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James Beattie’s Literary Essays (1776, 1783) and the Evolution of Romanticism

Critics have paid a great deal of attention to the literary criticism of the great Romantic writers, with the prose of the poets, for instance, being used in the main to aid the critics’ discussions of individual Romantic poems and poets. It is, of course, a valid exercise to comb Keat’s letters for insight into the great Odes, to see the Preface to Lyrical Ballads as an apologetic defence of the originality of the volume, to go to Biographia Literaria for a useful commentary on the literary ethos of the time, and the like. But this close connection of Romantic prose criticism to Romantic poetry has tended to imbue it with an originality of insight that it does not possess, at least to the extent of the oracular importance given to it by some modern critics. One is left by them with the impression that Romantic criticism is largely like Romantic poetry, a great flowering of genius which transcends and fulfills its sources.

In fact, the hunting for precedents of Romantic criticism is not undertaken nearly as often as is the search for pre-Romantic poetic sources. In Wordsworth as Critic, for instance, W. J. B. Owen is content to claim that “Wordsworth’s criticism is . . . obviously more original than a derivative work like Shelley’s Defence”; and yet

¹(Toronto, 1969), 229. A discussion of the role of Beattie’s essays in the evolution of Romanticism is called for because they are ignored or assigned little or no value by modern critics. J. W. H. Atkins, for instance, gives one paragraph to An Essay on Laughter and Ludicrous Composition and On Fable and Romance and finds them of some “historical if not intrinsic” interest [English Literary Criticism: 17th and 18th Centuries, London, 1966, (first edition, 1951), 353]. Atkins does not mention any of the other essays and in fact merely writes the stock response (i.e., when Beattie is mentioned at all). He cites, for example, Beattie’s statement that readers should be warned “against too great an indulgence in novel-reading.” This is, of course, a valid point, for the opinion was shared by many of Beattie’s contemporaries. In a word Atkins at least hints at the representative value in the essays. The silence of other critics is less excusable.
as I shall show, one may find innumerable similarities to Wordsworth’s criticism in the essays of James Beattie (1735–1803), Professor of moral Philosophy and Logic at Marischal College in Aberdeen. In fact Beattie’s essays on poetry and music, imagination, the Spenserian Stanza, the use of natural objects in the poetic landscape, and the like, demonstrate the lack of wisdom in critics who ignore or deride pre-Romantic critical writings as irrelevant to the growth of Romanticism. For in containing ample proof that many so-called Romantic ideas and trends were in popular circulation long before the Romantic poets and critics adopted and adapted them, Beattie’s essays prompt one to suggest that perhaps they exerted a seminal influence on the evolution of Romanticism.

There is no doubt that Beattie’s essays were widely-read, for he seems to have been the most popular Scottish writer of the time. He was “held . . . forth as the great philosopher of his generation” because An Essay on the Nature and Immutability of Truth, in Opposition to Sophistry and Scepticism (1770) was almost universally believed to have refuted the writings of David Hume and other metaphysicians. And when the first canto of The Minstrel; or, the Progress of Genius appeared in 1771 there was general amazement that so profound a philosopher could also write great poetry. Beattie therefore seemed to be the harbinger of a new age of enlightenment and culture; he was in fact regarded well into the nineteenth century as the outstanding poet, philosopher, literary critic, Christian apologist, and writer on the education of youth of his time.

2Dr. Johnson’s reaction is typical of most philosophers, clergymen, writers, periodical reviewers, politicians, noblemen and commoners. He believes that “Beattie has confuted [Hume]” (Boswell, The Life of Samuel Johnson, Oxford, 1950, v, 273) because “there is in [the Essay on Truth] a depth of reasoning and a splendour of language which make it one of the first-rate productions of the age” (Margaret Forbes, Beattie and His Friends, Westminster, 1904, 79). The book’s popularity is seen in the fact that almost twenty editions appeared between 1770 and 1800, with many more later.
4A reviewer in Blackwood’s Magazine, for instance, writes that in 1812 “Beattie was the man of highest and most deserved reputation” (xvi (August, 1824), 162).
tion as the leading philosopher and poet in the mid-1770s created a constant demand for more books. On 1 January 1768, for example, Dr. Gregory wrote to him that "every thing relating to the "Belles Lettres" is read; or pretended to be read," indicating the great desire for critical writing about literature and the need for enlightened taste in instructing the reading public—all of which, it was urged by many, Beattie could supply.

