

Romanticism: A Conflict between Pragmatic Political Ethos and Aesthetics

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Abstract:

This undertaken project aims at exploring the contrast between Romantics' political aspirations and their aesthetics. The paper investigates the English Romantics' rapturous refuge of imaginative experience for the creation of Plato's inspired ideal world and their flight away from stark reality. The paper unravels the ways in which Romantic poetry, especially, of William Blake, Wordsworth, Shelley, bears marks of prevalent socio-political condition. The study scrutinizes the tug of war between the Romantic aesthetics of "art for art's sake" with its God-like dreamland of imagination and the Romantics' pragmatic political ethos which causes the split. Consequently, the gnawing gap is created in the Romantic soul where both the world of reality and the imagination battle to conquer. The paper aims to shed light on such Romantic fissure, it is divided into four portions: the first part deals with the Romantic aesthetics, the second section highlights their political ethos mirroring in the Romantics' poems, the third portion studies the underlying connection between the Romantic aesthetics and the Romantics' political aspirations and the fourth part brings out the inherent contradictions between the two. This is a qualitative study based upon hermeneutic theory of in depth artistic analysis. The paper concludes the two contradictory traits: one, their desire to remain intact with the current political situations that breed political aspiration thus forming a part of this world of reality. And secondly their desire for mystical experiences and flight into the world of imagination, which according to the Romantics is more real than this reality, through their poetry. These two traits become antagonistic because the world of imagination also constructs an ideal world where every individual is happy. In other words it creates a utopia that stands in sharp contrast with the political aspirations because it lacks pragmatism. The paper is contextualized in Romantics' Poetry for a better comprehension of the schema of art and aesthetics.

Keywords: *Aesthetics and Philosophy of Art, English Romantics, Philosophy and Literature*

1. Introduction

The Romantic cry for individual freedom has to have a way in the Romantics' political ethos of this right for all. Doubtlessly, this movement from freedom for one graduated into freedom for all is sensible. Yet, this is the only reason which threads together the two opposite variants of the Romantic theory and the Romantics' political practices in poetry. They idealized the French Revolution which stirred them, yet their whole philosophy stood in a sharp contrast to its political ideals due to many reasons, namely their ideology is Renaissance-inspired spirit of individuality which could not amalgamate with the ideas of "fraternity and equality" though Wordsworth thought it otherwise. Therefore, to the large extent, the Romantic aesthetic is irreconcilable with the politically inspired goals as captured in the Romantic poetry.

One of the most significant trends of the Romantic aesthetics is an essential linkage between the physical and the metaphysical worlds where the former is the means to the latter. In Shelley's "Adonais", the flight for "the white radiance of eternity" is only one such example (Abrams, 1979). Pertinently, another Romantic trend is the universal significance of the concrete image. Keatsian imagery is filled with this characteristic feature and his "nightingale" and "urn" its instances. From Aristotle to Dr. Johnson to Wordsworth and Keats there exists the celebrated universality of poetry in spite the Romantics' preference for the particular.

This foregrounding the particularity is embedded in the Romantic theory's thematic core which is the faculty of imagination. M. H. Abrams and Harold Bloom in their celebrated works *Mirror and the Lamp* and *The Visionary Company* respectively underscore this characteristic Romantic streak in detail. According to them, the Romantics approach the world through Kantian philosophical pinhole: the reality is what human mind wills, therefore, human mind is inherently creative. Such a world-view on the part of the Romantics bridges the gulf between the world and the man or "the object and the subject" (1961). As the human beings are crown of creation, they can imitate God-like act of creation via imagination. The biblical myth of fallen Man is, therefore, re-created and the loss of human status is regained through bliss of imagination which is the road to creation. Such an outlook is liberated and individualistic beyond doubt. Michael John Kooy argues in "Romanticism and Coleridge's Idea of History", the historical past is stemmed from imagination and is known as "Romantic historiography" and thus even history is seen subjectively by the Romantics. (Oct., 1999)

2. Research Question

How do the Romantics' political aspirations contrast with their aesthetics?

3. Discussion

Romanticism, a movement that gained its momentum in the last half of the 18th century and emerged in reaction to the Industrial revolution and socio-political set of canons of the Age of Reason ultimately challenged all traditional social, political and economic institutions. It was marked by the French Revolution in its background to which most of the Romantic poets embraced initially but rejected later. The reason Romanticism came up with new patterns of thought and forms of expression in the art, Romantics made significant contributions not just to poetry, but also to theology, philosophy, psychology, political theory, and history.

As far as the aesthetic sensibility of Romantics is concerned, it emphasized "the imagination as the supreme faculty, the gateway to exploring life at a level deeper than the rational" (G. Davis, Elynor 336). Thus during this period there was a broad shift towards ways of looking at the world which recognized the importance of the emotions and the imagination. On the basis of the absorption into imagination, there is an obvious conflict between their aesthetics and the demands of practical human reality. Beginning of the English Romantic Period may be marked with the year 1793 –when Godwin published his work "Political Justice". It was an attack on aristocracy, property, religion and politics. Thus, almost every poet of this era was influenced by Godwin's ideals of politics. But this influence is more pertinent to Shelley.

