Romanticism in Europe - A Study of Romantic Poets with Special Reference to William Wordsworth’s the Lyrical Ballads

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Introduction

Romanticism was an artistic, literary, and intellectual movement that originated in Europe toward the end of the 18th century. Various dates are given for the Romantic period in British literature, but here the publishing of Lyrical Ballads in 1798 is taken as the beginning, and the crowning of Queen Victoria in 1837 as its end, even though, for example, William Wordsworth lived until 1850 and both Robert Burns and William Blake published before 1798. The writers of this period, however, "did not think of themselves as 'Romantics'" and the term was first used by critics of the Victorian period. Romanticism arrived later in other parts of the English-speaking world. William Blake is considered a seminal figure in the history of both the poetry and visual arts of the Romantic Age. The Romantic Movement at the end of the 18th century and the beginning of the 19th century was a deliberate and sweeping revolt against the literacy principles of the Age of Reason. Just as Dryden and Pope had rejected the romantic tradition of the Elizabethans as crude and irregular and had adopted classical or more correctly neo-classical principles of French literature in their writings, so now Wordsworth and Coleridge, in their turn, rejected the neo-classical principles in favour of the romantic. In doing so they were simply reverting to the Elizabethan or the first romantic age in English literature. Now what is it that distinguishes Classic from Romantic? Simply put classical writing is characterized by reason or commonsense in matter, expressed in a restrained style-style, that is to say, which has order, proportion, and finish. Romantic writing, on the other hand, is characterized by Imagination in matter, expressed in a style more or less free of restraint-a style, that is to say, which may be simple or grand, picturesque or passionate, depending on the mood or temperament of the writer. In other words, classicism subordinates matter to form; romanticism subordinates form of matter. Classicism stands for regimentation, regulation, authority; Romanticism for individuality, informality, freedom.

Nature of Romanticism

Defining the nature of Romanticism may be approached from the starting point of the primary importance of the free expression of the feelings of the artist. The importance the Romantics placed on emotion is summed up in the remark of the German painter Caspar David Friedrich that "the artist's feeling is his law". To William Wordsworth, poetry should begin as "the spontaneous overflow of powerful feelings," which the poet then "recollect[s] in tranquility," evoking a new but corresponding emotion the poet can then mould into art [1]. In order to express these feelings, it was considered that the content of the art needed to come from the imagination of the artist, with as little interference as possible from "artificial" rules dictating what a work should consist of. Samuel Taylor Coleridge and others believed there were natural laws which the imagination, at least of a good creative artist, would unconsciously follow through artistic inspiration if left alone to do so. As well as rules, the influence of models from other works was considered to impede the creator's own imagination, so that originality was essential. The concept of the genius, or artist who was able to produce his own original work through this process of "creation from nothingness", is key to Romanticism, and to be derivative was the worst sin.[2-3] This idea is often called "romantic originality"[4]. Not essential to Romanticism, but so widespread as to be normative, was a strong belief and interest in the importance of nature. However, this is particularly in the effect of nature upon the artist when he is surrounded by it, preferably alone. In contrast to the usually
very social art of the Enlightenment, Romantics were distrustful of the human world, and tended to believe that a close connection with nature was mentally and morally healthy. Romantic art addressed its audiences with what was intended to be felt as the personal voice of the artist. So, in literature, "much of romantic poetry invited the reader to identify the protagonists with the poets themselves". According to Isaiah Berlin, Romanticism embodied "a new and restless spirit, seeking violently to burst through old and cramping forms, a nervous preoccupation with perpetually changing inner states of consciousness, a longing for the unbounded and the indefinable, for perpetual movement and change, an effort to return to the forgotten sources of life, a passionate effort at self-assertion both individual and collective, a search after means of expressing an unappeasable yearning for unattainable goals."

Robert Burns (1759–1796) was a pioneer of the Romantic movement and after his death he became a cultural icon in Scotland. As well as writing poems, Burns also collected folk songs from across Scotland, often revising or adapting them. His Poems, chiefly in the Scottish Dialect was published in 1786. Among poems and songs of Burns that remain well known across the world are, "Auld Lang Syne", "A Red, Red Rose", "A Man's A Man for A' That", "To a Louse", "To a Mouse", "The Battle of Sherramuir", "Tam o' Shanter" and "Ae Fond Kiss".