He responded by revising several of his university lectures and publishing them in 1776—*Essays on Poetry and Music* and *An Essay on Laughter and Ludicrous Composition*; and in 1873, as part of *Dissertations Moral and Critical, Of Memory and Imagination, On Fable and Romance, and Illustrations on Sublimity*. These very successful lectures gained him a phenomenal reputation as a critic. On the publication of *Dissertations*, for instance, a reviewer

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2. (Edinburgh, 1776). All quotations are from this edition, hereafter referred to as Essays.
3. (London, 1783). All quotations are from this edition, hereafter referred to as Dissertations.

The universities were probably the most influential agents in this great period of Scottish letters. Almost all the best-known writers were professors and they catered for the growing desire for self-improvement by adapting their courses of study to changing trends, by teaching their students to write a simple and direct style, and by cultivating their taste and feelings on all aspects and problems of human life. They thus helped to create in Scotland an interested and informed reading public: "We have the testimony of a succession of eminent men, to the effect that the chairs of mental philosophy taken along with the essay-writing which the professors . . . demanded . . . sent forth a body of youth capable of thinking, and of expressing their thoughts in a clear and orderly manner" (James McCosh, *The Scottish Philosophy*, London, 1875, 268). Beattie's critical essays provide an excellent example of this influence. By all accounts he was an outstanding teacher, who developed his literary bent to the point of gaining fame as a writer and of giving the longest, most comprehensive and inspiring course of rhetoric and belles-lettres in the eighteenth century (See my article, "James Beattie and the Eighteenth-Century University", *The Aberdeen University Review*, Autumn, 1971, 174-85). Over the years he wrote and rewrote his lectures and published many of them in the hope of improving the taste and judgment of the reading public. In fact the essays were admired because they were college lectures. William Rose, for instance, in reviewing *Dissertations*, sees Beattie's practical rules which he mingles with his critical statements "as a valuable part of the work, and heartily [wishes] that the instructors
wrote in the London Magazine: “The reputation which Dr. Beattie has so deservedly acquired as a writer will not be lessened by these dissertations. . . . Few writers, indeed, appear to be more desirous of promoting . . . literature than Dr. Beattie, and there are very few who possess, in so considerable degree, the happy talent of blending critical knowledge with useful and practical truths.”10 A year later William Cowper was enthusiastic over his “critical researches” which were the “most agreeable and amiable” he had ever read.11

By 1804 Beattie’s reputation seems to have been well-established: “Dr. Beattie displays a more elegant vein of criticism than any of his predecessors . . . as a critic his merit is conspicuous.”12 Consequently in 1807 Sir Walter Scott was merely echoing a long-held belief in praising Beattie as “the most pleasing and ingenious writer on the Belles Lettres of his day.”13 Beattie’s considerable reputation as a critic and his advocacy of many Romantic notions were, I believe, quite important in preparing the reading public to accept, for example, Lyrical Ballads and Wordsworth’s views in the 1800 Preface. But it was not far into the nineteenth century, one suspects, before Wordsworth, Coleridge, and the others were given full credit as the originators of ideas propogated by Beattie, so that he was by then denied any influence on English letters. Thus by 1829 John Wilson’s (Christopher North) disgust and nationalistic pride moved him to write that up to his time Beattie was “the best writer on Literature and the Fine Arts Britain ever produced—full of feeling and full of genius.”14 Such extravagant praise is difficult to

of youth . . . would imitate Dr. Beattie in teaching their pupils to act as well as to speculate, and to conduct themselves with honour, probity, and resolution in the different departments of life” (The Monthly Review, 69 (July, 1783), 31.

1052 (July, 1783), 50.
13The Edinburgh Review, 10 (April, 1807), 199. Scotsmen were more effusive in praising Beattie than were Englishmen. Nevertheless Scott’s remarks seem a proper balance in view of the lavish adulation of Alexander Bower: “… upon subjects of criticism or polite learning in general, Beattie’s opinions have long been considered oracular and decisive” (An Account of the Life and Writings of James Beattie, London, 1804, 223).
14Blackwood’s Magazine, 25 (April, 1829), 539.
support, of course, but it does indicate the need to give Beattie credit where it is due.

