Although it follows the order of Wordsworth’s life, it is not a simple autobiography. It is shaped by themes the influence of nature, the role of books, the power of imagination, and the recovery of the spirit after crisis. Darbishire concludes that *The Prelude* is one of the greatest poems in English because it records a real spiritual journey with honesty and depth. It shows the mind learning from nature, facing disappointment, and finally finding harmony again. Thus, she says that Wordsworth’s greatest gift was his ability to see the living spirit in nature and to connect it with the human mind. His poetry records moments when the outer world and the inner world meet in harmony. This gives his best work a sense of unity and depth. She praises the simplicity and purity of his language; shows that the plain style was the result of long labour; and it allows the feeling to come through directly without decoration. She gave the evidence that Wordsworth could write tender lyrics about flowers or children, powerful descriptions of mountains, moving stories of ordinary people, and grand philosophical passages. All these come from the same honest vision of life.

A.C. Bradley says that Wordsworth is one of the greatest English poets because he had a unique “vision” of life. “Wordsworth’s morality is of one piece with his optimism and with his determination to seize and exhibit in everything the element of good.” (Bradley 123). He saw nature not as dead matter but as something alive and full of spirit. He felt that the same spirit lives in the human mind too. This connection between nature and mind is the centre of Wordsworth’s poetry. One big idea Bradley discusses is Wordsworth’s feeling of “immortality” and “natural piety.” In the Ode on Intimations of Immortality, Wordsworth talks about how children see the world with glory and freshness, but adults lose it. Bradley explains that this is not just sadness. Wordsworth believes we can recover something of that glory through memory and nature. The child is like a “mighty prophet” because he feels the divine in simple things.

Bradley gives many examples. He quotes lines like:



“Thou, whose exterior semblance doth belie

Thy Soul’s immensity...” (Ode: Intimations of Immortality from Recollections of Early Childhood,” Stanza VIII)

He says these lines show the sublime feeling Wordsworth had for the child. The child’s soul is infinite even if the body is small. He talks about the “spots of time” in *The Prelude*. These are special moments from childhood that give strength to the adult mind. Wordsworth believed such moments feed the soul for life. Bradley calls this a deep psychological and spiritual truth. He says Wordsworth understood the power of memory better than most poets. Another important point is Wordsworth’s love for simple people and ordinary life. In *Lyrical Ballads*, he wrote about shepherds, leech-gatherers, and poor mothers. Bradley says this is not just pity. Wordsworth saw dignity and wisdom in these lives because they live close to nature. Their feelings are pure and strong.

He sees Wordsworth as a “philosophical poet” but not in a dry way. His philosophy comes through feeling and imagination, not through arguments. This makes him different from Shelley, who is more revolutionary and fierier. He connects Wordsworth with the idea of the sublime. Many of Wordsworth’s experiences crossing the Alps, seeing the Simplon Pass, or standing on Snowdon, give a feeling of vastness and unity. The mind feels small but also powerful because it can contain these huge feelings. He also talks about “joy” in Wordsworth’s poetry. It is not simple happiness. It is a deep, spiritual joy that comes when the mind and nature are in harmony.

While reading “*Tintern Abbey*,” he feels the calm, the memory, the growth of the mind. Bradley teaches us to focus on this experience. Wordsworth shows that the external world and the inner world are connected. Bradley helps us see how the poems create this unity in the reader’s mind. He says that for Wordsworth, imagination reveals truth. Bradley says this is the highest power of the poet.

Wordsworth according to Cleanth Brooks was crafty in the use of rhetorics. Brooks refers to his well-known sonnets like “*Upon Westminster Bridge*” and lyrics like “*Tintern Abbey*” in which he uses paradox, hyperbole and personification of abstract ideas to achieve greater poetic effects.

### **3. Metacritical Thoughts on the Mastercraft of Coleridge**

Samuel Taylor Coleridge’s *Biographia Literaria* (1817) is a seminal work of literary criticism and autobiography, famously distinguishing between “imagination” and “fancy,” proposing an organic theory of poetry, and critiquing Wordsworth’s poetic theory. It blends philosophical inquiry (influenced by German idealism) with personal literary reflections.

