

## CHANGE IS IN THE AIR

I once did a talk for teachers called ‘*Teaching Poetry As A Subversive Activity*’, after an American book I was keen on (*Teaching As A Subversive Activity* by Neil Postman and Charles Weingartner). Poetry is best seen, I think, as a “subversive” *game*, attempting to alter, or “subvert” our vision of the world and to offer new ways of seeing, feeling and thinking. Part of that subversion is to “subvert” poems themselves and offer fresh ways of looking at what has already been written about.

Here, we will look at three poems, all on the topic of ‘mutability’.

‘Mutability’ clearly refers to ‘change’: the word refers to the quality of being changeable, as in caterpillars showing mutability on their way to becoming butterflies. What do we think of change? After all, we live in an age when change happens all around us very rapidly and we are all now expected to *embrace* change – in the workplace, in attitudes, fashions and ideas. Change is often seen as somewhat threatening (think of the phrase “life-changing” ... of injuries etc.) but life without change would clearly be intolerable also. So, where do we stand on ‘change’, as in ‘mutability’, this slightly oppressive-sounding word, with its heavy consonants and its Latinate root connected with...mutation? We should bear in mind that the word then was still a long way off from Darwin’s hypothesis (1856) that genetic mutation and natural selection are keys to understanding how species have evolved.

The nineteenth century saw great changes: 1816 is one year after Waterloo - Europe would subsequently be in a continuous state of upheaval. Parliamentary democracy (of sorts) would only arrive in Britain in 1832. The Industrial Revolution was just beginning to surge, empires were being gained, capitalism was stretching its tentacles outwards and the new ideas about education (Rousseau’s *Emile*), the *Rights of Man* (Tom Paine) and women (cf Mary Wollstonecraft) were being debated. Change was definitely in the air.

Here is the poem by Shelley called “Mutability” published in 1816, around the time that he and his wife Mary were travelling around Europe, visiting Byron in Switzerland, fleeing debts in Britain to live cheaply abroad and make a living as writers. Mary wrote and published ‘*Frankenstein*’ in 1816. This poem comes from Shelley’s collection ‘*Alastor : or The Spirit of Solitude, and other poems*’ published in the same year.

### Mutability

We are as clouds that veil the midnight moon;  
How restlessly they speed, and gleam, and quiver,  
Streaking the darkness radiantly!—yet soon  
Night closes round, and they are lost forever:

Or like forgotten lyres, whose dissonant strings  
Give various response to each varying blast,  
To whose frail frame no second motion brings  
One mood or modulation like the last.

We rest.—A dream has power to poison sleep;  
We rise.—One wandering thought pollutes the day;  
We feel, conceive or reason, laugh or weep;  
Embrace fond woe, or cast our cares away:

It is the same!—For, be it joy or sorrow,  
The path of its departure still is free:  
Man's yesterday may ne'er be like his morrow;  
Nought may endure but mutability!

The poem has beautiful effects, particularly with the opening comparing us to clouds, gleaming, quivering, before being lost to darkness. One might say this is an archetypal “Romantic” poem, with its emphasis both on subjective “feeling” and freedom (“The path of its departure still is free...”). The actual idea of “mutability” is only casually referred to at the end and the poem is less about “mutability” than about the dangerous excitement of dreams, thoughts, and feelings “free” to roam at will.

Two other features stand out: the word “wandering”, for Shelley and Mary were great wanderers; and music, the “forgotten lyres”. The music of poetry itself is hinted at here and the idea is picked up in Wordsworth’s more austere treatment of the theme, which we will consider next. One further point to note, before we do so, is the form of Shelley’s poem. It is written in ‘ballad’ form, something for which Wordsworth and Coleridge partly paved the way with their *Lyrical Ballads* in 1798 (although William Blake also contributed to popularising the ballad form for serious poetry). The ballad form nearly always connotes a certain popular appeal. Ballads are democratic: street songs, stories (like *Robin Hood*) hymns, nursery rhymes, so they are essentially non-intellectual and accessible to all.

The repeated “we” in the poem draws the reader into the poem, unconsciously; the poet seems to be speaking as if “we” are included, accompanying him in his veering travels. The ideas (“A dream has power to poison sleep”) are dropped in a little wildly and no thought is ever developed in any particular way. Readers might be ‘seduced’ by the rush of language that seeks to win us over to the poet’s side, casting “our cares away” in the heroic (*romantic*) urge to be free, to think, feel, rest, “rise” as we wish.

Wordsworth’s more austere examination of “mutability” is very different.