The poet, painter, and printmaker William Blake (1757–1827) was one of other early Romantic poets. Largely unrecognised during his lifetime, Blake is now considered a seminal figure in the history of the poetry and visual arts of the Romantic Age. His prophetic poetry has been said to form "what is in proportion to its merits the least read body of poetry in the English language"[5] but is now considered a seminal figure in the history of both the poetry and visual arts of the Romantic Age. Considered mad by contemporaries for his idiosyncratic views, Blake is held in high regard by later critics for his expressiveness and creativity, and for the philosophical and mystical undercurrents within his work. Among his most important works are Songs of Innocence (1789) and Songs of Experience (1794) "and profound and difficult 'prophecies' " such as Visions of the Daughters of Albion (1793), The First Book of Urizen (1794) and Milton (1804). After Blake, among the earliest Romantics were the Lake Poets, a small group of friends, including William Wordsworth (1770–1850), Samuel Taylor Coleridge (1772–1834), Robert Southey (1774–1843) and journalist Thomas de Quincey (1785–1859). However, at the time Walter Scott (1771–1832) was the most famous poet. Scott achieved immediate success with his long narrative poem The Lay of the Last Minstrel in 1805, followed by the full epic poem Marmion in 1808. The romanticism of Blake consists in the importance he attached to imagination, in his mysticism and symbolism, in his love of liberty, in his humanitarian sympathies, in his idealization of childhood, in the pastoral setting of many of his poems, and in his lyricism.

"Bring me my spear! O clouds, unfold! Bring me my chariot of fire"

The above lines from, 'Jerusalem' amply justifies the point. "Poetry fettered", said Blake, "futters the human race". In theory as well as practice, the Romantic Movement began with the smashing of fetters. In his enthusiastic rage, Blake condemned the verse-forms which had become traditional. He poured scorn upon all that he associated with classicism in art and in criticism.

Wordsworth (1770–1850). Son of a lawyer and land agent to Lord Lonsdale, William Wordsworth was born April 7, 1770 at Cockermouth in the Cumberland highlands. The boy's parents died early, his mother when he was eight and father when he was fourteen. He received his school education at the neighbouring village of Hawkshead. His school days were very happy, spent as they were in great freedom of playing and reading. At seventeen he entered St. John's College, Cambridge. In his third vacation he went with a friend on a walking tour of France. After taking his degree in 1791 he again went to France where he stayed for a year. Like so many of his generation he was very enthusiastic about the French Revolution, but was cured of this later [6]. In 1797 and 1798 he lived in close association with Coleridge, and the result of this friendship was the Lyricall Ballads. After the publication of this book, Wordsworth, his sister Dorothy, and Coleridge visited Germany. Returning home in 1799 he settled with his sister at Grasmere in the lake district, published the second volume of the Lyricall Ballads in 1800, and in 1802 married his cousin Mary Hutchinson.

The Lyrical Ballads

The book that marks the beginning of the Romantic Movement was the Lyrical Ballads [7] produced jointly by Wordsworth and Coleridge and published in 1798. It opens with Coleridge
Rime of Ancient Mariner and closes with Wordsworth’s Lines written above Tintern Abbey. The Ancient Mariner and the Tintern Abbey, however, may be said to contain in germ, all the poetry of the 19th century. Describing the origin of the Lyrical Ballads in his Biographia Literaria Coleridge points out the kinds of poetry the two poets had aimed at. In the poems of Coleridge the characters and incidents “were to be, in part at least, supernatural,” yet possessing such “human interest and a semblance of truth” as “to procure for these shadows of imagination that willing suspension of disbelief for the moment which constitutes poetic faith.” Wordsworth, on the other hand, was to deal with persons and objects of everyday but in such a way as to give them “the charm of novelty” and to excite a feeling analogous to the super—natural, by awakening the mind from “the lethargy of custom and directing it to the loveliness and the wonder of the world before us: an inexhaustible treasure but for which, in consequence of the film of familiarity and selfish solitude, we have eyes, yet see not, ears that hear not, and hearts that neither feel nor understand.” Wordsworth in his Preface to the second edition of the Lyrical Ballads (1800) explains his object thus: “The principal object, then proposed in these poems was to choose incidents and situations from common life, and to relate or describe them throughout, as far as possible, in a selection of language actually used by men, and at the same time, to throw over them a certain colouring of imagination, whereby ordinary things should be presented to the mind in an unusual aspect.” He chose humble and rustic life, he goes on to explain, because in that condition the essential nature of humanity finds a more congenial soil to grow and to express itself more naturally and freely than is possible in the sophisticated atmosphere of town. The aims and ideals of poetry thus set forth show the epoch making character of the Lyrical Ballads. To deal with the super natural — the “shadows of imagination”, to deal to deal with the Nature and rustic life and that too in the colloquial language of the rustics — all this ran counter to the principles and practice of the Augustan school with its insistence upon civilized interests of town life rendered in a formal, stereotyped, gaudy phraseology. The most important point to note in the Romantic manifesto, however, is the emphasis on Imagination. Though working in two different directions — the super — natural and the natural — the two poets were to achieve the desired result through one and the same instrument, that of the imagination. And imagination, not in the narrow eighteenth century sense of “ideas furnished by the senses” but in the larger sense of creative power, of what Coleridge called “the shaping spirit of imagination.”

