

The Problems of Life and Death in Romantic Poetry

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Romanticism is essentially the emphasis upon the individual effort to escape from the world of conventions and social control. There are two great avenues of such escape - External nature on the one hand, and man's nature and imagination on the other.

In the age of Romanticism literature springs from two main sources: emotion and imagination. Emotion is a feeling of the human heart when intensely stirred by sad, beautiful, comic or tragic happenings. Imagination is the ability of the mind to picture vividly scenes or happenings that either do not exist or have never actually been seen.

Romanticism is associated with vitality, powerful emotions, dreams like ideas and unusual individualism. The key word for romanticism is freedom to give reign to one's emotions and dreams. Wordsworth is an example of the romanticist whose main concern is himself .He wrote in his famous Preface: "all good poetry is the spontaneous overflow of powerful feelings". The poet to a romanticist is "a man pleased with his own passions ". Keats knew this when he cried " O far a life of sensations rather than of thought". Pierre Charles Baudelaire, the French romanticist, expressed his own point of view saying" one should always be drunk it is time to seek intoxication. That you may not be the slave of time , drink without ceasing of wine , of poetry, of virtue , as you may wish ."

Death was one of the main problems occupying romantic poets.

They were struggling with the idea of life and death, and trying to solve the problem of the mystery of death.

Wordsworth is the one with whom death seems to dominate poetry less than with the others, though in "Intimations of I Mortality " you find this problem the subject of the Ode. Death, as the poet explained in this poem, is then nothing but a return to a more complete and more satisfactory existence. Life is an existence of isolation, and of no intrinsic value, whereas death is

perfection, and man can submerge himself again in nature, and become part of the universe.

With Shelley the obsession of death was extraordinary. He saw in it the perfect state, the stage of ultimate and peaceful happiness, and his short life saw him occupied with the thought of death in every poem he wrote. In his "Ode to the Westwind " this longing for death -is one of the chief motives. Death promises what life cannot give, a submerging into nature, complete disintegration with it , and thus a return to the true sources of life.

Shelley is a deeply sensitive poet; at a time he has been heart-sick and hopeless, weakened and discouraged; he has hated life and conventional societies and quit even faith in God. However, and before the Westwind can perform such a job and assist the poet with a new hope. The poet, radically enough, allows free range for his wild uncontrollable spirit driving him to madness and impracticality. He is on his way of almost committing suicide being haunted by an intense feeling of a "death-urge". He wishes to lose all his senses ,all attachment with life, all communications with society and accompany the wind panting" beneath thy power and share the impulse of thy thought". In such a mood, Shelley is quite aware of the consequence: "I fall on the thorns of life; I bleed ". It is an extreme and savage love of self -torture that drives us to pity the poet's emotional status. It is an expression of deep hatred to life in general.

Man , in his life -time, suffers from the loneliness of his isolation ,and while all other things in nature perish and revive, he alone seems to be doomed to die and disappear , only his thoughts remain ingasa visible heritage to the world.

Frustration may be felt through the writings of the majority of the romantic poets. Some consider the element of melancholy to be a result of the many disappointments through which some of the romantic poets passed. The new Wordsworth ,Byron, Coleridge, Shelley and John Keats dreamt of, was one full of mysterious dreams. The industrial revolution of the Eighteenth century and the dominance of materialism caused many difficulties for the romantic spiritual philosophy of life.

Life to a romanticist is either a "silver vision " or a "dim vast vale of tears ", as Shelley expresses this fact in his " Alastor":

"As one that in a "silver vision " lost

Then in his "Hymn to intellectual beauty" :

"The dim "vast vale of tears", vacant and desolate"

Life is not at its best when it can combine both extremes in one situation; when moonlight shines on the ruins of a castle or when flowers give "thought that often lie too deep for tears".

In another poem deploring the untimely death of Keats, who died on year before Shelley, the poet calls life a "dome of many-coloured glass" which "stains the white radiance of eternity". It is death which is pure and perfect, while life, and even art which transcends it , are " stains" in this perfection.

Keats poetry again and again returned to the subject of death-to him the invalid to whom death was a constant presence, death had two contradictory aspects. One is described in the "Ode to a nightingale" , where the dismal effects of age and the threat of death are seen, but then

there was that other form of death which meant freedom from suffering, the escape from the effects of time, which seemed the only ideal state to the poet.

Romantic poetry is born out of the sense of imperfection, and the poets who were influenced by the ideas of romanticism, could never free themselves from the obsession of death that promised an escape from the imperfection of life. They regretted the limitations that were imposed, and death appeared to them as the ideal state.

In the "Bright Star" Keats likens himself to a bright star in his steadfastness in love. "Bright Star" is a sonnet written shortly before the poet's death in Italy. Keats was in the last stages of consumption when he wrote it , and it is an expression of his burning desire for a consummation of life , his hunger for experience, which is strengthened by the sensuous elements. The longing of man is in it who knows that most of his dreams are unattainable, and that his death was inevitable. .

Lord Byron was a great admirer of the classics, yet he was the leader of the extreme form of romanticism. He was an aristocrat, yet a passionate revolutionary who sacrificed his life in the cause of Greek democracy.

Gotho said of him : "he is the greatest talent of our century , but the moment he begins to reflect he is a child".

His poem "on reaching my thirty -sixth year" was written right before the poet's death in Greece. In it he intuitively speaks of the end but does not regret his past life for now he has the rare opportunity of dying for the cause of liberty. The romantic poet sought an escape from the actual world to a world of vision once seen. Being an individualistic he believed in liberty and freedom. It was George Lord Byron who praised the:

“Eternal spirit of chainless mind
Brightest in dungeons, liberty, thou art
For there they habitation is the heart
The heart, which loves of three alone, can bind.”

Percy Shelley felt the magic touch of liberty, he thus addressed the common people of his country saying:

“Rise like lions after slumber
Shake your chains to earth like dew
Which in sleep had fallen on you
You are many they are few”

In his effort to find a more perfect universe, the romanticist shuns actuality and seeks an escape to a different world, a world where dreams create perfection, where faith is real and no pretence prevails, where nature heals the wounds and restores health to mind and body. The romantic poets were of the belief that society had contaminated man -that what man needed most was to live simply and naturally as a son to mother, Nature.. ...close to the soil, loitering on the grass, sitting beside a flowing brook, lying in the shade and chanting with birds and flying with butterflies...as Robert Bruns says:

Give me a spark of Nature's fire
That is the learning I desire.

תקציר

השירה הרומנטית קשורה קשר הדוק עם חיוניות, שפע של אמוציות, רעיונות דמוי חלום ואינדיבדואליזם בלתי שיגרת. המשורר הרומנטי מוצא את סיפוקו בטבע הגולמי הבלתי נגוע. המשוררים הרומנטיים אמורים לחיות בעולם דמיוני יותר מאשר בעולם אמיתי. הם כתבו על הזיקה בין המוות והחיים, על הטבע כמקור השראה ועל כח הרגש והאמוציות. המוות היה אחת הבעיות שהטרידו את המשוררים הרומנטיים. הם נאבקו ברעיון החיים והמוות וניסו למצוא פתרון לבעיה זו. מוות לפי וורדסוורת' הוא מעין חזרה למציאות יותר מושלמת ויותר משביעה רצון. החיים הם מציאות של בדידות ולא חוסר ערך פנימי פה בזמן שהמוות הוא בחזקת שלמות והאדם יכול שוב להתחבר לטבע ולהפוך לחלק מהיקום.

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