## Mutability (1822)

BY WILLIAM WORDSWORTH

From low to high doth dissolution climb,  
 And sink from high to low, along a scale  
 Of awful notes, whose concord shall not fail;  
 A musical but melancholy chime,  
 Which they can hear who meddle not with crime,  
 Nor avarice, nor over-anxious care.  
 Truth fails not; but her outward forms that bear  
 The longest date do melt like frosty rime,  
 That in the morning whitened hill and plain  
 And is no more; drop like the tower sublime  
 Of yesterday, which royally did wear  
 His crown of weeds, but could not even sustain  
 Some casual shout that broke the silent air,  
 Or the unimaginable touch of Time.

Written when Wordsworth was 52 and becoming a deeply conservative, religious, ‘Establishment’ figure (he would later become Poet Laureate after Southey’s death), the poem is a meditation on how everything is subject to change, how all things inevitably decline and how Time, with a capital T, imposes “dissolution” even on the seemingly strongest objects, like a fortified tower.

It’s a poem I have always liked in spite of its rather preachy tone (“Truth fails not...”). It begins, somewhat oddly, by announcing that “dissolution” *climbs* before peaking out and *descending* towards decline, death, destruction or whatever awaits us when we have “dissolved”. Presumably he is thinking of the cycle of life as being like a parabola, as we grow upwards to

maturity before going “over the hill” on the long descent. For the poet, this dissolution or decline is like some ethereal “music”, stopping us in our tracks and incurring awe. The word “concord”, however, strikes a positive and reassuring note in spite of the word “melancholy” just after; we are told in this first section of six lines that “they can hear who meddle not with crime, Nor avarice, nor over-anxious care” in a tone of some *ex cathedra* utterance, like someone speaking to a captive congregation, grave and ‘serious’. Not everyone, then, is capable of listening to or understanding this “music”. Like divine revelation that must be mediated by priests, the music of dissolution needs to be interpreted for others by a class of virtuous, right-minded people who seem able to interpret the *zeitgeist* and relay proper feelings and ideas to the masses.

So far, so good, but how subversive is all of this?

The *form* of the poem is particularly interesting. It is a sonnet rather than a ballad (as in the early *Lyrical Ballads*); the register is loftier, the metrics more complex. Yet Wordsworth breaks with the normal convention of an 8-line octet followed by a six-line sestet, as if anticipating change already in the poetics. In its own way this is quite subversive, for a start.

He begins with a short premise, all in one sentence of 6 rather than 8 lines, whose gist is that the implications of “dissolution” are best understood by those who, (like himself!), have trained themselves to “hear” the music (and are fully in command of the moral high ground!). This is followed by a lengthier statement, again all in one sentence, that “Truth”(whatever we understand by that) does not “fail”. Again, like some oracle, he expects us to take this on trust, for it might be difficult to prove. What exactly *does* he mean by “truth”?

The *outward* embodiments of this Truth, we are told, *are* subject to decline and destruction. To show us this, the poet *paints* a picture of a “tower”, a symbol of strength and resistance, finally being toppled by a mere “shout” or, the poem tells us, by the “unimaginable touch of Time”. There is particular beauty in this phrase, “the unimaginable touch of Time”. The lengthy, Latinate, six syllables of “unimaginable” is undercut (subverted?) by the simple Middle-English word “touch” (derived from the Old French word ‘tochier’), with its gentle, sensitive connotations of both physical and emotional contact.

Clearly, the ‘touch of time’ is hard, impossible even, to *imagine*. But the poem here subverts the idea it is presenting, because as readers we are being invited, nevertheless, to do exactly that – *imagine* something unimaginable. The poem helps us by using images and sounds (the light ‘t’ sounds of the “touch of Time”) to get us to feel this touch.

In another sense also, the poem subverts itself. If we take “Truth” as including *artistic truth*, to some extent - the artistry demonstrated by the poem - then an interesting mirroring effect is built up. Solid reality, represented here by the *actual* tower touched by Time, is frozen in the *artistic representation* of that physical embodiment. In a sense, the poem itself has become a timeless music and has become, itself, a “Truth” that does not fail and is no longer subject, like the tower it seeks to portray, to corrosion and dilapidation. John Keats in his ‘Ode on a Grecian Urn’ and Shakespeare in his sonnet “Shall I Compare Thee” also play on just such ideas of the timelessness of art. The poem, therefore, *plays* with paradox.

There is, as we have already said, a very visual aspect to this poem, and Wordsworth, while not a painter, had quite a painterly approach to poetry. This was partly because he was visually schooled in the tradition of the “Picturesque”.

It is hard now to appreciate just how exciting the idea of “picturesque travel” was at its height between, say, the 1780s and the early 1800s. It was pioneered largely by the Reverend William Gilpin (died 1804), an amateur artist and “tourist” (a new term for a new sort of traveller). In 1782 he had published ‘*Observations on the River Wye, and Several Parts of South Wales, etc. Relative Chiefly to Picturesque Beauty; made in the Summer of the Year 1770*’ and later, ‘*Three Essays, on Picturesque Beauty, on Picturesque Travel, and on Sketching Landscapes*’ (1794).

