

Puissant Smack of French Insurgency on English Romantic Movement

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ABSTRACT

The centuries old French Monarchy collapsed in three years of revolution which transformed the whole European society. The oppressed class significantly supported it. French revolution brought a renaissance of hopes, happiness and equality. This joviality was propagated far and wide by the exceedingly prejudiced romantic poets. William Wordsworth, Samuel Taylor Coleridge, Lord Byron, and Percy Bysshe Shelley were the pro-active romanticists with identical mental wave lengths. Their ideologies influenced not only the European writers but also to the writers worldwide. Literature got rejuvenated with these romantic thoughts and fresh energies which were brought into the society by this Romantic Movement.

This virgin freedom of common people has brought legal system, quality of life and sovereignty of expression. This catalyzed the poet's thoughts and aggravated the fresh and zealous ideas to be brought into the society discarding the practice of singing the praises of monarchs and clergy only in their literary creations. At this juncture the Romantic Movement points out the upheaval of a group of existing poets who wrote, not according to common and doctrinaire standards, but as they independently delighted there are no principles comprehensive and common to all except those of individualism and revolt.

KEYWORDS: Equality, fraternity, imperialism, liberty, philosophical doctrines, revolution.

The French Revolution, which is an outcome of the philosophical doctrines of Rousseau, Voltaire, Turgot, etc as well as of the centuries of political and social tyranny and repression, is a world event rather than a domestic event of France. The demolition of the Bastille fortress by the Paris mob on July 14, 1789, opened a new era in the social, political and literary history of Europe. It is so because it molded the fate of many European nations. According to Albert Hancock, in his book *The French Revolution and the English Poets: a study in historical criticism*, he has narrated

"The French Revolution came, bringing with it the promise of a brighter day, the promise of regenerated man and regenerated earth. It was hailed with joy and acclamation by the oppressed, by the ardent lovers of humanity, by the poets, whose task it is to voice the human spirit."

Equality was the central theme of the revolution. Mankind was conceived of as one brotherhood. The three watch words of French. Revolution, namely Equality, Fraternity and liberty left a powerful impression upon the thoughts, philosophy and politics of Great

Britain and particularly upon the Romantic Movement. Wordsworth, Coleridge, Southey, Shelley and Byron all come under the direct influence of French Revolution, and their works are colored by its democratic ideal and the fervor it generated. For them, it heralded the beginning of a new era, of a golden age for mankind. The sun, the moon, the stars, the sky, nature, man, lumen nature itself assumed a new aspect, as the bell of liberty, fraternity and equality. Hancock writes,

"There is no need to recount here in detail how the French Revolution, at the close of the last century, was the great stimulus to the intellectual and emotional life of the civilized world, how it began by inspiring all liberty-loving men with hope and joy."

Wordsworth was highly influenced by the French Revolution. He was at once a child of the Revolution and a stubborn enemy to it. Wordsworth in his prelude said that

*"I had melancholy thoughts...
a strangeness in my mind,
A feeling that I was not for that hour,
Nor for that place."*

The doctrines of Rousseau (the return to nature, to primitive methods of life, to the re-establishment of human nature and society on the elements of love and simple relations among the simple folk) exerted a strong influence on him.

"I prefer liberty with danger than peace with slavery."

The poet's aspiration for liberty, equality and fraternity were altogether strengthened and intensified because the ideals that were dear to Wordsworth were proclaimed a new in France. So, he raised the Revolution with great enthusiasm and wrote eulogistically about it.

"Europe at that time was thrived with joy France standing on the path of golden hours and human nature seeming born again"

The poet feel elated and exhilarated at the thought that the Revolution was marking the end of an era of tyranny and was ushering in a period of peace, equality of brotherhood of mankind. According to Christensen,

"To get the real animating principle of the Romantic Movement, one must not study it inductively or abstractly; one must look at it historically. It must be put beside the literary standards of the eighteenth century. These standards impose limits upon the Elysian fields of poetry; poetry must be confined to the common experience of average men... The Romantic Movement then means the revolt of a group of contemporary poets who wrote, not according to common and doctrinaire standards, but as they individually pleased... there are no principles comprehensive and common to all except those of individualism and revolt."

Although the constructive purpose of the Revolution fascinated and bewitched the poet, yet when it took a destructive turn, the poet was highly disappointed. The horrible carnage, bloodshed, rapine and the September massacre filled the mind with disgust with the revolutionists. His faith in the Revolution and in the nobility of man was completely shaken and the peace of his mind violently disturbed. The disillusioned poet says in the prelude.

"I scarcely knew one night of quiet sleep such ghastly visions had I of despair and tyranny and implements of death and long orations which in dreams I pleaded before unjust tribunals."

Soon he turned to Godwin's theories and soon left it. So, we see Wordsworth embraced only the sublimated and not the coarse and vulgar form of the ideal of the Revolution.