In Chapter XIII Coleridge says that our imagination is what helps us see the world. He talks about two kinds of imagination. The imagination, which is like a big power that helps us understand everything and the secondary imagination, which is like a smaller version of the primary one. The secondary imagination works with our mind to create new things. Coleridge also talks about the difference between imagination and fancy. He says that imagination is like a power that brings things together while fancy is just a way of rearranging things we already know. When it comes to poetry Coleridge thinks that a good poem is like a living thing where all the parts work together. He does not like the idea of poetry being a collection of random words and images. Coleridge also says that poetry should be fun to read and enjoy, not about telling the truth. He thinks that the best poetry is the kind that gives us pleasure and makes us happy. In chapters Coleridge argues with Wordsworth about what kind of language we should use in poetry. Coleridge thinks that we should use beautiful language that is different from the



way we talk in everyday life. He also talks about something he calls the "suspension of disbelief". This means that when we read poetry, we should be willing to imagine and believe in things that're not real just for the fun of it. Coleridge loves the ideas of philosophers like Kant, Schelling and Fichte. He wants to use their ideas to understand how art and imagination work.

#### **4. The Poetic Architectures of Shelley and Keats**

Percy Bysshe Shelley thinks that poetry is a creative force that can help us understand the world and make it a better place. He says that poets are like lawmakers but of making rules they create new ways of thinking and feeling. Shelley thinks that imagination is more important than reason because it helps us see the world in a beautiful way. He says that poetry is not about writing verses but about capturing the essence of human nature.

John Keats has a way of thinking about poetry. He says that a poet should be able to live with uncertainty and mystery without trying to figure everything out. Keats thinks that beauty is the important thing in life and that it is the key to understanding the truth. Keats also talks about the idea of "capability" which means being able to live with doubts and uncertainties without getting anxious or trying to find answers. He thinks that this is a part of being a poet because it allows us to see the world in a new and creative way. Cedric Watts has written a book about John Keats, where he explores Keats' life and poetry in detail. Watts says that Keats' poetry is special because it is full of language and beautiful images.

#### **5. Critiquing Poetry of the Romantic Revival**

There are different opinions of scholarly critics on the poetry of the Romantic Revival. C.M. Bowra thinks that the Romantic poets were special because they believed in the power of imagination to discover truths. He says that they saw imagination as a way of transcending the world and accessing a deeper spiritual reality. Bowra thinks that the Romantics were not just escapists. Rather they used their imagination to create new and beautiful things. He says that they saw nature as a symbol of the divine and that they used it to express their feelings and thoughts. Graham Hough has a view of the Romantic poets. He says that they were part of a movement that emphasized emotion and imaginative freedom. Hough thinks that the Romantics were special because they were able to tap into the feelings and desires of the human heart.

William J. Long thinks that the Romantic Revival was a reaction against the rules and conventions of the 18th century. He says that the Romantics wanted to break free from the constraints of poetry and create something new and original. Long thinks that the Romantics were special because they emphasized the importance of nature individual freedom and the power of imagination. He says that they saw the world as a place of wonder and mystery and that they used their poetry to express their feelings and thoughts.

According to Long, the Romantic poets were a group of people who saw the world in a new and beautiful way. They believed in the power of imagination to create and discover things and they used their poetry to express their deepest feelings and thoughts. Their poetry is still read today because it speaks to something deep and universal in the human heart. The Romantics may have lived a time ago but their ideas and poetry are still relevant and powerful today. We can learn a lot from the Romantics about the importance of imagination, creativity and individual freedom. They show us that poetry can be a tool for expressing our deepest feelings and thoughts and for creating new and beautiful things. So let us cherish the poetry of the Romantics and let us continue to explore and celebrate the power of imagination in our lives.



Coleridge, Shelley and Keats are a few examples of the many poets who were part of the Romantic movement. They each had their unique style and way of thinking but they all shared a deep love of nature, beauty and the power of imagination. Such poems continue to inspire and delight us to this day. We can learn a lot from their ideas and their way of seeing the world. We can use their poetry to express our own feelings and thoughts. The Romantic poets remind us of the importance of living life to the fullest and of using our imagination to create and discover things. They show us that poetry can be a tool for self-expression and for exploring the deepest mysteries of the human heart. The Romantic movement was a time in history and it continues to inspire and influence us today. We can learn a lot from their ideas and their way of seeing the world. We can use their poetry to express our own feelings and thoughts. Not only this, Romantic poets remind us of the importance of living life to the fullest and of using our imagination to create and discover things.