In an England where the middle classes now had the money, leisure and the means, with stage coaches and better roads, touring became the latest fashion and art was there to record all the exciting discoveries of Britain’s own, largely ignored and unknown outer reaches (Turner and others made fortunes turning out prints and paintings for tourists wanting souvenirs of their various tours). The aristocracy had always made what was called the Grand Tour of Europe but now the wars with France had for many years put paid to continental touring at the end of the eighteenth century, and so Gilpin was pioneering a new, home-based tourism with his touring of the River

Wye, Scotland, North Wales and the Peak District (where, you remember, Jane Austen's Elizabeth Bennet was excited to go "touring" with her aunt and uncle, the Gardiners) were all places high on the list of the ardent "tourist".

When Wordsworth returned from France in 1791, aged twenty-one and having had an affair with a French girl, Annette Vallon, resulting the following year in the birth of little Caroline, his first instinct had been to hit the road and follow in Gilpin's footsteps, down the River Wye, seeking aesthetic inspiration and spiritual insights, as just such a picturesque traveller. He was having to weigh up whether to train as a clergyman or, more riskily financially, to try to become a poet. This was what he was mulling over, along with Gilpin's treatises on *Picturesque Beauty*, as he traipsed towards Tintern Abbey, the ruins of which had so excited Gilpin.

William Gilpin's ideas were all about our relationship to Nature, the true source of artistic inspiration. Nature in itself was beautiful, but it could only really be interpreted, refashioned (if necessary!) and transmitted by artists who were properly trained to understand *what* they were viewing and *how* they were to view it. Gilpin was a curate and then became headmaster at Cheam School and he was, from the start, an enlightened and enthusiastic pedant, always devising *rules* for how Nature should or shouldn't be viewed pictorially.

There was at the time an interesting polemic going on about what constituted 'beauty' in this new 'Romantic' age, where Feeling was so important. Was the 'sublime', where terror could mingle with pleasure, on the same plane as picturesque beauty, which might be seen as beauty of a more "feminine" sort? Edmund Burke had thrown his hat into the ring with his *Philosophical Inquiry into the Origin of Our Ideas of the Sublime and Beautiful* (1757); so, too, had Mary Wollstonecraft in her *Vindication of the Rights of Men* (1790) who felt that Burke's rhetoric was distinctly anti-feminine. Wordsworth's mention of the word 'sublime' gives a nod towards this whole philosophical topic.

Landscapes (and landscaped gardens) were consequently 'read' with as much attention as literary texts (Jane Austen, in her descriptions of Mr Darcy's Pemberley or Mr Knightley's Donwell Abbey, directly draws on this to sway her heroines' and her readers' feelings). For William Gilpin, if the composition were unbalanced or if Nature were lacking *aesthetically*, the artist should correct it; the "picturesque" ideal demanded that raw nature should be viewed and interpreted as a moral exercise (a poor peasant might be toiling in the background, eking out his existence with honest toil, or a ruined abbey could show the effects of history and its dilapidated nature might carry a message about the passing of time - eg. Tintern Abbey).

It is, therefore, against this quite complex debate about landscape and beauty that we should understand part of the point of Wordsworth's 'Mutability'. The ruined tower is one step further along the road from the ruined abbey he had contemplated and written about in 1792. *Art with a moral purpose*.

One of Wordsworth's enthusiastic supporters was a real artist and painter, Sir George Beaumont 7<sup>th</sup> Baronet, who forsook politics to exhibit his rather conventional paintings (he hated Turner!) at the Royal Academy, collect Old Masters, found the British Institute and later bequeath his collection of paintings to the newly built National Gallery. Taught by Alexander Cozens (as influential as Gilpin in analysing landscape, almost scientifically!) at Eton and coming into contact with Uvedale Price (a leading landscape theorist), Beaumont was thoroughly steeped in the aesthetics and the landscaping ideas of the picturesque and the sublime. Wordsworth and he met in the Lake District, a favourite "picturesque" location, and Sir George and his wife became friendly with the 'Lake Poets', even allowing the Wordsworths the run of a farmhouse on their Leicestershire estate at Colleorton.

In 1815, Wordsworth had dedicated his latest collection of poetry 'Elegiac Stanzas' to his friend, and George Beaumont drew the illustrating frontispiece from one of his paintings. This painting, '*Peele Castle in a Storm*' was directly referenced by Wordsworth in a poem on the death at sea of his brother, Captain John Wordsworth, when his ship struck a reef off Weymouth in 1805.



**Peele Castle in a Storm by George Beaumont**

**Elegiac Stanzas Suggested by a Picture of Peele Castle in a Storm, Painted by Sir George Beaumont**

BY WILLIAM WORDSWORTH

I was thy neighbour once, thou rugged Pile!  
 Four summer weeks I dwelt in sight of thee:  
 I saw thee every day; and all the while  
 Thy Form was sleeping on a glassy sea.