_The Minstrel_ undoubtedly helped considerably to prepare eighteenth-century readers for the kind of literary essays Beattie published to satisfy their demands. For the poem strikes the same balance between the imitation and crystallization of earlier models and trends and the suggestion of a new visionary view of man and nature now almost entirely associated with later Romanticism. The poem is in fact the first deliberate attempt in English to trace the development of the poet's own mind and imagination as affected by education, custom and nature. The hero of the poem, the minstrel Edwin, is therefore Beattie himself shown in the setting of his vividly re-created adventures with nature near the rivers, valleys and rugged seacoast of eastern Scotland. The new Romantic point of view of the poem is considerable in its own right, especially in its emphasis upon the importance of nature, which can bring supreme blessings to man:

The gentle Muses haunt the silvan reign;
Where thro' wild groves at eve the lonely swain
Enraptur'd roams, to gaze on Nature's charms.  
(I, iv)

Not only does Beattie imbue the poem's landscape with greater prominence and imaginative insight than earlier poets, but also he explicitly assigns to nature much greater significance than it gets in earlier nature-poetry. Beattie's claim arises in a deliberate attempt to show a contrast to and to counteract the popular theme of the vanity of human wishes:

O how canst thou renounce the boundless store
Of charms which Nature to her votary yields!
The warbling woodland, the resounding shore,
The pomp of groves, and garniture of fields;
All that the genial ray of morning gilds,

15 "... in Edwin, I have given... a picture of myself, as I was in my younger days... I have made him take pleasure in the scenes in which I took pleasure, and entertain sentiments similar to those, of which, even in my early youth, I had repeated experience. The scenery of a mountainous country, the ocean, the sky, thoughtfulness, and retirement, and sometimes melancholy objects and ideas, had charms in my eyes, even when I was a school boy..." (Forbes, 1, 267).

And all that echoes to the song of even,  
All that the mountain’s sheltering bosom shields,  
And all the dread magnificence of Heaven,  
O how canst thou renounce, and hope to be forgiven!  (I, ix)

Beattie's personal belief in instinctive and instantaneous impulses becomes in *The Minstrel* a sacramental view of nature, showing a moral power in natural objects: "These charms shall work thy soul's eternal health,/And love, and gentleness, and joy impart" (I, x). This new kind of poetic vision inspires many fine Romantic images and lines:

Oft when the winter storm had ceas'd to rave,  
He roam'd the snowy waste at even, to view  
The cloud stupendious, from th' Atlantic wave  
High-towering, sail along th' horizon blue:  
Where, midst the changeful scenery, ever new,  
Fancy a thousand wondrous forms describes,  
More wildly great than ever pencil drew,  
Rocks, torrents, gulfs, and shapes of giant size,  
And glittering cliffs on cliffs, and fiery ramparts rise.  (I, liii)

Beattie's sensitivity to natural beauty is evident in the eager anticipation and close observation in many such lines in the poem. It is clear in fact that the development of nature-poetry was aided and enriched by Beattie's belief in the salutary effect of nature on man and by his own enthusiastic response to nature.

The great emphasis in *The Minstrel* on the power of nature to shape character is stressed also in his essays. His theory of sympathy, for instance, while merely echoing Adam Smith's *Theory of Moral Sentiments* (1759), called wide attention to important notions about the emotional response to art, and probably shaped significantly current taste, thus preparing the way for Wordsworth and others to emphasize the "moral" influence of nature on human sensibility. Beattie's best-known essay in his lifetime, *An Essay on Poetry*, provides even better examples in its descriptions of natural scenes. The highlands of Scotland, for instance, are described as

a picturesque, but in general a melancholy country. Long tracts of mountainous desert, covered with dark heath, and often obscured by misty weather; narrow vallies, thinly inhabited, and bounded by precipices re-sounding with the fall of torrents; a soil so rugged, and a climate so dreary, as in many parts to admit neither the amusement of pasturage nor the labours of agriculture; the mournful dashing of waves along the firths and
lakes that intersect the country; the portentous noises which every change of the wind, and every increase and diminution of the waters, is apt to raise, in a lonely region, full of echoes, and rocks, and caverns; the grotesque and ghastly appearance of such a landscape by the light of the moon:—objects like these diffuse a gloom over the fancy, which may be compatible enough with occasional and social merriment, but cannot fail to tincture the thoughts of a native in the hours of silence and solitude [Essays, 181-2].

Some of the southern provinces of Scotland, on the other hand, "present a very different prospect. Smooth and lofty hills covered with verdure; clear streams winding through long and beautiful valleys; trees produced without culture, here straggling or simple, and there crowding into little groves and bowers;—with other circumstances peculiar to the districts... render them fit for pasturage, and favourable to romantic leisure and tender passions" (Essays, 186). A final example is Beattie's claim that

persons of lively imagination, immured in deep solitude, and surrounded with the stupendous scenery of clouds, precipices, and torrents... dream, even when they think themselves awake, of those few striking ideas with which their lonely lives are diversified; of corpses, funeral processions, and other objects of terror; or of marriage, and the arrival of strangers, and such like matters of more agreeable curiosity. Let it be observed also, that the ancient highlanders of Scotland had hardly any other way of supporting themselves, than by hunting, fishing, or war, professions that are continually exposed to fatal accidents. And hence, no doubt, additional horrors would often haunt their solitude, and a deeper gloom overshadow the imagination even in the hardest native (Essays, 182-5).