Coleridge (1772 – 1834). Samuel Taylor Coleridge was born in the small Devonshire town of Ottery St. Mary, was educated at Christ’s Hospital (the famous charity school in Landon) and Jesus College, Cambridge. He ran away from the University and enlisted as a private in a cavalry regiment. Coleridge had published some poems in 1796, but it was only in contact with Wordsworth that he found himself. He lived near Wordsworth and his sister Dorothy nearly six year, first at Nether Stowey (1797 – 98) and then after a year’s stay in Germany (1798 – 99) in the Lake District (1800 – 1803). It was during these six years that he produced most of his enduring poems [8]. Kubla Khan, according to Coleridge’s own account was composed in a dream induced by an anodyne which he had taken because of a slight indisposition. He had been reading the following sentence in Purchas’s Pilgrimage at the moment he fell asleep: “Here the Kubla Khan commanded a palace to be build, and a stately garden there unto. And thus ten miles of fertile ground were enclosed by a wall.” On waking up he took up pen and paper and wrote down the lines as we have them [9]. His further progress was interrupted by a visitor, and when an hour later he resumed writing he could not recollect the remaining lines. The fragment is a chaotic piece produced by the inspiration of the moment, and is notable for the thrilling picture in the concluding lines, of the poet in ecstasy

A damsel with a dulcimer
In a vision once I saw:
It was an Abyssinian maid,
And on her dulcimer she played,
Singing of Mount Abora.
Could I receive within me
Her symphony and song,
To such a delight would win me
That with music loud and long,
I would build that dome in air,

That sunny dome! Those caves of ice!
And all who heard should see them there,
And all should cry, Beware! Beware!
His flashing eyes, his floating hair!
Weave a circle round him thrice,
And close your eyes in holy dread,
For he on honey-dew hath fed,
And drunk the milk of Paradise.

The resemblance of this picture of the inspired poet to Shakespeare’s “The poet’s eye in a fine frenzy rolling” has already been remarked.
Christabel is another fragment which evokes dark superstition, mystery, and horror. It affords no clue as to its meaning or how it Friendship in the Second Part:

   Alas! They had been friends in youth;
   But whispering tongues can poison truth;
   And constancy lives in realms above;
   And life is thorny; with one we love
   Doth work like madness in the brain.
   And thus it chanced, as I divine,
   With Roland and Sir Leonine.

Apart from this gem of sentiment, Christabel is remarkable for its metre, which depends on four accents in each line while the number of syllables may vary from seven to eleven. Scott was so charmed by its music that he adopted it for his Lay of the Last Minstrel.

Scott (1771 – 1832). Sir Walter Scott was born a year after Wordsworth and a year before Coleridge in Edinburgh. The son of a lawyer he was educated at the High School and the University there. He studied law, was called to the bar, and became a professional lawyer, who later obtained two legal appointments. His imagination had been fired in childhood by the romantic tales and legends of feudal Scotland told by his grandmother. His intense love of Scottish history and tradition was stimulated quite early by Percy's Reliques and German romanticism. After some translations and imitations of German ballads, he published in 1802 his Minstrelsy of the Scottish Border, a collection of Scottish ballads together with some of his own. From this he proceeded to his first important original poetical composition The Lay of the Last Minstrel (1805) a metrical romance (a long romantic tale in verse). The metre chosen was that of Coleridge's Christabel. The poem was an immediate success. It was followed by other metrical romances: Marmion (1808), The Lady of the Lake (1810), Rokeby (1813), The Lord of the Isles (1815) and others. Realising even before The Lord of the Isles had appeared, that he had exhausted his poetic vein and that he could not complete with Byron in this field, he turned to his true vocation of a romantic novelist, and published Waverley in 1814 [10].