The Romantic poets deemed their creative imagination as most vital, in the creation of their poetry. Their creative imagination transcended them into the realm of a world, beyond that of their

material existence. This heightened sense of imagination was then re-created in their poetry to make it available to the common man. To name a few poems, Shelley's 'Adonais', John Keats' 'Ode to a Nightingale' and Coleridge's 'Kubla Kahn' are examples of this experience where the poets envisioned an ideal world. C.M Bowra wrote in 'The Romantic Imagination', that the Romantic poets 'saw that the power of poetry is strongest when the creative impulse works untrammelled, and... this happened when they shaped fleeting visions into concrete forms and pursued wild thoughts until they captured and mastered them' (1950). Within these imaginative experiences, the Romantics also envisioned their idea of political idealism. Adian Day quotes M.H Abrams, who writes that the Romantic poets 'were all centrally political and social poets' (1996). Influenced by the French Revolution, the poets envisioned a humanistic society, where the interests of man would reign important. Through their aesthetic creation of this political idealism, the Romantic poets forwarded their political aspirations that they desired to see materialized in the real world.

The poetry of William Wordsworth, one of the first Romantic poets, can be seen as spiritually aesthetic. It is through this spiritual quality that Wordsworth forwarded his political idealism. Wordsworth, through his poetry invoked his readers to allow 'nature (to) be your teacher'. He believed that nature was the only true teacher of man, and thus encouraged mankind to come into close association with nature and to allow it to fill them up with knowledge.

'Sweet is the lore which Nature brings;
Our meddling intellect
Misshapes the beauteous forms of things—
We murder to dissect' (Wordsworth, 1798)

By allowing nature to be the ultimate teacher of man, Wordsworth denounces the material aspects of knowledge gained through books and therefore also breaks down the social hierarchies that separated man from man. Adian Day quotes Abrams in his book 'Romanticism', where he says that 'Wordsworth subverted a view of poetry inherited from the Renaissance, a view which had assumed and incorporated a hierarchical structure of social classes' (1996). By allowing nature to be man's teacher, Wordsworth viewed every man at an equal footing, for nature refuses to separate mankind according to vain systems of hierarchy.

However, Wordsworth's political aspirations were also based on his desire to gain popularity amongst his people. Wordsworth's poetry, while portraying nature as the ultimate source of knowledge for man, consciously restrained from hinting any pantheistic ideas. Shelley's pantheistic strains encountered in his poetry were heavily criticized by the public and therefore Wordsworth removed any hints of pantheism from his poem, 'The Prelude'. Thus, Wordsworth's poetry while successful in aesthetically conveying his spiritual, religious ideas, yet were contrived to gain him the popularity that he desired.

Samuel Taylor Coleridge, a close friend of William Wordsworth also portrayed his political aspirations in his poetry. His poem, 'The Dungeon' criticizes the social forces which generate criminal behaviour. He points out that ignorance and poverty reduce man to such misdeeds. Thus Coleridge, like Wordsworth takes on a social stance, through his poetry and speaks of the miserable condition of man that reduces them to criminal behaviour. He criticizes the prison which

confines man and which does not offer a logical cure against their misdeeds. Coleridge therefore, employs natural images as a cure for the criminal behaviour of man. He writes:

‘With other ministrations thou, O nature!
Healest thy wandering and distempered child:
Thou pourest on him thy soft influences,
Thy sunny hues, fair forms, and breathing sweets
Thy melodies of woods, and winds, and waters,
Till he relent, and can no more endure’ (Coleridge, 1798)

He thus, presents the aesthetic beauty of nature as an overwhelming force that can cure all misdeeds. Through this poem, Coleridge therefore envisions his ideal state of man’s life and like Wordsworth, portrays it through the aesthetics of nature.

After Wordsworth and Coleridge, John Keats and Percy Bysshe Shelley portrayed their political aspirations through their poetry. These poets were influenced by Leigh Hunt, through whom many of the poets’ political aspirations were developed. Leigh Hunt thus became a sort of intellectual mentor for Keats and Shelley. John Keats in fact writes a dedication to Leigh Hunt, where through his aesthetic use of images John Keats elevates the character of Leigh Hunt. The poem evokes the natural images of ‘roses, and pinks, and violets’, (Keats, 1884) and then goes on to commemorate the company that Keats has spent with him:

‘I feel a free,
A leafy luxury, seeing I could please
...a man like thee.’ (Keats, 1884)

Shelley, too influenced by Leigh Hunt, openly criticized and exclaimed his political views in his poetry. Undaunted by the disapproving critiques at the hands of the critics and the public, Shelley continued to voice and assert his beliefs against the political authorities prevailing during his time. His poems, ‘Ozymandias’ and ‘The Mask of Anarchy’ can be regarded as significant examples that blatantly exclaim his disapproval of the government.