These kinds of prose description published for their own sake are not to be found in eighteenth-century criticism before Beattie. And they anticipate by over thirty years Wordsworth's attempts to show the effects of landscape on the mind in his Guide to the Lakes (1810). But of greater significance is the expression in such pas-

17 It is true that there were accounts of natural scenes written earlier in the age; Gray's well-known letters describing the Grand Chartreuse and his tour of the Lakes are perhaps the best examples. But it was Beattie who first published such descriptive passages as legitimate parts of public literary essays. Beattie was probably encouraged to do so by the inclusion of some of Gray's descriptions in Mason's biography of Gray in 1775, although his own descriptions had been written years earlier (1762). It is interesting that William Forbes's biography cites Mason's book as the authority for the use of much quotation from letters loosely connected by editorial comment.
sages of Beattie's vividly expressed, sympathetic involvement with man and nature and of the brooding sense of gloomy dreaming which pervades the landscape and controls the imagination. Clearly *The Minstrel* and the *Essay* were prominent in reflecting many current notions, such as primitivism, sentimentality, and melancholy, in reminding readers of past glories, by alluding to Homer, Shakespeare, Milton, Gray, and others, and in pointing to future possibilities in poetry and criticism. As usual the creative artist (in *The Minstrel*) advanced more rapidly and effectively than the critic (in the *Essay*) in shaping popular literary opinions; yet, as if they were companion-pieces, both exerted significant influence in laying the foundations of Romanticism.

A good example of the seminal effect of Beattie's criticism is its direct and important influence on Robert Burns's attempts to unite poetry and music. With dramatic suddenness, Beattie's *An Essay on Poetry and Music* revived wide interest in the problem which had long been consigned to the theorists by serious critics who charged that most unions in the age were vulgar and unskilled. The *Essay* is thus the culmination of the long debate over the conditions and principles which might best unite poetry and music, showing the complexity of the problem as it forces the critic to draw upon new developments such as the notion of music as a means of communication and the theory of the association of ideas. Beattie's basis for argument is an accurate estimate of the current attitude towards the two arts:

Is not good music set to bad poetry as unexpressive, and therefore as absurd, as good poetry set to bad music, or as harmonious language without meaning? Yet the generality of musicians appear to be indifferent in regard to this matter. If the sound of the words be good, or the meaning of particular words agreeable; if there be a competency of hills and rills, doves and loves, fountains and mountains, with a tolerable collection of garlands and lambkins, nymphs and cupids, *bergerets* and *tortorellas*, they are not solicitous about sense or elegance (*Essays*, 162–3).

It would seem that for a purist like Beattie the situation is hopeless. But new knowledge can bring new attitudes, Beattie believes, and so develops his argument and describes the great possibilities he sees, leading to the firm statement that "Poetry is the most immediate and most accurate interpreter of Music" (*Essays*, 161). When poetry and music are well united, therefore, we can "expect pathos, senti-
ment, and melody, and in a word every gratification that the tuneful art can bestow" (Essays, 166). In fact, after such a union, music is even capable "of being improved into an instrument of virtue, as well as of pleasure" (Essays, 167).

Beattie’s fresh, forceful approach to this difficult problem brought joy and hope to his fellow Scot, Burns, who admired him as the most distinguished Scottish writer prominent in English letters and thus paid him several flattering tributes in print. Burns was particularly interested in his views on Scottish pastoral music in the Essay on Poetry and Music. Consequently Burns, Beattie and George Thomson collaborated on a collection of Scotch airs: Beattie was to submit songs in manuscript and rewrite his remarks on pastoral music as an introduction to the volume, while Burns was to "draw up an appendix to the Dr’s essays [itself a treasure], containing [his] stock of anecdotes, &c of our Scots Airs & Songs." 18

