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The Poetic Bridge in the Nineteenth Century

The image of the bridge is often employed as a motif for travel. Bridges are built to be crossed, and have come to symbolise journeys and activity. This paper will examine the way in which bridges were conceived in nineteenth century poetry, and will argue that bridges can have a complex dual function in such works: firstly, as sites of static observation, providing a viewing-place for critical reflection and a space for the development of the romantic imagination; and secondly, as sites of temporal crossing, offering a symbolic crossing-point from the present to the past and from reality to myth. This dual function of static reflection and active connectivity with the past makes the bridge a vital literary image for nineteenth century poets. Moreover, the murky underside of the bridge provides an interesting comparison to the more romantic life on top of the bridge, and the author will consider the peripheries of the bridge as sites of tragedy.

The author will examine the text of William Wordsworth's 'Composed upon Westminster Bridge, September 1802,' and use this as an entry point for an exploration of later nineteenth century poetry. The discussion will focus in particular on Alfred Lord Tennyson's 'Godiva' and, as a transatlantic comparison, Henry Wadsworth Longfellow's 'The Bridge,' in addition to Dante Gabriel Rossetti's 'Found' and Thomas Hood's 'The Bridge of Sighs.'