

Lecture 08

Romanticism: The Revolutionary Context

Hello and welcome back to another lecture in this series on Literary Theory. Over the next two lectures, we will take up the topic of Romanticism and we will see how this late eighteenth and early-nineteenth century phenomenon impacted the field of English literary theory. This period under consideration was marked in the history of Europe by a major political upheaval. Here I am of course thinking about the French revolution of the 1790s which established the first Republican government in France and which thereafter went on to inspire several political movements throughout the world. This political revolution created a radically changed cultural milieu and in today's lecture we will see how this changed cultural scenario created new notions about creating and theorizing literature. But apart from the political upheaval, the period between late eighteenth and early nineteenth century was also a time of a deeper and more profound revolution of ideas – a philosophical revolution if you will – about how man and the universe around him is to be conceptualized and connected. In the lectures on romanticism we will also dwell upon this revolution of ideas and see how romantic theory of literature made use of it to create some very lasting notions about literature, nature and the role of the poet.

Meaning of the term

But before we move on to these different revolutions and their relation to a romantic theory of literature, we need to look at the term Romanticism itself and spend a little time discussing what the term might mean. Now the term Romantic or Romanticism as it is applied within the field of literary studies is ultimately derived from the word Rome. Rome is today known to us as merely

the name of a city but in first three centuries of the Common Era the city gave its name to a huge empire radiating from it to cover much of Europe, the whole of modern day Turkey and the fringes of northern Africa. One of the chief binding features of this Roman Empire was the language Latin and the term “romance” thus came to be associated, and in fact is still associated, with languages which originated from Latin. So for instance Italian, French, Spanish, Portuguese are all referred to as romance languages because they originated from Latin which was in turn the official language of an empire that was centered in Rome.

Now by the middle ages, the word romance also acquired a more specialized meaning when it was used not just to designate languages derived from Latin but also writings in these languages. This meaning was even further narrowed down when romance was used to mean specific kinds of writings – tales of chivalrous adventures, of magic and of courtly love which were filled with knights, princesses and a host of fantastical creatures. These metrical tales, referred simply as romances, formed the mainstay of medieval European literature. Thus, if we look at the history of English literature for instance we find a large collection of metrical romances based on the lives and adventures of King Arthur and his famous band of courtiers.

The word romance and the adjective form romantic registered another shift in meaning in English language during the late seventeenth and early eighteenth century. As you will know from our previous lecture on Neoclassical literary theory, this was the period when Enlightenment prioritized reason and made rationality the touchstone of judging the value of everything related to man and his universe. During this period, the terms romance and romantic with their association with magical and fantastical literature were turned into pejorative words. In fact, the very first use of the adjective romantic that Oxford English dictionary records is from 1650 where the pejorative connotation is already noticeable. The quotation is as follows: “Being

a history which is partly true, partly romantick (sic), morally divine". Note here the way in which the word romantick is placed in opposition to the word truth. This gives the impression that the romantic involves things which are fabricated and fantastical and therefore not true. If we go down the list of references provided by the Oxford English dictionary we realise that by the mid eighteenth century, the pejorative quality of the adjective "romantic" is fully established. Thus in the year 1740 we find the reference of this following line: "This Account, as Whimsical and Romantic as it is, was told to the Lady Cowper...by Dr. Patrick." Romantic and whimsical have become synonymous here and both signify the notion of something which is capricious, fantastic and not amenable to reason.

Now as you will know from our study of Neoclassicism that during the late seventeenth and eighteenth century, the valorization of reason within the field of literature was translated into the valorization of classics. It involved celebrating the rules which putatively underlined the classical literary world of the ancient Greek and Latin authors. Thus within the field of late seventeenth century and early eighteenth century English literature, we find the term romantic being used to designate a kind of negative literary space within which the classical rules and conventions were not in operation. One example of such a use can be found in the preface to English dramatist Thomas Shadwell's 1668 play *The Sullen Lover*. In the preface Shadwell writes how he has meticulously tried to abide by the classical convention of the Three Unities and how in the matter of obeying the classical rules he has found Ben Jonson to be his only worthy predecessor. Shadwell then goes on to add this: "most other Authors that I ever read . . . have wild Romantick Tales, wherein they strain Love and Honour to that Ridiculous height, that it becomes Burlesque". The romantic is here identified as a wild site that is in sharp contrast to the meticulously organized garden of the neoclassical literature.

But these various attributions like wild, fantastical, magical, whimsical only gives us a rather vague idea of what exactly do the word romantic mean? And this is precisely the problem. If we study the use of the word romantic in late seventeenth and early eighteenth century we find it to mean more or less a negative space that is beyond the pale of Enlightenment reason and the rule-governed neoclassicism. Throughout the course of the eighteenth century this negative space identified by the name romantic would be filled with various different and even contradictory attributes which again were mostly pejorative.