...

Ah! *then*, if mine had been the Painter's hand,  
 To express what then I saw; and add the gleam,  
 The light that never was, on sea or land,  
 The consecration, and the Poet's dream;

I would have planted thee, thou hoary Pile  
 Amid a world how different from this! ....

This is just an extract. The poem is full of pathos, for Wordsworth was very much afflicted by his brother's death. Here, the poet can be seen directly *imagining* himself as a "painter" of pictures - always with a moral reflection. And if we look at another Beaumont painting, 'Landscape With Ruined Tower'...



...I think we can see the possible inspiration for ‘Mutability’. The tower seems to lean precariously, though it looks substantial enough for the time being. The painting is a good example of the “picturesque” vision. The composition is carefully balanced: the eye is drawn from the lighter, vivid foreground to the rolling, stalwart mountains behind. The tower is pitifully vulnerable, as is the human figure, beside the forces of nature at work. The sky is beautiful but the clouds remind us of the storms that are possible.

In contrast to the Romantic era, let us examine another subversive ‘take’ on the topic of mutability, with the title “Of Mutability”, this time by a modern, woman poet, Jo Shapcott. It was published in 2010 as part of a collection called *Of Mutability*.

## OF MUTABILITY

Too many of the best cells in my body  
 are itching, feeling jagged, turning raw  
 in this spring chill. It’s two thousand and four  
 and I don’t know a soul who doesn’t feel small  
 among the numbers. Razor small.

Look down these days to see your feet  
 mistrust the pavement and your blood tests  
 turn the doctor’s expression grave.  
 Look up to catch eclipses, gold leaf, comets,  
 angels, chandeliers, out of the corner of your eye,  
 join them if you like, learn astrophysics, or  
 learn folksong, human sacrifice, mortality,  
 flying, fishing, sex without touching much.  
 Don’t trouble, though, to head anywhere but the sky.



Jo Shapcott, here, is directly confronting her breast cancer (she has recovered, thank heavens) and the prospect that she might very well die soon. Mutability is no longer an abstract idea, but something her body is undergoing right now, leading to great changes in her life. Almost everything subverts the Wordsworth sonnet she certainly had in mind when she wrote this. Starting with the form, it is (just about) a sonnet, but a sonnet that has been wrenched around. Wordsworth's unusual sestet opening has been replaced by a five-line intro, followed by a nine-line follow-up. The sweetened music of a rhyme scheme is ditched, though there is a rhythm built in with the injunctions "Look down.... Look up...." And at the end "sky" does rhyme with "eye", linking and highlighting these two words.

The tone, too, is utterly different: highly ironic, minutely personal and almost casual, in its courageous jokiness ("I don't know a soul who doesn't feel small among the numbers..."). There is, however, a connection with the Romantic style somewhere, perhaps, in its strength of feeling: "Razor small". What a phrase! The poem also is concerned, as Wordsworth's was, in "looking" – "Look down... Look up...". And perhaps the ending recalls Shelley with "Don't trouble to head anywhere but the sky."

I love her wry funniness, "sex without touching much". There's an earthy stoicism and humour that is very appealing and which undercuts both the self-centred 'hippy-ness' of Shelley and the grave, earnest 'do-good' streak in Wordsworth. It's certainly refreshing and salutary to have a woman's voice to balance the picture, with its "fuck-it-all" readiness to swim against the current in her own way.

In the end, though, poetry is a game played with images, sounds, rhythms, structures and, quintessentially, words - words that bounce off each other through the ages, recalling, arguing, concurring, deflating, echoing in a music that is paradoxically both touched *and* untouched by Time.

August 2018

*Here – as an extra is a later poem by Shelley, also sometimes published under the title "Mutability" (1824). I have no idea whether it refers back to Wordsworth's poem at all – it doesn't appear to. I find it trite, over-sentimental and wishy-washy; the rhyming seems too mechanical and the poem makes no new discoveries, nor does it move us on further. Still, with its title, it may legitimately be considered here, I suppose (though, for me, flowers don't "smile"!).*

## ***Mutability***

1

*The flower that smiles today*

*Tomorrow dies;*

*All that we wish to stay,*

*Tempts and then flies.*

*What is this world's delight? Lightning that mocks the night,*

*Brief even as bright.*

2

*Virtue, how frail it is!*

*Friendship how rare!*

*Love, how it sells poor bliss*

*For proud despair!*

*But we, though soon they fall, Survive their joy and all*

*Which ours we call.*

*Whilst skies are blue and bright,*

*Whilst flowers are gay,*

*Whilst eyes that change ere night*

*Make glad the day,*

*Whilst yet the calm hours creep, Dream thou – and from thy sleep*

*Then wake to weep.*