Beattie’s ill-health and Burns’s death thwarted these plans, but their letters on the proposal show clearly that Burns regarded Beattie as an inspiring authority. Certainly the Essay has many ideas about the union of poetry and music realized in practice by Burns. There is Beattie’s authoritative statement that Scottish music arose from the native folk, “who actually felt the sentiments and affections whereof it is so very expressive” (Essays, 189) and was not an importation from the Continent as was widely believed. One can imagine Burns’s nationalistic pride swelling at such a declaration, and his enthusiasm over Beattie’s emphasis on the virtue of tender feelings in song and his thoughts about the “wild irregularities” of ancient “fragments” (Essays, 189). But Beattie’s insistence that music “never appears to the best advantage but with poetry for its interpreter” (Essays, 129) must have struck him as the most important critical statement ever written about the two arts. This principle of the ability of poetry to interpret music is applied deliberately by Burns in his songs.19

Beattie was one of the most important pre-Coleridgean critics of the imagination, standing supreme with William Duff in assigning much greater powers to imagination than earlier writers. While

19James Kinsley agrees that Beattie’s influence on Burns was great. See "The Music of the Heart", Renaissance and Modern Studies, VIII (1964), 5–52, especially 36–43.
Beattie’s *Of Imagination* seems mostly copied from Duff’s *Essay on Original Genius* (1767), it nevertheless gave much greater publicity to the developing concept of imagination, while strengthening the trend by strenuously arguing against earlier statements on the topic. Beattie disagrees with Addison, for instance, that sight alone “furnishes the Imagination with its ideas” (*Dissertations*, 73). He claims that Addison’s expression is too loose in seeming to use idea and image synonymously: “. . . we cannot have a single image in the fancy, that did not make its first entrance through the sight” (quoted in *Dissertations*, 73). This in nonsense, Beattie claims, for it denies imaginative power to blind persons, and cites the Scottish poet, Thomas Blacklock, who had lost his sight at five months, but who is a very imaginative writer. Beattie tries also to refute Hume’s notion that memory and imagination may be distinguished “according to the liveliness or faintness of the ideas suggested by the one, or by the other” (*Dissertations*, 6).

Beattie disagrees also with some contemporaries, such as Burke, Gerard, and Kames, over the scope of imaginative activity. Like them he follows Hobbes and Locke in assuming that the imagination is governed by the laws of association, but unlike them he investigates further possibilities, claiming finally that the imagination has two important functions, based on the way ideas are associated in the mind. Its first role is the conceiving of ideas “as they are in themselves without any view of their reality,” and the second is the creation of new forms from the ideas and notions derived from experience. Even though he had started this general account of imagination by stating that “Imagination and Fancy are not perfectly synonymous” (72), at this point he ascribes both descriptions to “the Imagination or Fancy” (74), while seeming to contradict himself by emphasizing the “combining power” of the second role as more important.

Years later in publishing Volume I of *Elements of Moral Science* (1790), he corrected this discrepancy in summarizing his essay on imagination: “Imagination employed in its more trivial exertions is often called Fancy” (104). In assigning the role of the conceiving of ideas as they really are to fancy and the creation of new forms to imagination, Beattie is merely echoing the distinction between the two powers of the mind which had been perceived vaguely throughout the Neo-classic Age and which got its first distinctive crystallization in Duff’s *Essay*. 
Thus it is clear that long before Coleridge's celebrated definition, the terms fancy and imagination were not always used synonymously, as Coleridge seemed to think. In fact Beattie's remarks show that the distinction was widely-circulated while Coleridge was still a child. Even though fancy and imagination are often the same, Beattie writes, sometimes they perform differently. They are therefore names for the same faculty; but imagination is applied to its more solemn use; "A witty author has a lively Fancy; but a sublime poet is said to possess vast Imagination" (72). It seems clear that Coleridge's famous distinction between fancy and imagination is little more than a reiteration of the common eighteenth-century notion as it was preserved and explained by Beattie and elaborated on by Beattie's disciple, Dugald Stewart.20

Since The Minstrel was responsible for the sudden revival of interest in Spenser, Beattie's critical remarks on the stanza were particularly influential, especially on Byron. Beattie's first public statements were contained in the Preface to Canto I (1771) and show the caution of a conscious innovator not unlike Wordsworth's tentative claims and proposals in the 1800 Preface. The deliberate apology for choosing the form, for instance, indicates the disrepute it had gained and the calculated risk in using it. One senses behind every statement the sure knowledge that it will be attacked. The parting shot is typical of Beattie's prepared defence: "What some critics have remarked, of its uniformly growing at last tiresome to the ear, will