Byron

George Gordon Byron (1788 – 1824), sixth Lord Byron, was born in London and succeeded to the title at the age of ten on the death of his uncle – ‘the wicked Lord Byron’ – who had sold a great part of the family estates. The poet was the only child of Captain John Byron by his second wife, a Scottish heiress. His first wife was a Marchioness whom he had married after first seducing her and squandering her property. In 1807, he published Hours of Idleness, a collection of poems in heroic couplets, which was severely criticized by the Edinburg Review. Byron retaliated with English Bards and Scotch Reviewers [11] (1799) a vigorous satire in heroic couplets in which he attacked not only Jeffrey, the Scottish editor of the Review, but all poets of the romantic school – Wordsworth, Coleridge, Southey and Scott, while defending Pope and Dryden and their followers like Rogers and Campbell.

Mary Shelley

Shelley is perhaps best known for poems such as Ozymandias, Ode to the West Wind, To a Skylark, Music, When Soft Voices Die, The Cloud, The Masque of Anarchy and Adonais, an elegy written on the death of Keats [12]. Shelley’s early profession of atheism, in the tract "The Necessity of Atheism", led to his expulsion from Oxford and branded him as a radical agitator and thinker, setting an early pattern of marginalization and ostracism from the intellectual and political circles of his time. His close circle of admirers, however, included the most progressive thinkers of the day, including his future father-in-law, philosopher William Godwin. A work like Queen Mab (1813) reveal Shelley, "as the direct heir to the French and British revolutionary intellectuals of the 1790s. Shelley became an idol of the next three or four generations of poets, including important Victorian and Pre-Raphaelite poets such as Robert Browning, and Dante Gabriel Rossetti, as well as later W. B. Yeats. Shelley’s influential poem The Masque of Anarchy (1819) calls for nonviolence in protest and political action. It is perhaps the first modern statement of the principle of nonviolent protest. Many of the main ideas behind the literary movement of Romanticism can be seen in Frankenstein by Mary Shelley. Although the dark motifs of her most remembered work, Frankenstein may not seem to conform to the brighter tones and subjects of the poems of her husband Percy Bysshe Shelley and their contemporaries and friends, William Wordsworth and Samuel Taylor Coleridge, Mary Shelley was a contemporary of the romantic poets. Despite this apparent difference, Mary Shelley was deeply influenced by the romantics, and the reader of Frankenstein can certainly identify a number of characteristics of romanticism in this novel. Some critics have argued that Frankenstein is actually more sophisticated than the prose of other romantic writers, as this novel “initiates a rethinking of romantic rhetoric”. This rethinking is achieved by Shelley’s engaging
and simultaneously challenging the typical romantic tropes which results in the production of a novel that is more complex than we had earlier thought.

**The Romantic Epistemology**

The epistemology of the Romantic or the Expressive theory of art is radically different from the one that underlies the mimetic or the imitative-rationalist aesthetic. The components of the Romantic epistemology are: (i) the active-projective view of human self or mind, (ii) distrust of reason and (iii) individualism. On the mimetic view, human mind is a passive recipient of external impressions and does not in any way modify them. Plato uses a different analogy, but means exactly the same, when he compares the human mind to a piece of wax taking on the impressions of a signet ring. This view of human mind continued to dominate the thinking of the West with minor deviations here and there and squarely suited the empirical worldview of the seventeenth century. Locke described human mind as ‘tabula rusa’ in his *Essay Concerning Human Understanding*. Hartley explained the working of the human mind in mechanical terms through his theory of association of ideas and Hume came out with a more-or-less plausible scientific explanation of the way in which this association of ideas worked. As he wrote in his *Treatise of Human Nature*:

> “The qualities from which this association arises, and by which the mind is after this manner conveyed from one idea to another, are three, viz. Resemblance, Contiguity of time and place, and Cause and Effect.”