## **6. Interpretations of Romantic Poets by Modern and Postmodern Critics**

Interpretation of the poetry of Romantic poetry never ends even in the modern and postmodern eras. However, modality of interpretations changes from emotional and aesthetic levels to a more degree of hermeneutic interpretation. New Critics, focused on formal analysis and close reading, often held a complex view of Romantic poetry. While rejecting the Romantics' emphasis on authorial intention and emotion (the "Intentional Fallacy" and "Affective Fallacy"), they appreciated the technical brilliance of poets like Coleridge, who emphasized organic form. They valued structural unity over the subjective spontaneity often associated with Romanticism.

New Critics considered Samuel Taylor Coleridge a precursor to their principles, particularly his focus on the organic unity of poems and his theoretical work. By rejecting subjectivity, they deemed the focus on the poet's inner feelings (e.g., in Wordsworth) as less relevant than the "words on the page"; analyzed Romantic poems for irony, paradox, and tension, rather than merely emotional expression, often finding high technical skill in poets who unified opposing elements; and develop an anti-Romantic Sentiment as many New Critics had an "anti-romantic" stance, aiming to separate the poem from the poet's biography and emotional state.

F.R. Leavis's interpretation of the poets of the Romantic age was largely characterized by a modernist, anti-Romantic stance, heavily influenced by T.S. Eliot's ideas on the "dissociation of sensibility". In his seminal work *New Bearings in English Poetry* (1932) and later *Revaluation* (1936), Leavis aimed to restructure the English poetic canon by devaluing the emotionalism and "dream-world" atmosphere of the 19th-century Romantics, arguing they lacked the intellectual control found in 17th-century metaphysical poetry or modernism. Leavis opposed the Romantic tendency to prioritize "spontaneous overflow of powerful feelings," believing it led to vague, indulgent, and "un-impersonal" poetry that lacked moral rigor. In *Revaluation*, Leavis launched a severe attack on P.B. Shelley, criticizing his verse for offering "the emotion in itself, unattached, in the void" and lacking concrete reality. He described Shelley's poetry as a "spiritual malady" characterized by luxurious self-pity and an "alcoholic lack of focus". He generally approved of John Keats, noting his superior artistic maturity and ability to move beyond mere sentimentality towards a more concrete realization of experience, as hinted in his letters ("leaves to a tree"). While Leavis found fault with the "passive submission" to emotion in some romantic poetry, he regarded Wordsworth more highly than Shelley, noting that at his best, Wordsworth's poetry did not "withdraw" but offered a "reverent



openness before life". Insistence on "Impersonality": Following Arnold and Eliot, Leavis valued "impersonality" or "disinterestedness"—the ability of a poem to exist as an object in its own right, independent of the poet's personal emotional indulgent.

Leavis argued that the Romantic poets (with the exception of some of Keats and Wordsworth) broke the "line of wit," the tradition of combining thought and feeling that ran from Donne to Hopkins. He championed poets who exhibited a "tensely flexible and complex" language that responded to the "living language of the time".

Post-structuralist literary critics, particularly those associated with deconstruction and the Yale School, view the poets of the Romantic age not as proponents of organic unity or divine imagination, but as poets struggling with the inherent instability of language, meaning, and the self. Instead of seeing Romantic poems as successful embodiments of emotion, post-structuralists focus on the "play" of signifiers, arguing that the poetry deconstructs itself, exposing the failure of metaphor to bridge the gap between human perception and absolute truth.

Paul de Man challenged the traditional view that Romantic poets (like Wordsworth and Coleridge) successfully merged nature and mind through symbols. He argued that the symbol is merely a momentary metaphor that breaks down, revealing that there is no natural, organic link between the signifier (language) and signified (reality). Post-structuralists argue that Romantic poetry is obsessed with creating a sense of "presence" (e.g., God, nature, authentic self). However, this poetry ultimately shows that presence is impossible, as the words always suggest an absence, creating an irony that the poets themselves were not fully aware of. Decentering the Subject (The Author) as contrary to the "humanist" reading of the Romantics, which focuses on the poet's unique, coherent imagination and personal emotion, post-structuralists "decenter" the author. The poet is seen not as the master of meaning, but as a subject whose consciousness is constructed by language and ideological forces, making the "intention" irrelevant.