*For a more complete discussion of this topic see J. Bullitt and W. J. Bate, "Distinctions between Fancy and Imagination in Eighteenth-Century English Criticism," Modern Language Notes, LX (January, 1945), 8-15. The conclusion reached by Bullitt and Bate was judiciously cautious for the time: "The distinction, at all events, had attained sufficient currency to warrant the assumption that Coleridge's was by no means unique; considering the assimilative character of his mind, it is difficult to believe that his distinction was untouched by the external influence which was at hand to direct it" (15). The fact is that Coleridge "was certainly acquainted . . . with Beattie and especially Stewart; and . . . the parallel between Stewart's and Coleridge's distinction is close enough to argue a direct influence" (14). Since Norman Fruman has irrefutably demonstrated the incredible extent of Coleridge's plagiarisms, it now seems a safe assumption that Coleridge's definition of fancy and imagination is probably entirely a deliberate appropriation of the well-known distinction of Beattie's time (See Coleridge, The Damaged Archangel, George Braziller, New York, 1971).
be found to hold true, only when the poetry is faulty in other respects” (vii).

Beattie thus tried to prepare the way for a reasonable hearing against enormous odds. But the universal praise the poem received now enables one to pass over Beattie's fears of failure and concentrate on what is really valuable in the Preface. For it shows Beattie's excitement over the possibilities he saw in using the stanza. He therefore sets out “to imitate Spenser in the measure of his verse, and in the harmony, simplicity, and variety of his composition”, but he avoids "antique expressions", admitting only a few "old words where they seemed to suit the subject" to make the poem "intelligible to a reader of English poetry." He chooses "to write in so difficult a measure" because it pleases his ear and seems "from its Gothic structure and original, to bear some relation to the subject and spirit of the Poem." "It admits both simplicity and magnificence of sound and language, beyond any other stanza . . .[and] allows the sententiousness of the couplet, and sometimes too the more complex modulation of blank verse" (vii).

It is interesting to compare these public statements with some private remarks written in a letter to Dr. Blacklock on 22 September 1766, in which he reports that he has written one hundred and fifty lines of The Minstrel and is surprised that he is having so little difficulty with "the structure of that complicated stanza": "not long ago I began a poem in the style and stanza of Spenser, in which I propose to give full scope to my inclinations, and be either droll or pathetic, descriptive or sentimental, tender or satirical, as the humour strikes me; for, if I mistake not, the measure which I have adopted admits equally of all these kinds of composition" (Forbes, I, 113–4).

Byron quotes this statement in the Preface to the first edition of Cantos I and II of Childe Harold's Pilgrimage (1812) as his authority for attempting the stanza, indicating the powerful appeal of Beattie's influence. Byron clearly found his enthusiasm contagious, as he continues to tell Blacklock that he has always been fond of the stanza, for "I think it the most harmonious that ever was contrived. It admits of more variety of pause than either the couplet or the alternate rhyme; and it concludes with a pomp and majesty of sound, which, to my ear, is wonderfully delightful. It seems also very well adapted to the genius of our language, which, from its irregularity of inflexion and number of monosyllables, abounds in
diversified terminations, and consequently renders our poetry susceptible of an endless variety of legitimate rhymes" (Forbes, I, 114). The Spenserian Stanza thus found its best eighteenth-century theorist and practitioner in Beattie.

The increasing tension between Neo-classic and Romantic attitudes is seen in Beattie’s use of science. His writing in fact reflects the tendency of the time to see in the precept and example of the scientific spirit of inquiry a means of improving on, or even replacing, earlier critical approaches to literature. Beattie seemed to think more and more that criticism could be improved to the extent that it might be called perfect, or “scientific.” One sees in his criticism therefore an interesting and probably typical response of the time to the ageless yearning after permanence in art and thus rules to judge it. Consequently, in drawing frequent illustrations from science and in accepting only those rules arrived at by rationalistic analysis, he attempts to state final criteria of literary judgment. His Essay on Poetry, for instance, tries to prove by fact and experience that critical taste can be stable and to name the distinguishing characteristics of poetry. As a result he gives the terms reason, nature and truth as the main criteria of excellence, leading to his proof of the long-standing maxim that the poet is to imitate nature in a reasonable way if he is to glimpse truth.

While one may call Beattie’s applications of the scientific method to criticism misguided, or even naive, it is more useful to recognize them as attempts to maintain the stability that had been striven for in Neo-classic literature and criticism since the Restoration. Much of his criticism thus shows him trying to ease the tension between the “old” and the “new” which confronted him as a critic. His division of poetry into seven types with several subdivisions, for example, indicates that the doctrine of literary kinds was probably still as strong as it had been in the time of Dryden and Pope.

