

Four Seasons fill the measure of the year:
Romantic Meteorology

Meteorological phenomena – and the seasons – provided the Romantic poets with a rich source of language and images. Even a cursory consideration of selected poem titles reads like a poetic weather report, with works such as ‘It is a Beauteous Evening, Calm and Free’, ‘Lines Written in Early Spring’, ‘Come, come thou bleak December wind’, ‘Frost at Midnight’, ‘The Human Seasons’, ‘The Fitful Alternations of the Rain’, and ‘Ode to the West Wind’¹ all speaking of the close relationship between Romantic poetry and this very specific aspect of the natural world. In this essay, I will examine some examples of Romantic weather-writing, and consider the different functions that weather serves in these texts.

Wordsworth’s poem, ‘I Wandered Lonely as a Cloud’, written in 1804 with later revisions, certainly celebrates that redemptive emblem of Spring, the ‘host of golden daffodils, / [...] Fluttering and dancing in the breeze’; but his choice of comparative in the title bears analysis. Wordsworth could have elected to wander lonely as a butterfly, as a star, as a bird of prey – but it was the cloud that provided him with the perfect simile to evoke his temporary isolation. Additionally, the daffodils themselves are placed in a meteorological context; although the flowers are thematically foregrounded, they are brought to animated life by ‘the breeze’.

Wordsworth’s preoccupation with weather was shared by his sister, Dorothy – his companion during that inspiring daffodil encounter of Thursday 15th of April 1802. A prolific and prodigious diary-keeper, Dorothy foregrounds the Cumbrian weather in the opening remarks of many of her journal entries, with the observations for that day being no different: ‘It was a threatening, misty morning, but mild. [...] The wind was furious, and we thought we must have returned. [...] The wind seized our breath.’²

In the same entry, Dorothy goes on to recount how ‘in the woods beyond Gowbarrow Park we saw a few daffodils close to the water-side. [...] as we went along there were more and yet more; and at last, under the boughs of the trees, we saw that there was a long belt of them along the shore, [...]. I never saw daffodils so beautiful.’ The flowers ‘seemed as if they verily laughed with the wind, that blew upon them over the lake; they looked so gay, ever glancing, ever changing.’ Here, in the image of the daffodils that ‘laughed with the wind, that blew upon them over the lake’, Dorothy pre-empts her brother’s poem, with its daffodils ‘dancing in the breeze’. Recalling this diary passage’s opening (and recurring) theme of weather, it is to weather that Dorothy returns in the final lines of her account of that day: ‘The bays were stormy [...] All was cheerless and gloomy, so we faced the storm. [...] It rained and blew, when we went to bed.’

William Wordsworth was not alone in exploring through poetry the effects of weather on flora. In the opening line of his poem, ‘The Cloud’, published in 1820, Percy Bysshe Shelley’s eponymous narrator proclaims, ‘I bring fresh showers for the thirsting flowers’, going on to describe how:

¹ Written by, respectively: William Wordsworth; William Wordsworth; Samuel Taylor Coleridge; Samuel Taylor Coleridge; John Keats; Percy Bysshe Shelley; Percy Bysshe Shelley

² All quotations taken from *Journals of Dorothy Wordsworth*, Macmillan and Co Ltd, 1897 (version cited: The Project Gutenberg E-Book of *Journals of Dorothy Wordsworth*, Vol. I, June 2013)

From my wings are shaken the dews that waken
The sweet buds every one.

Developing a theme, several instances of weather conditions impacting upon plant-life follow in quick succession:

I wield the flail of the lashing hail,
And whiten the green plains under,
And then again I dissolve it in rain,
And laugh as I pass in thunder.

