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Romanticism in Victorian Poetry: A Reading of the Major Poets

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Abstract

The prolonged history of English literature is demarcated in different ages with a view to comprehending literary and cultural atmosphere of the time. However, the literary influence of one particular age does not stop at the last year of the age, rather it continues. Hence, it can be said that Victorian poetry was highly influenced by the Romantic trends in English literature. All the major Victorian poets were immensely motivated by the seminal Romantic poets. In this respect, it deserves mention that following T. S. Eliot's notion of tradition the Victorians were influenced by their predecessors and they turned their own works to suit their own purposes. However, while being influenced they have nevertheless retained their originality, maturity and craftsmanship. The paper is an attempt to look and enquire into the discourse of similarity and differences that one finds between these two major trends in English literature- Romanticism and Victorianism. While drawing the parallels one also finds the changes in tone implicit in Victorian poetry which is an outcome of the socio-historical and political environment of the period. The research paper unearths these discourses through the comparative analysis of canonical poems of these two periods.

Keywords: Originality, Influence, Structure, Romanticism, Victorian

The long reign of Queen Victoria from 1837 to 1901 demarcates the period in the history of English literature that bears her name. The question has been asked whether the distinctive character of these sixty-four years justifies the adjective "Victorian", for it is a truism that Victorian poetry at least developed in the shadow of Romanticism. Indeed when the queen ascended the throne of England in 1837, all of the important Romantic poets apart from William Wordsworth had died, but since they had died young many readers still regarded them as their contemporaries. Tennyson and Browning were born less than twenty years after the birth of

Keats, and so it is not surprising that a great majority of the Victorian poets show the strong influence of the Romantics in their writing. Nevertheless, most of the Victorians could not sustain the confidence that the Romantics fell in their power of the imagination, and so they often rewrote seminal Romantic poems with a sense of both belatedness and distance.

We may see this in particular in Mathew Arnold's lyric "Resignation" in which the Victorian poet addresses his sister upon revisiting a landscape, much as Wordsworth has addressed his sister in "Lines Written a Few Miles above Tintern Abbey". The parallels between the two poems become obvious on a close reading of the texts. In both the poems, the respective poets address their sisters Fausta and Dorothy respectively. In both the poems also there is the strong sense of recognition of having come back to the same country site after a gap of several years. Thus, while Wordsworth reflects on the five years after which he returned to the hillside near the ruins of Tintern Abbey, Arnold speaks about how:

Once more we tread this self-same road,
Fausta, which ten years since we trod;
Alone we tread it, you and I. (Arnold 86-88)

Not only this, Arnold seems to perspectivise in much the same way as Wordsworth, the sights and sounds of the environment. In "Tintern Abbey", Wordsworth had looked down from the hillside by the side of the river Wye, on the valley below and noticed the "wreathes of smoke/Sent up, in silence, from among the trees," (18-19) and had reflected on "the din/Of towns and cities" (26-27). All these details have uncanny parallels in Arnold's lines:

Here, where the brook shines, near its head,
In its clear, shallow, turf-fringed bed;
Here, whence the eye first sees, far down,
Capp'd with faint smoke, the noisy town;
Here sit we, and again unroll,
Though slowly, the familiar whole. (Arnold 90-95)

Like Wordsworth, Arnold also speaks of the gypsies (who Wordsworth call "vagrant dwellers in the household woods") who roam through the natural environment, and even the philosophy of Arnold's poet is similar to that of Wordsworth, for if Wordsworth speaks of "hearing often times/ The still, sad music of humanity" ("Tintern Abbey" 91-92), the poet in Arnold's poem "gazes" with "tears/ ... in his eyes" (186-187), and hears:

The murmur of a thousand years.
.....
A placid and continuous whole-
That general life, which does not cease,
Whose secret is not joy, but peace. (Arnold 188, 190-192)

One way in which it may be possible to theorize the close relationship and evident similarities between the above poems of Arnold and Wordsworth is to evoke the notion of

influence as propounded by T. S. Eliot in his 1919 essay "Tradition and the Individual Talent" which is included in the *English Critical Texts: 16th Century to 20th Century* (1962). Eliot, as is well known, sees the question of the artist's relationship to works created by his predecessors as that of a man aware of an achieved body of work and turning it to his own uses. If we can read ourselves of the prejudiced assumption that a poet's best work will also be his most original, Eliot declares, "we shall often find that not only the best, but the most individual parts of his work may be those in which the dead poets, his ancestors, assert their immortality most vigorously. And I do not mean the impressionable period of adolescence, but the period of full maturity" (294).

Such statements form part of a view of literature which directs our attention towards the achieved structures of literary work rather than to the author who created them. The relationship between poets and previous tradition were reflected upon later in the 20th century by Walter Jackson Bat's *The Burden of the Past and the English Poet* (1971), and Harold Bloom's *The Anxiety of Influence: A Theory of Poetry* (1973). Bloom in chapter 4 of his book, "Demonization or the Counter Sublime", says that "negation of the precursor is never possible" (102).