‘Ozymandias’ is a vivid depiction of Shelley’s criticism of rulers and the government. The statue that is depicted as lying round the ‘lone and level sands that stretch far away’, (Shelley, 1819) is a stark contrast to the ‘sneer of cold command’ (Shelley, 1819) that is depicted as the expression upon the statue of the King. Shelley lays emphasis upon the state of the statue that once depicted a state of grandeur and authority of the King and now lies, subject to the ravages of time that have ‘shattered’ it and rendered it broken and dismembered. Shelley’s aesthetic use of images of the King’s expression is starkly contrasted with the barren land that surrounds him. Through this aesthetic appeal Shelley lays bare his political views, openly criticizing the authorial figures who deemed their power and their authorial position as ultimate and ever lasting.

A similar idea is also echoed in ‘The Mask of Anarchy’ where Shelley allegorizes ‘Anarchy’ riding on a white horse that is tainted with blood. There Anarchy exclaims: ‘I AM GOD, AND KING AND LAW!’ (Shelley, 1819) The poem was in fact written against the Peterloo Massacre, and Shelley treats the entire poem as an allegory that represents the government that he is so

openly against. Shelley allegorizes, 'Murder', 'Fraud', 'Hypocrisy' and finally 'Anarchy'. All these allegories are shown to be heavy with the guilt of blood upon their hands. Yet, as Shelley points out, the authorities continue to assert their power over the people and thus wrench the country of any hope of peace.

The images that Shelley employs to depict these allegories of 'Murder' 'Fraud', 'Hypocrisy' and 'Anarchy' render the poem with an aesthetic sense while also portraying side by side his political criticisms and aspirations. At the very outset of the poem, Shelley establishes his critical tone through his vivid use of imagery in describing the allegorical personas. He states:

'All were fat; and well they might
Be in admirable plight,
For one by one, and two by two,
He tossed the human hearts to chew
Which from his wide cloak he drew.' (Shelley, 1819)

Moreover, he goes on to emphasize upon the plight of man at the hands of these blood-thirsty creatures, when he draws upon the images of blood which becomes as common as the dew on the grass. Blood occurs as a common motif in the entire poem, thereby emphasizing upon the many lives that have been sacrificed and lost at the hands of these authorial figures.

The poem however, goes on to establish Shelley's political idealism. Having established his ideas, Shelley then elaborates upon his visions of a better world. It is here that he allegorizes 'Hope' and thus envisions a hopeful future for the victimized public. From here on, Shelley's imagery takes on another aspect, promising a positive revival and hope for the people.

'As flowers beneath May's footstep waken,
As stars from Night's loose hair are shaken,
As waves arise when loud winds call,
Thoughts sprung where'er that step did fall.' (Shelley, 1819)

Shelley now elaborates upon his hope for the people to be blessed with 'Spirit, Patience, Gentleness'. He thereby exalts these values in contrast to the world of blood shed that figures of 'Anarchy' and 'Murder' were reinforcing. He ends his poem, arousing his people to action:

'Rise like Lions after slumber
In unvanquishable number -
Shake your chains to earth like dew
Which in sleep had fallen on you -
Ye are many - they are few.' (Shelley, 1819)

Thus, the poem, with its vivid depiction of images, metaphors and allegories establish Shelley's ideal political visions. His aesthetics put forward his political aspirations, which establishes him as not only a Romantic poet but also a poet with political aspirations. Similarly, Wordsworth, Coleridge and Keats, through their aesthetics also established themselves as poets with a vision of political idealism.

4. Conclusion

As mentioned above history and poetry became convergent in the Romantic times. In *Mirror and the Lamp*, M. H. Abrams writes “it had been common since antiquity to oppose poetry to history, and to base this distinction on the ground that poetry imitates some form of the universal or ideal instead of the actual event”. But this has changed as the faculty of imagination became the focal point of poetry and history in the Romantic period. This removes the Romantics one step further from the reality then how come they involve themselves in political objectives which stand in a contradiction to their poetic belief. In other words, if fluidity, relativity, and subjectivity are their principles then their political ideals stand at variance with their Romantic ideology because reality and imagination are polarized not belonging to the same world.

The inherent contradiction between the Romantic aesthetic and their inspired political ideals as reflected in their poetry is fixed fissure. Wordsworth, Shelley, Coleridge, and Blake succumbed to dedicated devotion to prevalent political ambience. Only Keats’s worlds of reality and imagination remain apart as in accordance with the initial Romantic intention. However, in Shelley’s philosophical idea of poetry such binaries and hierarchies as political and romantic, real and ideal, truth and imagination are conceived as unified. But essentially, the tide of the Romantic poetic trends falls apart to their political adherences.

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