According to one of the critic

“Samuel Taylor Coleridge was also profoundly affected by the French revolution. Unlike Wordsworth, Coleridge was more open and receptive to the social and political world around him. He was a very versatile man and he led a life that covered many fields and his work displayed this.[8] He was a poet of nature, romance, and the Revolution. He was a philosopher, a historian, and a political figure.[4] The French Revolution played a great role in shaping Coleridge into each of these things.”

Coleridge, too, like his friend, was deeply moved by the ideals of the French Revolution. According to Albert Hancock,

“Coleridge tended to focus his life on two things. The first, being to separate himself from the surrounding world and to submerge himself in thought, as a poet. The second, to play a role in the world's affairs, as a philosopher, historian, and politician, as mentioned earlier.”

The promise of a new and glorious era in the life of human beings all over Europe delighted him and welcoming this era of emancipation he sings.

*“No fetter will or mind shall know
And eloquence shall fearless flow
Yes! Liberty the soul of life shall reign
Shall throb in every pulse, shall flow through every vein!”*

But the enthusiasm of the poet was cooled down when the Revolution went, towards violent direction. His ‘Ode to France’ is a passionate confession of his disillusionment with the French Revolution.

*“O France, that mockers heaven, adulterous, blind and patriot only in pernicious toils!
To insult the shrine of liberty with spoils from freedom torn to tempt and to betray”*

To quote S.A. Brooke,

“Almost all his best poetic work is co-incident with the Revolution; afterwards everything incomplete.”

Robert Southey and Sir Walter Scott too were to a great extent inspired by the Revolution but became disgusted at the ‘Reign of Terror’ and the imperialism of Napoleon. Although Byron did not mention the name of French Revolution in his poetical works; yet he was saturated with the revolutionary spirit in its action against old social institutions and opinions. A rebel against society and not only against society but also against the very conditions of human life, Byron is the one supreme exponent of the distinctive farces of the revolution. He had a real passion for liberty, one of the ideals of the revolution. Don Juan, his masterpiece, is built upon the concept of liberty. In this poem he not only champions the cause of liberty, but also seeks to establish powerful and positive belief in the dignity of the individual man. He also fought for the cause of Greek liberty and died a martyr in defending it.

More than any other romantic poet of his generation Shelley was the true exponent and inheritor of the ideas of the French Revolution. The French Revolution inspired and then disappointed both Wordsworth and Coleridge. It made Byron a rebel and Southey a laureate, but it gave birth to Shelley. In spite of its failure as a humanitarian movement with the outburst of the Napoleonic campaign. Shelley still clung to its ideals, uncompromising shattering, eager to build in a day the structure which long centuries of growth must fashion, being still fresh upon his mind. Shelly in ‘Ode to Naples’ writes -

*“What though Cimmerian Anarchs dare blaspheme
Freedom and thee? thy shield is as a mirror
To make their blind slaves see, and with fierce gleam
To turn his hungry sword upon the wearer; 80*

*A new Actaeon's error
Shall theirs have been—devoured by their own hounds!
Be thou like the imperial Basilisk
Killing thy foe with unapparent wounds!
Gaze on Oppression, till at that dread risk”*

Shelley was a great rebel and revolutionary. He had great scorn for the existing political; social and economic institution which meant to suppress mankind. He considered that love should be the root and basis of man's development instead of tyranny and oppression. As a result love is celebrated in his poetry as the sole law which should govern the moral world. He was an ardent lover of liberty and wrote two odes in honor of liberty 'Ode to Naples' and 'Ode to liberty'. In his famous lyric 'Ode to the West Wind' Shelley celebrates his faith in the Restoration of mankind.

“O wind !If winter comes can spring be far behind?”

He was the prophet of the Golden age or of the millennium that would come. He was hoping against hope that there was a bright future waiting for mankind when evil, tyranny, lust and injustice would be annihilated and beauty freedom and love would take place in turn. In his poem the world's great age begins a new, he expresses the ultimate hopes of regeneration of mankind. 'The Revolt of Islam' means the highest point of influence exercised by the French Revolution on the mind of Shelley. Argolis is a city of Shelley's imagination where the social and political injustices prevailed. The oppression of the king and the nobles and the clergy all remind us of Paris on the eve of the French Revolution.

Thus, the poems of Shelley are strongly colored by his studies of the revolutionary movement in France. Truly he has been called the child of the French Revolution.

Keats was totally untouched by the turmoil and excitement of the French Revolution. He did not indicate the least trace of its ever loving occurred.

The French Revolution influenced Wordsworth and Coleridge on the sentimental side, Shelley on the intellectual side, Byron on the political side, but it has no perceptible and discernible influence on Keats.

Thing of beauty is his only concern, as he says.

“Beauty is truth, truth beauty – that is all ye know on earth, and all ye need to know”

John Keats wrote -

“I am certain of nothing but the holiness of the heart's affections and the truth of the imagination.”

So, in short, the literature of the period, particularly the poetry, is the product of the revolution.

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