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## Celebration of the Self in Romantic Poetry: A Study

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Sensation and imagination are the two vehicles rode by the romantic writers for a spiritual quest. To the romantics, 'Mind' was more soaring than 'Matter' and so they placed imagination on a higher altar than reason. Imagination and reason are poles asunder in Keats' view. Shelley, on the other hand, in his *A Defence of Poetry* (1840) defines imagination as an originative and seminal faculty while 'reason' is 'the relations borne by one thought to another'. Augustan age was replete with the materialistic doctrines (isms) of Voltaire, Holbach, Hume and Locke whereas the Romantic age was commanded by the idealistic philosophy of Kant, Schelling and Hegel. The Romantics followed the epochal doctrines laid by the eminent philosopher Kant. These philosophers rarefied the mind of man and uplifted it from a debris (detritus) to a stellar resplendence (an astral aura). The following lines of A.C. Swinburne sum up the romantic spirit and its sturdy and inflexible idealism:

Dead air, dead fire, dead shapes and shadows, telling  
Time naught;  
Man gives them sense and soul by song, and dwelling  
In thought,  
In human thought their being endures, their power  
Abides;  
Else were there a thing that each light hour  
Derides.

In the middle of the 18<sup>th</sup> century some salient characteristic features which were so long brewing up, reached a high statue and attained a point of culmination. Some of these features may be colligated as-

1. Supernaturalism and Orientalism
2. A fascination for the strange and the mysterious leading to a desire for the past
3. Awakening of Imagination
4. Love of Nature intense
5. Intellectual curiosity
6. Glorification of childhood
7. Keen ideas of liberty
8. Insistence on autonomy of the individual and subjectivity.

Besides enormous external and political changes, the Romantic Movement reflected a very rudimentary internal and subtle revolution – a revolutionary change in attitude towards the

value of personal human experience. These writers cast away the rule of reason and began to foster a literature that highlighted subjectivity and the liberty of the self which were assisted by the importance laid on the imagination. Though the major writers came from various backgrounds and specialized in varied genres, their preference was directed solely towards individual speculations from impersonal objectivity to intense subjectivism. The movement was characterized by an obsession with the self, the deep sense of alienation from society's preoccupation with material pleasures.

All the Romantic poets believed in an 'ulterior reality, they found it in different ways and made different uses of it. They varied in the degree of importance which they attached to the visible world and in their interpretation of it. William Blake (1757-1827), the most vigorous in conception of imagining was of the view that our imagination is a divine power and the very fountainhead of everything real. Blake's true home was in vision, in what he saw when he gave full liberty to his creative imagination and transformed sense – data through it. He could say, 'One power alone makes a poet: Imagination, The Divine Vision,' because for him the imagination creates reality, and this reality is the divine activity of the self in its unimpeded energy. Though Blake had a keen eye for the visible world, his special concern was with the invisible. Since he was a painter with a remarkably pictorial habit of mind, he described the invisible in the language of the visible. In the Songs of Innocence (1789), Blake's symbols are largely drawn from the Bible but in the Songs of Experience (1794), he often uses symbols of his own making. In the Songs of Innocence Blake sets his poem about the Lamb, with its artless question:

Little Lamb, who made thee?  
Dost thou know who made thee?

The lamb and the tiger are symbols for two different states of the human soul. When the lamb is destroyed by experience, the tiger is needed to restore the world. In compositional unity, the Songs of Innocence was a work of beauty and sheer genius. Blake recaptured an Elizabethan freshness, zest and careless ecstasy as no other lyrical poet had done before or since his time. He was strongly influenced by children's songs, ballads and hymns. The Marriage of Heaven and Hell voices his contempt for 18<sup>th</sup> century rationalism and Blake's belief that God was both good and evil. In Songs of Innocence, Blake had highlighted the unadulterated happiness of a child's world. His Songs of Experience portrays the inevitability that a child must leave his innocence and struggle in a world where evil is an integral component. This is the core of Blake's philosophy – the merging of the opposites, the fusion of innocence and experience, good and evil, flesh and spirit, heaven and hell. He firmly believed that 'without contraries, is no progression'. In the poetry of Robert Burns (1759-96), the love lyric reached new heights of both lucidity and accuracy of imagery.

A Red, Red Rose (1794) set a new benchmark in the annals of English love poetry. To readers with a refined urbane taste, poems like Highland Mary (1792) and the Jolly Beggars, (1785) may not be very palatable, but it is Burns at his scintillating best. His themes were always about Scotland's poor, which did not afford scope for the nobler possibilities of

poetry. In his lyrics, the Romantic spirit became earthy, literally and it was tinged with tenderness and a hint of satire in his awareness of the exploitations of class divisions which prevailed in the country side. There is a royal ease about Burns at his best, he sings naturally as he breathes:

Some rhyme to court the country clash,  
Or raise a din;  
For me an aim I never flash;  
I rhyme for fun.

Pace, passion, precision- these things mark his great achievements, whether in satire or song. Tam O' Shanter (1791) sashes along like a whirlwind; The Jolly Beggars(1785) in a foaming torrent The Cotter's Saturday Night (1785) starts in a slow and pensive vein, but soon breaks away.