In the mimetic view, again, man was important not as an individual but as a member of the human race. All value was attached to what was general and in contrast everything individual was considered special. Reason was regarded as an infallible faculty and the ultimate guide and savior.

The Romantic theory of knowledge is a questioning of this worldview. Human mind or self is not passive but active and projective. It not only modifies what it receives but, in a significant sense, creates it. Man is an individual and autonomous entity, a mysterious reservoir of boundless potential and it is not the general which is most valuable but that which is individual and particular.

**Forms of Poetry**

The diverse elements of a work of art are mingled together, according to the Romantics, by an informing and dominating passion or emotion. Blake, Wordsworth Shelley and Keats express this in their different ways and Coleridge uses a very cogent analogy to explain this. In a letter to Southey he compares the operation of emotion or feeling in a poem with the movement of breeze through the leaves. He believes in mechanism, in the theory of the association of idea, to explain the movement of the leaves without presupposing the existence of the breeze. In *Biographia Literaria*, Coleridge explains how the presence of an emotion in a poem leads to an artistic fusion while its absence spells chaos.

As a result of the Romantic emphasis on subjectivity, individualism, emotion and inspiration of the forms of poetry also underwent a through revaluation. All forms of art are determined by the aesthetic that underlines them. That aesthetic is, in turn, significantly related to its intellectual and socio-cultural background. The Greeks regarded gods as supreme and man as a puppet of fate and attached utmost importance to the reality that lies outside of us. Very naturally, therefore, drama, particularly tragedy, was the highest art form with them. In the post-Renaissance Europe the spirit of quest and adventure not only informed forms of art but also drastically modified them. The pragmatic and mechanical outlook of the neo-classical age effected a corresponding modification in art forms. Epic, prose-satire, comedy of manners and long, didactic, verse ‘essays’ suited the new temperament.

**Some Modernist and Poststructuralist Views of Romanticism**

T.S. Eliot and F.R. Leavis, two of the more influential cities of this century were not much favourably inclined towards the Romantics. One leading New Critic, Cleanth Brooks, in his 1939 book *Modern Poetry and the Tradition* was of the opinion that modern poetry seriously put into question the assumed importance of Romanticism in literary history. He even declared Shelley to be resistant to irony to function as a model for a new poetics. Then came Northrop Frye, a towering figure in twentieth century criticism. He saw in Romanticism a healing energy or a conception of creativity that could unify the mental elements in the creative process. His 1947 study of Blake, *Fearful Symmetry* is a landmark.
Conclusion

The Romantic movement affected most aspects of intellectual life, and Romanticism and science had a powerful connection, especially in the period 1800–40. Many scientists were influenced by versions of the Naturphilosophie of Johann Gottlieb Fichte, Friedrich Wilhelm Joseph von Schelling and George William Friedrich Hegel and others, and without abandoning empiricism, sought in their work to uncover what they tended to believe was a unified and organic Nature. The English scientist Sir Humphry Davy, a prominent Romantic thinker, said that understanding nature required “an attitude of admiration, love and worship, [...] a personal response.” [13] He believed that knowledge was only attainable by those who truly appreciated and respected nature. Self-understanding was an important aspect of Romanticism. It had less to do with proving that man was capable of understanding nature (through his budding intellect) and therefore controlling it, and more to do with the emotional appeal of connecting himself with nature and understanding it through a harmonious co-existence. Imagination, inspiration and organicism are all crucial to Romantic poets. Equal stress is placed on freedom, individualism, emotions, spontaneity, sincerity and authenticity. Distrust of rationality went with this. The inner life mattered more to the Romantics. Theirs was an expressive theory of art. Lyricism dominated the age genre-wise and formal perfection of the neo-classical kind was not sought after by most Romantics. They believed in a kind of transcendentality also and this made the supernatural a fit subject for someone like Coleridge the poet. Liberty, fraternity and equality were valued, the French Revolution being an obvious influence.

References

1. From the Preface to the 2nd edition of Lyrical Ballads, quoted Day, 2
3. Spearing (1987) quote: “Surprising as it may seem to us, living after the Romantic movement has transformed older ideas about literature, in the Middle Ages authority was prized more highly than originality."