Shelley foregrounds the ‘hail’, ‘rain’, and ‘thunder’ by using these words as line-endings, and emphasises the active nature of weather, as wrought by the narrating cloud, in a series of verbs: ‘wield’, ‘whiten’, ‘dissolve’, ‘laugh’, and ‘pass’. This meteorological catalysing continues in the first line of the next stanza, which once again combines a verb (‘sift’) in conjunction with a meteorological phenomenon (‘snow’):

I sift the snow on the mountains below,
And their great pines groan aghast;

The nature of Shelley’s cloud is demonstrably wilder than the lonely cloud of Wordsworth’s poem; and the flora on which Shelley’s cloud impacts is somewhat larger than Wordsworth’s daffodils. Here, hail has the power to ‘whiten’ entire swathes of open land (the ‘green plains’), while snowfall sees powerful pine trees groaning, ‘aghast’, under its accumulated weight. Shelley’s cloud is a joyfully self-celebrating phenomenon, certainly; but it is also mischievous, even destructive, and it is this ambiguous relationship with flora that hints at a greater meteorological complexity than is glimpsed in William Wordsworth’s poem discussed above, although is arguably more discernible in Dorothy’s writing.

The examples of meteorological poetry (and Dorothy’s diary extracts) discussed above are largely observational, the writing exploring or recording the relationship between weather and landscape. What of the experiential, and of the impact of weather on the human psyche? What of the metaphorical, in which the vocabulary and images of weather might provide the poet with a means to turn their attention away from their external surroundings and to reflect upon their inner landscape? In his 1802 poem, ‘Dejection: An Ode’,³ Samuel Taylor Coleridge externalises his despondency by using meteorological language symbolically. The prevalence of meteorology is established in his choice of epigraph:

*Late, late yestreen I saw the new Moon,
With the old Moon in her arms;
And I fear, I fear, my Master dear!
We shall have a deadly storm.*
(Ballad of Sir Patrick Spence)

Coleridge’s poem shares little in common thematically with the traditional ballad that he cites, and this suggests that it is the ‘deadly storm’ – a literal narrative occurrence in the ‘Ballad of Sir Patrick Spence’ – that attracted him to this passage with its metaphorical

³ “April 4 1802: ‘STC begins a verse letter to Sara H [...] [‘Letter to Sara Hutchinson’ is eventually published, much altered, as ‘Dejection: An Ode’.]”. Valerie Purton, *A Coleridge Chronology*, Macmillan Author Chronologies, Palgrave Macmillan, pages 55-56

potential. Coleridge's opening stanza continues the foregrounding of weather in his consideration of the quotation:

Well! If the Bard was weather-wise, who made
The grand old ballad of Sir Patrick Spence,
This night, so tranquil now, will not go hence
Unroused by winds, that ply a busier trade
Than those which mould yon cloud in lazy flakes,

Here, Coleridge's mood finds expression in the language of weather: his night, though 'tranquil now, will not go hence / Unroused by winds', and these metaphorical winds will, he determines, be wilder ('ply a busier trade') than a snow-cloud with its 'lazy flakes'. Later in this stanza, weather re-emerges to provide further external articulation of the poet's inner condition. This is, however, somewhat ironic; Coleridge considers himself no longer inspired by the wonders of natural phenomena, and yet meteorology has provided him with a rich metaphorical vocabulary with which to record this apparent intellectual poverty:

The coming-on of rain and squally blast.
And oh! that even now the gust were swelling,
And the slant night-shower driving loud and fast!
Those sounds which oft have raised me, whilst they awed,
And sent my soul abroad,
Might now perhaps their wonted impulse give,
Might startle this dull pain, and make it move and live!

Coleridge's torment is much in evidence in his desire for the external weather conditions to worsen ('oh! that even now the gust were swelling') in order to rouse in him a poetic response. Ironically, however, his lament and longing for 'Those sounds which oft have raised me [...] / And sent my soul abroad' achieve this, in the creation of a work bemoaning the absence of creativity.

As the poem progresses, it becomes considerably less meteorological in its later stanzas; there are only two further inclusions of 'luminous cloud' and one of 'cloud' as a verb. Having served the poem's early purpose in the establishment and expression of Coleridge's despondent state, it appears that weather was no longer needed as a thematic scaffold once the narrative had developed and gained its own momentum.