Some similarities may be found in the poetry of both Blake and William Wordsworth(1770-1850). Both of them emphasized the glorification of childhood and its celebration of nature. Central to Wordsworth's vision of Nature is the importance of the impact and influence of Nature on the human mind. Wordsworth's poetry is essentially empirical: that is, he records the evidence of his senses, looking inward rather than outward. Nevertheless, he does describe the world of Nature and of the characters who inhabit the natural landscape. In fact, Wordsworth gives detailed accounts of the lives of ordinary people in poems such as The Old Cumberland Beggar (1800) and The Leech-Gatherer (1802) – characters of a low social position not normally represented in Augustan poetry. Wordsworth celebrates the spirit of man, living in harmony with his natural environment and away from the corrupt city. However, the essence of his poetry lies not in the description of this world of Nature but rather in the development of the inner mind which records it. In Wordsworth's long autobiographical poem The Prelude(1805),the main concern is the psychology of the individual. Such an emphasis on the formation of the individual sensibility has since become a major characteristic of Western literature. One of its original titles was 'A Poem on the Growth of an Individual Mind'. In many parts of The Prelude and in poems such as Tintern Abbey (1798) and Ode: Intimations of Immortality(1807), Wordsworth records a personal search for the moments of insight and understanding which, he believed, only Nature could give. Time and the passing of time become recurring themes as in 'Five years have passed' in Tintern Abbey where memory of the past, together with the effects of Nature, allow the poetic 'I' to see into the heart of things' in the present. He believed in the truth of his own senses and imagination and he sometimes describes moments in which he perceives mystical and transcendental truths:

A presence that disturbs me with the joy  
Of elevated thoughts; a sense sublime  
Of something far more deeply interfused,  
Whose dwelling is the light of setting sun,  
And the round ocean and the living air,  
And the blue sky, and in the mind of man.

Wordsworth continued to regard the child as the single most important source of wisdom and truth. In Ode: Intimations of Immortality the child is addressed:

Thou best philosopher, who yet dost keep  
Thy heritage, thou eye among the blind,  
Thou, deaf and silent, read'st the eternal deep,  
Haunted forever by the eternal mind.  
The child is here seen as the father of man.

Coleridge's *The Rime of the Ancient Mariner* (1798) is an increasingly exciting poem in the style of an ancient ballad and here Coleridge observes the life or sprite which animates both man and the natural world in the poem and old sailor or mariner narrates the terrible sequence of events which followed when he shove an albatross and who to nightmare visions and to a long period of suffering and his water supply runs out in punishment for his deed. When the mariner blesses some sea-creatures, his offence against the power of Nature is forgiven and he is able to return home, revitalized through his shared suffering:

Water, water everywhere  
And all the boards did shrink  
Water, water everywhere,  
Nor any drop to drink.

The lack of water represents the dryness of spirit, the becalmed ship symbolizes the aimless soul of a man who has sinned and who awaits eventual redemption. The moral is essentially Christian:

He prayeth well who loveth well  
Both man and bird and beast.

*Christabel* (1816) is the story of the lady Christabel, daughter of Sir Leoline, who meets the lady Geraldine in the forest and brings her to his home where various mysterious events take place. Coleridge's poetry abounds in the magical, the strange and the dream like. From the phantom ship and line spectral horrors of *The Ancient Mariner* to the 'ancestral voices' and the enchanted fountain of *Kubla Khan* (1816) and the 'one red leaf', the mysterious woods, and Sir Leoline's castle in *Christabel*, everything carries suggestions of the otherworldly. Coleridge does not use the spells of mediaevalism as so many stage properties he absorbs them into himself, and they reappear rarely distilled and inextricably blended with the poet's exquisite perception of the mysteries that surround the commonplace thing of everyday life.

John Keats' (1795-1821) influence upon the poets of his century has been unique and abiding. 'John Keats is the greatest of us all', said Tennyson. Keats desperately sought a symbol of permanence in a world where youth and beauty were fleeting. He was deeply distressed by the fact that in this world 'Beauty cannot keep her lustrous eyes, / Or new Love pine at them beyond tomorrow.' He believed that the principle of beauty dwelt in all things, yet his was also the quest for truth and he found it difficult to reconcile beauty which was

ephemeral with a lasting truth which appeared to be so full of ugly suffering. In Ode to a Nightingale (1819), he attempts to share the happiness of the Nightingale to escape to its 'world among the leaves' but knows that it will probably not last because he is human and what is human cannot last. So in the last stanza, he bids farewell to the Nightingale as well as to his 'fancy'. In Ode on a Grecian Urn (1820), he appears to find a solution, if somewhat tentative, to his quest, in the urn, symbolizing art, he finds permanent beauty.

Paradoxically, love is with Shelley an abstraction, a sublimated feeling. Love for Shelley is a rarefied emotion, where the Keatsian is distant and unattainable. In Ode to the West Wind (1820) Shelley exclaims : 'I fall upon the thorns of life! I bleed!' Like the true Romantic, he tends to suffer from a deep depression, perhaps due to the thwarting of his ideals the inability to achieve recognition as an unhappy personal life. It is said that Prometheus, the cloud, the west wind, the night and the skylark are all Shelley himself. Thus in these poems we have Shelley's own idealized self enlarged into universality.

Lord Byron (1788-1824), among all the Romantics, is blended up with the finest temperaments of cynicism and a vibrant imagination. Neither fascinated with the past not drawn to the future, he is deeply concerned with the Europe of his day with all its affections and hypocrisies. Byron's individuality, sensuality, wit, and muddiness everything surfaces in his poems. Manfred, Don Juan, Harold – all are Byron himself. Beppo(1817) and Don Juan(1819) scintillate with satirical observations. Don Juan begins with the narrator saying 'I need a hero'. The need to identify with heroic struggle, to map out a heroic quest and to push one's self to the limits of heroism as an aspect of Romanticism remained with Byron throughout his life.

The Romantic poetry emblazoned a coalition of divergent views and ideologies. In a world which exists by a sempiternal process of creation, a Romantic poet cannot live the life of a passive passer-by. He is and wishes to be active through his active activities.

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