The negative space identified by the term romantic will only gradually come to acquire the prestige of a positive and influential category of creating and thinking about literature and the world during the course of the nineteenth century. But even after the term “romantic” gets stabilized during the course of the nineteenth century it will not have a clearly defined meaning. Thus for instance as late as 1924 we find the American scholar A.O. Lovejoy arguing that:

“any attempt at a general appraisal even of a single chronologically determinate Romanticism --- still more, of "Romanticism" as a whole --- is a fatuity. When Romanticism has been analyzed into the distinct "strains" or ideas which compose it, the true philosophic affinities and the eventual practical influence in life and art of these several strains will usually be found to be exceedingly diverse and often conflicting.”

So the point here is that in our quest to explore romantic theory, we will actually be dealing with various strains which are exceedingly diverse. My lecture today therefore won't attempt at a comprehensive analysis of either romanticism in general or of romantic theory of literature in particular primarily because such generalisations, at least in the case of romanticism, is not quite possible.

French Revolution

With this in mind let us turn to the first major strand which informed the romantic theory of art that emerged during the late eighteenth and early nineteenth century. This is the strand of French revolution. On the 14th of July, 1789 the fortress of Bastille, which was used by the French aristocracy as a political prison, was stormed by a raging crowd. With this iconic act, the French revolution burst onto the world stage. Within a few years the French monarch Louis XVI was beheaded along with his wife Marie Antoinette. In many ways these scenes of violence and regicide that were playing out in the streets of the late eighteenth century Paris were repetitions of what had happened in England during the 1640s. In both the cases the absolute monarch was removed from the throne and that act was followed by an attempt to restructure the political system so as to end the autocratic rule of one person or a small section of the society who formed the aristocracy and to bring in a more representative form of government. Thus in both the cases absolute monarchy was replaced for varying periods of time by a republic where the hierarchy of the monarchical system gave way to the dreams of creating a more egalitarian society. In both cases again, the dream was only partially fulfilled. Political agency was indeed expanded beyond the narrow domain of aristocracy but it was still not extended to a large section of the population. Indeed, in both the cases the initial attempts to revolutionise the way political power was structured in the society ended with the return of monarchy – in England in the form of Charles II and in France in the form of Napoleon. But in spite of these many similarities it has to be noted that the French revolution had a much wider global impact than the beheading of Charles I and the establishment of the British Republic. The democratic and rebellious spirit of the French revolution produced a much more pronounced sense of exhilaration among its followers. We

witness some of this wild exhilaration in the lines of poetry written by William Wordsworth in which he recounts the emotions he felt while he was in Paris during the tumultuous years when the French Revolution unfolded. To quote his words:

Bliss was it in that dawn to be alive,
But to be young was very Heaven! O times,
In which the meagre, stale, forbidding ways
Of custom, law, and statute, took at once
The attraction of a country in romance!

Look at the use of the word romance here. The distinction that had developed in English language by the mid eighteenth century between romance and romantic on one side and customs, laws, rules, and classical conventions on the other is preserved here. But the values of the two sides are overturned. Rules, conventions and laws which were so dear to the intellectuals of the neoclassical period is turned into a negative thing through its association with the oppressive regime of the old guard, and romance acquires a positive charge which is identified with the transformative spirit of the French revolution.

Now, William Wordsworth and Samuel Taylor Coleridge, the two pioneers of English romanticism, were both eager enthusiasts of the French revolution and the possibilities of change that it embodied. But like many enthusiasts, both Wordsworth and Coleridge were also fast disillusioned with the revolution as it failed to live up to its more radical promises and ended up with a monarch back on the throne. These radical promises which so inspired romantics like Wordsworth and Coleridge and which propelled the French revolution at least in its early days are found most clearly in the writings of the French intellectual Jean Jacques Rousseau. And to

really understand the impact of the ideals of French revolution on the English Romantic Movement we need to understand some of the key arguments that Rousseau produced.

Jean Jacques Rousseau

The dates of Jean Jacques Rousseau are 1712 to 1778 and he was one of the most influential figures in the history of modern West. Rousseau through his writings like *Discourse on the Origin and Basis of Inequality among Men*, *Emile*, *The Social Contract*, *Confessions* strongly shaped almost all aspects of French social, cultural and political life during the second half of the eighteenth century and it were these influences which formed much of the intellectual basis of the French Revolution. One of the key ideas that Rousseau proposed in his works is that of the “noble savage”. Now as we have discussed in our earlier lecture, the neoclassical intellectual tradition primarily conceived man as essentially a social creature. The most representative human being of this era was that of a man engaging with his peers within the institutions that made up the bourgeois public sphere. Rousseau expanded this narrow perception of man and introduced in his writings the idea of a pre-social man. This pre-social man is innately good in nature – hence the term “noble savage” – and he is characterized by two basic instinctual drives: one is of self-preservation and the other is of compassion for the others in their misery and troubles.