Keeping in mind Bloom's paradigm of the uneasy relationship between an *ephebe* and the precursor poet, it is possible to read Thomas Hardy's famous lyric "The Darkling Thrush" as a rewriting of Keats' "Ode to a Nightingale" with a sense of distance and belatedness. Both these poems have a fundamental similarity in that they reflect on the difference between mortal existence and natural life. Throughout his own poem Keats had mused sadly on the world of man in which

...men sit and hear each other groan;
Where palsy shakes a few, sad, last grey hairs,
Where youth grows pale, and spectre thin, and dies;
Where but to think is to be full of sorrow
And leaden eyed despairs. (L 24-28)

In both poems too the poets' melancholy reflection are counterpointed by the ecstatic singing of a bird-Keats' Nightingale singing "in full throated ease" (L 10) and Hardy's thrush voicing for "... a full hearted even song/ Of joy illimited" (L 19-20). Yet these similarities apart, it is important to note the fundamental divergences between Hardy and Keats' poems. As a romantic poet, Keats is capable of transcending even if only for a moment the enervation of spirit that besets him with vigorous activation of his imagination. To Hardy, writing on the last day of the 19th century, such an escape on the "viewless wings of poesy" (L 33) was clearly impossible, for with the despair of his contemporary times sitting heavy on him, he could visualize only:

The century's corpse outleant,

His crypt the cloudy canopy,
The wind his death lament.
The ancient pulse of germ and birth
Was shrunken hard and dry. (Hardy, L 10-14)

To use Bloom's theory, Hardy in "The Darkling Thrush" is clearly rewriting Keats' "Ode to a Nightingale", but the rewriting is a Victorian transformation of a romantic theme, Keats' songbird becoming "an aged thrush, frail, gaunt, and small" (L 21).

However, among the major Victorian poets, there was at least one who idolized a romantic precursor, and this poet is Robert Browning who in his short lyric "Memorabilia", speaks of a man who had had the good fortune of having spoken to Shelley. Remembering his own encounter with the Romantic poet, Browning figures it as a shining span of brightness in the midst of the "blank miles" of life all around it ("Memorabilia" L 12). As Browning puts it,

For there I picked up on the heather
And there I put inside my breast
A moulted feather, an eagle-feather!
Well, I forget the rest. (L 13-16)

Here the "eagle-feather" is obviously the treasured memory of Percy Bysshe Shelley, and the last line quoted highlights the insignificance of everything else in the memory of Browning.

In some of his own poems, Browning clearly manifests the influence of Shelley's philosophy of optimism, the idea that "If winter comes, can spring be far behind?" ("Ode to the West Wind" L 70). In his essay *On Life*, Shelley had declared that:

Man is a being of high aspirations 'looking both before and after', whose 'thoughts wander through eternity', disclaiming alliance with transience and decay, incapable of imagining to himself annihilation, existing but in the future and the past, being not what he is, but what he has been and shall be. Whatever may be his true and final destination, there is a spirit within him at enmity with nothingness and dissolution. This is the character of all life and being. (874)

Browning's protagonist in his poem "The Last Ride Together" is like Shelley's "man... of high aspirations" and an individual who clearly disclaims "alliance with transience and decay" as in Shelley's vision (*On Life* 874). This is why Browning's rider speaks of his soul smoothing

...itself out, a ling-cramped scroll
Freshening and fluttering in the wind.
Past hopes already lay behind.
What need to strive with a life awry?
Had I said that, had I done this,

So might I gain, so might I miss.

Might she have loved me? just as well

She might have hated, who can tell!

Where had I been now if the worst befell?

And here we are riding, she and I. ("Last Ride Together" L 35-44)

Somewhat similarly, Browning speaks of his lover denying the spirit of what Shelley calls "nothingness and dissolution" (*On Life* 874) in making the lover first think of "... some life beyond,/ Have a bliss to die with, dim-descried" (L 92-93), but then having him "... sink back shuddering from the quest./ Earth being so good" (L 97-98). Indeed, Browning's phrase "the instant made eternity" (L 108) has a Shelleyan ring to it. Not only this, many of the images in Shelley's poetry seems to have ignited the imagination of the Victorian poet, and the particular instance is that of a few lines of a play on the life of Tasso which give a tantalizing anticipation of Browning's dramatic monologue *My Last Duchess*. Shelley's lines run

... The Duke was leaning,

His finger on his bra, his lips unclosed.

The princess sate within the window-seat,

And so her face was heed; but on her knee

Her hands were clasped, veined, and pale as snow,

And quivering... ("Scene from Tasso" L 18-23)

However, it is important to note that it is not merely the image of an autocratic Duke and the young woman whom he victimizes that influence Browning, but the whole premise of a dramatic situation reach with the play of intrigue which anticipated the Victorian poets' dramatic monologues.