But what of summer and autumn, and of the Romantic writing that responds to those seasons and their weather? In his poem, 'Summer', John Clare creates a compelling association between summer and the celebration of romantic love. However, although laden with an abundance of summer-evoking images, the poem itself contains only one specific meteorological reference (in its final line), instead relying on signifiers such as seasonal flora and fauna to suggest summer weather conditions. The poem's opening line operates as both imperative and invitation, while its chiasmus combines with an irresistible tumbling rhythm:

Come we to the summer, to the summer we will come,
For the woods are full of bluebells and the hedges full of bloom,
And the crow is on the oak a-building of her nest,
And love is burning diamonds in my true lover's breast;

The speaker places his 'true lover' firmly at the centre of the poem's focus; she could almost be summer herself in his declaration that 'I will look upon her face, I will in her beauty rest'. In its 'bluebells and the hedges full of bloom', the poem celebrates the abundance of summer. This is continued in the stanza, with a suggested reference to female fertility in 'the open bloom of May' and the 'brooding' bird:

[...] the open bloom of May,
The merry bee is trampling the pinky threads all day,
And the chaffinch it is brooding on its grey mossy nest

However, it is not until the final line that Clare introduces a specific meteorological reference – 'the heat of the day' – in the speaker's description of his desire:

[...] I cannot get a wink o'sleep for thinking of my dear;
I hunger at my meat and I daily fade away
Like the hedge rose that is broken in the heat of the day.

The reference to heat has greater impact for its singular occurrence, and the reader is left in no doubt as to summer's conditions, and the desires of Clare's narrator.

The heat of summer is equally unrelenting in John Keats' poem, 'On the Grasshopper and the Cricket':

When all the birds are faint with the hot sun,
And hide in cooling trees, a voice will run
From hedge to hedge about the new-mown mead;
That is the Grasshopper's – he takes the lead
In summer luxury, – he has never done
With his delights; for when tired out with fun
He rests at ease beneath some pleasant weed.

In contrast with Clare's foregrounding of seasonal flora to evoke the weather conditions associated with summer, here flora is relegated to background context in favour of the poem's small but significant summer fauna; the 'cooling trees' and 'pleasant weed' are presented as no more than a refuge for 'birds [...] faint with the hot sun' and for the title's 'Grasshopper'. However, these two poems share a reliance on indicators other than direct meteorological references to convey their prevailing summer weather conditions – in this case, the small but noisy insects of the poem's title.

Summer shifts fluidly to autumn in Keats' 1818 sonnet, 'The Human Seasons', in which the poet turns his attention to all four seasons, albeit relatively briefly:

He ['man'] has his Summer, when luxuriously
Spring's honied cud of youthful thought he loves
To ruminat, and by such dreaming high
Is nearest unto heaven: quiet coves
His soul has in its Autumn, when his wings
He furlth close; contented so to look
On mists in idleness – to let fair things
Pass by unheeded as a threshold brook.

Here, the meteorological ‘mists’ of autumn are alluded to only fleetingly, but are given a more prominent role in the opening lines of Keats’ 1819 ode, ‘To Autumn’, with its softly alliterative ‘m’ and ‘fr’ sounds. In Keats’ vision, autumn is every bit as fecund as spring or summer, and once again seasonal flora – and here, seasonal produce – is used as shorthand to evoke the season’s prevailing weather conditions, in place of weather itself. However, the poem’s weather conditions – ‘mists’ and ‘maturing sun’ – are catalysts, whose presence remains by suggestion, in their ‘Conspiring’ together to bring forth a rich variety of seasonal produce:

Season of mists and mellow fruitfulness,
Close bosom-friend of the maturing sun;
Conspiring with him how to load and bless
With fruit the vines that round the thatch-eaves run;
To bend with apples the moss’d cottage-trees,
And fill all fruit with ripeness to the core;
To swell the gourd, and plump the hazel shells
With a sweet kernel; [...]