Now this pre-social existence which Rousseau presented as the original state of human beings proved to be a very attractive idea to the British Romantics. Indeed, they hailed this “natural” state of being as the source of all human virtues and profusely wrote about returning to this state by removing themselves from the social spaces within the cities and embracing a state of solitude

within the lap of nature. The romantics also valorized this idea of the pre-social existence by celebrating the state of childhood which, like the noble savage, has not yet entered the social domain and is mainly a creature of instincts. But here I want to flag a problem. Since in classes of English literary studies, Rousseau is usually taught and read as a prelude to the romantic literary movement it is usually assumed that Rousseau not only presented the idea of the noble savage but also valorized it and indeed argued for a return to that state of being. Rousseau in fact does no such thing. For Rousseau, the state of being a noble savage is only the first stage in a complex process of human evolution. So in other words, Rousseau does not present a binary where the noble savage in the lap of nature is all good and then suddenly turns bad as he evolves into a social being. Indeed, for Rousseau the noble savage, irrespective of how noble he is, lacks valuable qualities like reason and morality in his wholly instinctive state of being. So while studying Rousseau to understand his influence on the romantics we have to be alert to the ways in which the English romantics not only adopted their ideas from Rousseau but also modified these ideas to create their own world view.

However, let us now move from Rousseau's idea of the noble savage to some of his political ideas which will again bring us back to context of French revolution. The fundamental basis of Rousseau's political ideas is a radical egalitarianism. In his *Discourse on the Origin and Basis of Inequality among Men* Rousseau writes that "it is manifestly against the law of nature [...] that a handful of men be glutted with superfluities while the starving multitude lacks necessities". This is clearly directed against a socio-political order where a monarch along with a group of entitled aristocrats holds absolute sway over the affairs of the state. In the place of such an "unnatural" system of social and political existence, Rousseau proposes a radical alternative. It is based on a

social contract which “establishes equality among the citizens in that they are all obligated under the same conditions and are all entitled to the same rights”.

It is these political ideals of Rousseau which sought to destabilize the entrenched privileges of a small group of social and political elites that inspired the leaders of the French revolution. And these were also the ideals which inspired the British Romantics who were swayed by the sense of tremendous enthusiasm that the early phase of the French revolution produced.

Both the ideas of the pre-social noble savage and socio-political egalitarianism resulted in the foregrounding of a new image of man in Romantic literature. Thus, whereas for the neoclassical authors the ideal human representation was the adult, rational, and mature man of the bourgeois public sphere, for the romantics it became a motley crowd of individuals who symbolized the oppressed, the marginalized, and the disenfranchised.

This centering of individuals from the social margins is already evident in what is usually categorized as the “pre-Romantic” poetry of William Blake whose *Songs of Innocence and of Experience* was published in the same year the Bastille was stormed. Thus for instance we find Blake writing poems about orphaned chimney sweepers who sleeps in soot and dreams horrible nightmares about him and his friends “Dick, Joe, Ned, and Jack/ [...] all of them locked up in coffins of black”.

Such a tendency to bring to the foreground the marginalized and the oppressed is also prominently evident in Wordsworth’s poetry. Consider for instance two of his poems, “The Female Vagrant” and “Resolution and Independence”. At the heart of the first poem is the story of a woman living at the edges of a strongly class divided society. Her life leads her from one misfortune to another and she finally ends up as a homeless vagrant wandering across the fields to eke out whatever meagre living is possible. The second poem introduces us to another

wandering figure situated at the margins of the society. Here it is an old leech gatherer pacing
“About the weary moors continually,/ Wandering about alone and silently”.

Now though both Blake and Wordsworth foreground figures from the social margins rather than seeking their inspiration from within the bourgeois public sphere, there is an important difference between their poems. Thus, unlike Blake, Wordsworth situates all of these marginalized figures within a very close proximity to nature so much so that the distinction between these human figures and their natural surrounding starts blurring. Consider for instance these lines from “The Female Vagrant”:

I lived upon the mercy of the fields,
And oft of cruelty the sky accused;
On hazard, or what general bounty yields,
Now coldly given, now utterly refused.
The fields I for my bed have often used:

In these lines, the vagrant is entirely turned into a creature of the moors and the fields. Completely exposed to the nature she almost becomes one with it. This blurring of distinction between the human and nature is even more pronounced in Wordsworth’s description of the old leech-gatherer:

As a huge stone is sometimes seen to lie
Couched on the bald top of an eminence;
Wonder to all who do the same espy,
By what means it could thither come, and whence;
So that it seems a thing endued with sense:

Like a sea-beast crawled forth, that on a shelf
Of rock or sand reposes, there to sun itself;

Such seemed this Man, not all alive nor dead,
Nor all asleep [...]

This close intertwining of the human and the natural forms the basis of a larger Romantic view of the world and indeed of the Romantic theory of literature as well. It is to this man-nature relationship that we will turn to in our next lecture. Thank you