From some romantic thinkers, the Victorian poets derived the idea of poetry as a diminished art. Daniel Karlin in the introduction to *The Penguin Book of Victorian Verse* (1997) thus cites the example of a late Victorian poet named Walter Alexander Raleigh who candidly confesses that "our songs/ Cannot vanquish ancient wrongs", and "our cage/ Is this narrow iron age" (quoted in Karlin xlix). The term "Iron Age" and Raleigh's acknowledgement of the unimportance of poetry comes from the Romantic critic Thomas Love Peacock's satire *The Four Ages of Poetry* written in 1821 in which as Daniel Karlin says Peacock dismissed poetry "... as a primitive and barbaric art, an art of superstition and the irrational, redundant in an enlightened and rational civilization" (xlix). The essence of Peacock's argument was that poetry had twice passed through four ages- the ages of Iron, Gold, Silver, and Brass- once in the ancient world and once again in the modern, and that in the Romantic era poetry in its second Brass Age. Following upon this the Victorian Raleigh would extend the cycle a third time, with the Victorian age being the third Iron Age.

Other Victorian poets took a different view. Elizabeth Barrett Browning, for instance, conceived of poetry as the visionary apprehension of the real. The work of the poet, she

believed, was a divinely ordained vocation, and in her review of Wordsworth's *Poems, chiefly of Early and Late Years* published in the *Athenaeum* of 27th August 1842, she praised the Romantic poet for presenting "a high moral to his generation" in terms of "what a true poet is, what his work is, and what his patience and successes must be" (qtd. in Karlin liv).

This idolization, or at least the following of Wordsworth, by Elizabeth Barrett Browning shows how the spirit of Romanticism continue to prevail in the Victorian era. Some Victorian poets however build upon their sense of a belated Romanticism in a number of different ways. Several poets writing in the second half of the 19th century, like Dante Gabriel Rossetti and Algernon Charles Swinburne, embraced an attenuated Romanticism, art pursued for its own sake. The sensuousness of John Keats, thus tended to become more pictorial and aesthetic than meaningful. In Swinburne's poem, "The Garden of Proserpine" we therefore come across many of the images previously used by Keats, but without their original philosophic nuances:

But bloomless buds of poppies,
Green grapes of Proserpine,
Pale beds of blowing rushes
Where no leaf blooms or blushes
Save this whereout she crushes

For dead men deadly wine. (L 27-32)

Not that the tendency to be pictorial, to use detail to construct visual images that represent the emotion or situation the poem concerns, was typical only of Swinburne and Rossetti. As two modern critics of Victorian poetry, Carol T. Christ and George H. Ford, have indicated, in the Introduction to *The Victorian Age: 1830-1901*, which is included in *The Norton Anthology of English Literature*, Arthur Henry Hallam "In his review of Tennyson's first volume of poetry, ... defines this kind of poetry as 'picturesque,' as combining visual impressions in such a way that they create a picture that carries the dominant emotion of the poem" (1061). This aesthetic brought poets and painters close together, and contemporary artists frequently illustrated Victorian poems, and poems themselves often represented paintings.

The way Victorian poetry grew up in the shadow of Romanticism may also be seen in the division in the lyric voice of Victorian poetry between the poetry of "song" and the dramatic "speaking" of Browning and Hardy. The Victorians inherited this conflict from Romanticism, and in particular from the dispute between Wordsworth and Coleridge about poetic diction. In the *Preface to the Lyrical Ballads* (1802), included in *English Critical Texts: 16th Century to 20th Century*, Wordsworth had stated that his intention had been to write poems "... in a selection of language really used by men" (164) on the basis of his conviction that the poet is "a man speaking to men" (171). However, Coleridge in Chapter XVIII of *Biographia Literaria* (1817), had ridiculed this idea, and cited Wordsworth's own verse to disprove it. In Victorian poetry, the speaking voice is closely identified with the dramatic monologue, as Browning

developed the form, where its idiom is colloquial and knowingly unpoetic. A good example of this is the speaker of Browning's poem "How it Strikes a Contemporary" which begins: "I only knew one poet in my life:/ And this, or something like it, was his way" (L 1-2), and ends on the same note: "Well, I could never write a verse,-could you?" (L 114). In contrast to this, there is the poetry of song, whose supreme exponent was Tennyson, the lines of whose poem *Tithonus* run:

The woods decay, the woods decay and fall,
The vapours weep their burthen to the ground,
Man comes and tills the field and lies beneath,
And after many a summer dies the swan.
Me only cruel immortality
Consumes. (L 1-6)

According to Daniel Karlin, the Victorian poets "felt collectively that they were orphans of Romanticism" (Karlin lxxii). However, the misgivings of Victorian poetry became a gift of Modernism. The contest between "speech" and "song", which was carried on by T.S.Eliot and Ezra Pound among others, and which is to be found in English poetry up to Philip Larkin and beyond, suggests something of the innovative intelligence of Victorian poetry and its enduring vitality.

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