And yet the time was almost at hand when Wordsworth in writing of the poet and the scientist in the 1800 Preface was to make the sudden yet conclusive statement about the relationship between literature and science. For him there is no difference between the “truth” of the poet and the “truth” of the scientist. “The knowledge both of the poet and the man of science is pleasure”; only the methods of arriving at it differ: “The Man of Science seeks truth as a remote and unknown benefactor; he cherishes and loves it in his
solitude: the Poet, singing a song in which human beings join with him, rejoices in the presence of truth as our visible friend and hourly companion." 21 In spite of shortsightedness Beattie's willingness to choose scientific examples in illustrating literary principles must have helped to prepare the way for the acceptance of Wordsworth's views.

One of the clearest indications of the value and representative quality of Beattie's criticism is the extent to which it anticipates Wordsworth. There are in fact many similarities between their ideas about literary theory and practice, indicating that in shaping the attitudes of his readers Wordsworth called on many more notions already implanted in their minds than has been realized. Beattie's doctrine of sympathy—the power which enables one to appreciate and enjoy art—is prophetic of Wordsworth's poet who finds everywhere "objects that immediately excite in him sympathies . . . accompanied by an over-balance of enjoyment" (Works, 738). In fact for both critics the power of sympathy permeates the poetic process, affecting even inanimate objects. "We sympathize . . . even with things inanimate," Beattie writes (Essays, 195) and Wordsworth echoes: "Things inanimate speak to the social reason's inner senses, With inarticulate language." 22 The fact is that both critics cover the same ground and arrive at much the same conclusions. A good example of their overall affinities may be seen in their lists of the powers of the poetic mind:

Beattie's List (Of Imagination) Wordworth's List (1815 Preface)
1. distinct apprehension 1. Observation and Description
2. sympathy, or sensibility of heart 2. Sensibility
3. acuteness of taste 3. Reflection
4. a lively and correct imagination 4. Imagination and Fancy
5. Judgment 5. Invention
6. Judgment

Both critics reacted strenuously against the elaborate diction of Neo-classic poetry. Wordsworth delivered a severe shock to so-called "poetical language" in the 1800 Preface: "... the language of a large portion of every good poem . . . must necessarily, except with reference to metre, in no respect differ from that of good prose . . .

22 Quoted in W. J. Bate, From Classic to Romantic (London, 1946), 145.
some of the most interesting parts of the best poems will be found to be strictly the language of prose when prose is well written” (Works, 736). Many readers of the Preface in 1800 were perhaps less shocked by this than is now supposed, for they were well aware of Beattie’s opinion in the Essay on Poetry: “Many passages there are of exquisite poetry, wherein not a single phrase occurs, that might not be used in prose” (Essays, 247). Consequently Beattie and Wordsworth both conclude that rhythm is the only characteristic feature of poetry. “Prose and Verse are opposites, but Prose and Poetry may be consistent,” Beattie writes (Dissertations, 518) and Wordsworth claims that the “antithesis to Prose is Metre” (Works, 736n). The poet must therefore search for “the most appropriate language,” which for Wordsworth is that “really used by men” (Works, 734) and for Beattie “the universal language of men,” for “common people speak and look what they think . . . [and] affect no sympathies which they do not feel” (Essays, 287).

Wordsworth’s views on the composition of poetry are well-known. For him the poet is a man of extraordinary sensibility, enthusiasm, and tenderness, who recollects emotion in tranquility and recaptures its spontaneous overflow in poems. The language which is appropriate to these “passions . . . must necessarily be dignified and variegated, and alive with metaphors and figures” (Works, 736–7). Beattie’s views, given in his Essay on Poetry in 1776 but written in 1762, are remarkably similar. When the “pathos of composition” is on him, the poet cultivates “a peculiar liveliness of fancy and sensibility of heart,” which heightens his excitement and pleasure, “as long at least as he employs himself in framing of words for them” (Essays, 57). This process directs the poet’s thoughts and gives “a peculiar colour to his language,” awakening “correspondent sympathies in the reader” (Essays, 56). Proper images and figures consequently present themselves because they are so “natural . . . that it would be impossible to imitate the language without them” (Essays, 264).