It is not until the poem’s second stanza (of three) that it becomes clear that Keats is addressing autumn itself, and uses a softly alliterated weather phenomenon – the ‘winnowing wind’ – to do so, as if the season were governed by weather, rather than the other way around:

Sometimes whoever seeks abroad may find
Thee sitting careless on a granary floor,
Thy hair soft-lifted by the winnowing wind;

Keats continues his direct address in the poem’s third and final stanza, and once again calls upon meteorological phenomena to do so, in the form of ‘barred clouds’ and ‘light winds’. Dismissing spring as an unworthy rival, Keats asks:

Where are the songs of spring? Ay, Where are they?
Think not of them, thou hast thy music too, –
While barred clouds bloom the soft-dying day,
[...]
[...] the small gnats mourn
Among the river shallows, borne aloft
Or sinking as the light wind lives or dies;

The ‘barred clouds’ and ‘light wind’ are active protagonists in Keats’ scheme; the ‘clouds bloom the soft-dying day’, and ‘the wind lives or dies’, suggesting the cyclical and renewable nature of the seasons and their weather.

This essay concludes by examining Coleridge’s 1798 poem, ‘Frost at Midnight’, with its consideration of ‘all seasons’ in the first line of its final (fifth) stanza. In the preceding stanza, Coleridge turns to weather as the vehicle by which to express his wish that his infant son should experience the rural childhood that he did not: ‘shalt wander like a breeze’. In this simile, Coleridge establishes an equation in which weather symbolises that most desirable of states, freedom. He goes on to elevate further the natural landscape (the ‘shores’, ‘craggs’, ‘ancient mountains’, ‘lakes’) ‘beneath the clouds’ – and, by suggestion, the weather itself – in his discernment of a divine hand, ‘thy God’, in its creation:

But *thou*, my babe! shalt wander like a breeze
By lakes and sandy shores, beneath the crags
Of ancient mountain, and beneath the clouds,
Which image in their bulk both lakes and shores
And mountain crags: so shalt thou see and hear
The lovely shapes and sounds intelligible
Of that eternal language, which thy God
Utters, who from eternity doth teach
Himself in all, and all things in himself.

Having foregrounded meteorological phenomena by placing the nouns, ‘breeze’ and ‘clouds’, at the ends of lines one and three in this stanza, Coleridge continues the deployment of weather in the poem’s closing address to his son, encompassing ‘all seasons’. Here, weather is used symbolically in the poet’s desire that ‘all seasons be sweet to thee’; but his evocation of each season’s prevailing weather conditions is so sensory that, even though there is no human presence in these lines, the physical experience of weather itself is presented as a gift to be treasured:

Therefore all seasons shall be sweet to thee,
Whether the summer clothe the general earth
With greenness, or the redbreast sit and sing
Betwixt the tufts of snow on the bare branch
Of mossy apple-tree, while the night-thatch
Smokes in the sun-thaw; whether the eave-drops fall
Heard only in the trances of the blast,
Or if the secret ministry of frost
Shall hang them up in silent icicles,
Quietly shining to the quiet Moon.

Coleridge’s lens is both long-distance (‘the general earth’) and short-range (‘the redbreast’), drawing focus ever closer to the domestic space. Far from being a remote phenomenon, an abstract to be observed only at a distance, Coleridge brings the weather to his very door: ‘the night-thatch / Smokes in the sun-thaw; [...] the eave-drops fall / Heard only in the trances of the blast’. Developing the intimacy glimpsed in the exchange between house and weather, the reader (invited to identify with the directly addressed infant) is almost vouchsafed a revelation in ‘the secret ministry of frost’. Finally, the poem’s focus – and that of the reader – is widened once again, as Coleridge’s gaze expands above the house with its ‘night-thatch’ and ‘eave-drops’, above ‘the mossy apple-tree’, and even above ‘the general earth’, in his contemplation of ‘silent icicles, / Quietly shining to the quiet Moon’.

The end of this poem places meteorology firmly at its centre, and in this respect shares common thematic ground with the other poems discussed. Whether in their detailed observations of weather and of its influence over external landscapes, or in their use of weather as a means of expressing the complexities of a given poet’s internal landscape, these poems engage with weather in ways that expand demonstrably beyond mere noticing and superficial mentioning. As Wordsworth himself acknowledges in ‘Lines Written in Early Spring’, ‘To her fair works did nature link / The human soul that through me ran’, offering a compelling summation of the inextricably close relationship between the Romantic poets and weather.