Critics like J. Hillis Miller have analyzed the "abysses" in Romantic texts, suggesting that poems by Shelley or Wordsworth often involve a "regress" of interpretation where no ultimate meaning can be reached. The poets are viewed as skeptical, often trapped in their own rhetorical structures. Post-structuralist readings often link Romanticism to modern and postmodern concerns, seeing the Romantic era as the origin of a crisis in representation that continues today.

Paul de Man is a central figure who focused on the "rhetoric of blindness" in Wordsworth and Rousseau, highlighting the gap between what the poets thought they were doing and what the language actually performed. J. Hillis Miller applied deconstructive analysis to Romantic and Victorian poetry to highlight the destabilized, shifting meanings. He focuses on the "misapprehensions" or "blind spots" within the Romantic poem's structure, treating it as a productive, unstable space rather than a closed, meaningful work. He interprets Wordsworth as a poet of "sheer language" rather than a romantic visionary, focusing on the tension between rhetoric and meaning where language disrupts understanding. He challenges the canonical view of Wordsworth as a poet of nature, emphasizing instead the deconstructive power of his words, particularly in his analysis of poems like *The Prelude* and *"A Slumber Did My Spirit Seal"*. De Man argues that Wordsworth's poetry demonstrates the impossibility of reconciling language with thought or "presence," often highlighting how tropes undermine the apparent meaning.

In terms of "Materiality" of language in time and history in Wordsworth, he focuses on the "nonsemantic" dimension of language, where words act as physical traces rather than just



symbols of nature or emotion. In "Autobiography as De-Facement", he examines the "abysmal loneliness" and the limitation of human expression, suggesting Wordsworth's work points toward the silencing of the human voice (prosopopeia). De Man argues that Wordsworth's work moves beyond simple symbolical imagery, challenging the notion that his poetry offers an organic unity between mind and nature. In short, de Man views Wordsworth as a profoundly ironic poet who constantly confronts the failure of language to fully grasp or bring to life the world it describes.

## 7. Conclusion: Romantic Poetry and Epistemological Interpretations

Poets of the Romantic Revival are mystics and rationalists. They have developed the best ideas of green and blue humanities. The epistemological dimension of English Romantic poetry represents a radical shift from the Enlightenment's reliance on reason, empirical observation, and objective fact toward a belief that knowledge is derived from individual perception, emotion, imagination, and intuition. Romantics viewed the human mind not as a passive receiver of sensory data (a *tabula rasa*), but as an active, creative participant that shapes and constructs the reality it perceives.

Imagination replaced reason as the supreme cognitive power. It was viewed as the "shaping" or "creative" power that connects humans to the essence of things, acting as a human equivalent to divine creation. Knowledge was often found in personal emotional experiences ("spontaneous overflow of powerful feelings") rather than logical analysis. The focus shifted inward, validating personal revelation and intuition over shared social or scientific knowledge. Nature was seen not just as raw material to be measured, but as a living, sacred, and symbolic entity containing transcendental truth, accessible through feeling. Romantic epistemology rejected the "mechanistic" view of the universe. They preferred organic metaphors, seeing the mind and art as living entities that grow rather than as machines that are built.

While not rejecting reason entirely, Romantics believed that reason alone (analytical or "fancy") was sterile and failed to grasp the vital essence of life. Samuel Taylor Coleridge distinguished between Fancy (a passive memory) and Imagination (an active "vital" power). The Imagination connects the self and object called "coadunation," that is making it a "true and original realism". William Wordsworth believed in "the feeling of their truth in its utmost conviction and affluence," suggesting that emotion provided a direct pathway to profound wisdom. Percy Bysshe Shelley held that poets possessed superior imaginative knowledge, acting as "unacknowledged legislators of the world" who could perceive deeper truths. John Keats advocated a way of knowing that embraces doubt, mystery, and uncertainty—"when man is capable of being in uncertainties, mysteries, doubts, without any irritable reaching after fact and reason". Wordsworth's "Tintern Abbey" (nature-based epistemology) vs. Coleridge's "Rime of the Ancient Mariner" (supernatural knowledge based on imagination); Blake's view of "Mental Things" as the only true reality; and Shelley's defense of poetry as epitome of knowledge.

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