It is clear from The Minstrel and the Essay on Poetry that Beattie agrees in general with Wordsworth’s beliefs concerning the subject-matter of poetry. Both stress the natural world with its ability to mould character and both try to preserve the “particular” while depicting “general” nature. Wordsworth’s poet, rejoicing “more than other men in the spirit of life that is in him,” looks for “passions and volitions” similar to his own “in the goings-on of the
Universe" and is "habitually impelled to create them where he does not find them" (Works, 737). Beattie too believes that "our affections are . . . the medium through which we may be said to survey ourselves and everything else" (Dissertations, 521). Wordsworth sees the universe as dynamic and organic, while Beattie writes that "everything in nature is complex in itself, and bears innumerable relations to other things" (Essays, 52). For both critics the imagination, judgment and moral sense combine to create poetry which shows man as the main preoccupation. Beattie anticipates almost exactly Wordsworth's statement that the poet's "passions and thoughts and feelings are the general passions and thoughts and feelings of man" (Works, 738): " . . . the true poet addresses himself to the passions and sympathies of mankind, which, till his own be raised, he cannot hope to do with success (Essays, 287). But when he is successful the poet shows that "nothing in nature so powerfully touches our hearts, or gives so great variety of exercise to our moral and intellectual faculties, as man" (Essays, 36). And Wordsworth considers "the mind of man as naturally the mirror of the fairest and most interesting properties of nature" (Works, 738).

While it cannot be proven that Beattie's criticism influenced Wordsworth directly, it is evident that there are remarkable similarities in attitude ideas and aims. These certainly indicate in Beattie sound critical taste and judgment, a significant awareness of and influence on the developing trends of the time, and a considerable ability to give popular expression to current notions and perhaps even to be the originator of some of them. His fresh approach to criticism, with its many parallels to Wordsworth's statements and along with the seminal influence of The Minstrel on Wordsworth's poetry, certainly constitute an achievement that one must call original.

On the other hand, the prose of the other Romantic critics shows little direct reflection of Beattie's ideas. The reason for this, however, is clear; the fact that Wordsworth was the great pioneer of Romantic criticism in his many pronouncements in the 1800 Preface and elsewhere enabled the others to assume public knowledge of such ideas and thus to get on with the important task at hand, the discussion of current poetry. What has been lost sight of is the extent to which Beattie and others had prepared readers for the acceptance of the claims of Wordsworth and the others. In this sense, one may claim
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considerable importance for Beattie's public instruction in literature and criticism.

Beattie's essays and The Minstrel are in fact a paradigm of the relationship of Romantic criticism to Romantic poetry. One is struck, for instance, by the similarity of his strong didactic strain to the efforts of the Romantic poets to train a fit audience to understand them. All of Wordsworth's essays, for example, show this, from the early tentative submission to the public of his theories and arguments in the 1800 Preface to the later didactic pronouncements of the great moral teacher. Shelley's A Defence of Poetry also follows the pattern, so evident in Beattie's essays, of reliance on the best of past critical statements and poems as the basis for allowing innovation and change. It is significant that in his time what Beattie wrote was almost universally believed in and considered important; and his enormous popularity must therefore be taken as a sign of great influence on his readers.23

One can only wonder how much more opposition Wordsworth and the others would have met had Beattie never published his essays. At any rate Shelley's comment at the end of his Defence about his great contemporaries being "sincerely astonished at [the] manifestations" of their "comprehensive and all penetrating" understanding of human nature helps one to see why Beattie's criticism was so prophetic of and a preparation for Romantic criticism and poetry. For "it is less their spirit than the spirit of the age" which supplied "the electric life" burning within their words. Since Beattie sensed this spirit in his youthful experiences with nature, recreated it in The Minstrel and personified it in Edwin, it is clear that his essays also reflected

23Beattie's fine Addisonian prose-style was a great factor in his success. In fact he was regarded as one of the great stylists of the time. Dr. Johnson, for instance, saw in his prose "a depth of reasoning and a splendour of language" (See note 3), while William Cowper regarded Beattie as the only writer "whose critical . . . researches are diversified and embellished by a poetic imagination, that makes even the driest subject, and the leanest, a feast for an epicure in books. He is so much at his ease too, that his own character appears in every page, and which is very rare, we see not only the writer, but the man: and that man so gentle, so well-tempered, so happy in his religion, and so humane in his philosophy, that it is necessary to love him, if one has any sense of what is lovely" (Cowper, II, 20-21). Clearly the presence in the essays of Beattie's personality as a wise, trusted teacher inspired a marked confidence in, and wide adoption of, his principles and opinions.
and strengthened the critical attitudes which accompanied the growing Romantic mode.

The total effect of his criticism was in fact not unlike Dryden's in showing a fine taste for literature and the strong desire to share the joy perceived in great writing. Like Dryden, mainly through the power of his own likes and enthusiastic response, he seems to have given focus and a sense of direction to criticism when it badly needed clarification of its role. As such Beattie is one of the soundest and most important critics of the time.

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