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ROMANTICISM: A MODERN PHILOSOPHY THROUGH CLASSICAL EYES

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ABSTRACT

Romanticism is often thought to be a step backward in contrast to the Enlightenment ideology. Romantics were often categorized as escapists who revolted against the progress of science and technology and wanted to withdraw themselves from the era of urbanization. Modernization and Industrialization made our lives easier and luxurious, so why were the Romantics revolting against such boons of science? The Lake District Poets of England sought to return to Nature and claimed that Nature preceded us so man can never control Nature as man is subsumed as a component within Nature.

Romanticism gets inspired from the fruits of Renaissance and infuses this knowledge with the notion of 'empathy' in order to arrive at a modern perspective where man doesn't want to outdo nature but live in harmony with one another, arrive at individuation but not through individualization in a society where he not only dedicates himself to learning, but also appropriating the seeds to consciousness to be at peace with nature.

Romanticism revolutionized the ways of thinking by placing man in the center and not religion, while focusing on the importance of nature to shape up man's character for a better future. Thus, the Romantic ideal was not just a sentimental philosophy, it was extremely modern in its outlook as it tried to uphold the traditions by blending the roots of classicism with radical ideas and revolutionary questions in order to arrive at modernity.

Keywords: Romanticism, Renaissance, philosophy, man, god, soul, body.

The driving forces of nature and existence saw a change along with new inventions in the field of science as the commercial and industrial life thrived synonymously during the late eighteenth century. The fall of monarchy to the power of people's revolutions aggravated this change after the guillotining of Louis XVI. Britain saw the emergence of Lake District Poets as well as a group of artists and revolutionaries across Europe like Jean Jacques Rousseau, Thomas Chatterton, Francisco Goya, Goethe, and George Gordon Byron. These poets had the enduring power to inspire generations with visions of eternity and along with the philosophy of Rene Descartes, John Locke, Thomas Hobbes and Jean Jacques Rousseau the Romantic ideal was brought together. During the inception of the previous Cultural Revolution, the Italian Renaissance saw the shift from theocentricism to anthropocentrism. The idea of removing religion from the center and replacing it with man was not a new thing to the European Romantics.¹

The Renaissance took place after the fall of Eastern side of Roman Empire and the seeds of Romanticism were sown along the fall of French Monarchy as liberty and individual freedom found its full manifestation through the philosophical debates of Denis Diderot and Jean Jacques Rousseau. Denis Diderot revolted against the existing order of monarchy and claimed that 'reason' is important for the growth of civilization. Rousseau, on the contrary emphasized that 'feeling' is more important than reason. Shelley, argued that "Reason is to Imagination as the instrument to the agent, as the body to the spirit, as the shadow to the substance." Their ideas sowed the seeds of Romanticism. In Germany, a group of Romantics emerged known as Frühromantik. They revolted against the modernization of human life which tends to alienate individuals and they believed that the sole idea of being a romantic was to understand others, and concluded that Romanticism was not just an approach to Literature but to life itself. The Black Death indirectly influenced the impact of Renaissance artistic ideals much in the same way, poverty and bitterness shaped the background for Romanticism. In England the Industrial Revolution was an important reason for romanticism to take place and the English Romantics wanted to return to nature. In Lake District, Grasmere, the influence of Wordsworth made his followers revolt against a railway track that was to pass through that place and they got the railway track rerouted.²

Wordsworth wanted man to be united with nature and questioned the savagery of lust and greed that was demonstrated by the Industrial Revolution. He wrote in *Lines Written in Early Spring*:

"I heard a thousand blended notes,
While in a grove I sate reclined,
In that sweet mood when pleasant thoughts
Bring sad thoughts to the mind.

To her fair works did Nature link
The human soul that through me ran;
And much it grieved my heart to think
What man has made of man."³

Renaissance removed God from center and Romantics questioned the divine rights of kingship. Rousseau argued that man should be in harmony with nature and without the shackles of civilization, self-preservation so that he could 'feel'. Feeling and empathy were important for the Romantics as Shelley elaborately talked about the necessity to empathize with others in his treatise *A Defense of Poetry*. According to Shelley, poetry should connect men with each other and help them identify with the pain and pleasures of others. This idea saw the seeds of consciousness that brought forth moral goodness and empathy together by effectively channeling 'Imagination'. Einstein said "Imagination is more important than knowledge. For knowledge is limited, whereas imagination embraces the entire world, stimulating progress, giving birth to evolution."⁴ The seeds of Imagination replenishes moral goodness in man which in turn cleanses the society as a whole. Imagination not only helps in the purging of emotions but also balances the humors as man puts himself in another's shoe and tries to understand their situation. For Shelley, this thought can be evoked only through Poetry and this is how he defended poetry against the infamous claims by his friend Thomas Love Peacock. However, the emphasis on 'spirit' or 'soul' is important because the soul is the seat of creativity and wisdom and it is poetry which can nourish the soul so that body and mind can connect and perceive a sense of harmony.

Plato talked about the idea of controlling bodily appetites so as to focus on the formation and development of the soul. Plato idealized the human soul as the center of one's life and evil could be suppressed by curbing the desires of the body.⁵ Shelley in his essay *A Defense of Poetry* argues that poets are philosophers as well as legislators. They turn the beautiful into ethereal through the "faculty of approximation".⁶ This "faculty of approximation" enables the observer to experience the beautiful, by establishing a "relation between the highest pleasure and its causes". Poets communicate with the common man by using this faculty and showing both sides of the same picture and this is how a poet is different from anyone else writing poetry. A poet must have the fire within him to deliver verses spontaneously and

eloquently and this genius is natural and cannot be imbibed by labour. Longinus mentions in *On the Sublime* that sublimity is the ability to form grand conceptions, with an irresistible force and mastery. A well timed stroke of sublimity scatters everything like a thunderbolt, illuminating the poetic genius.⁷ John Keats wrote in a letter to John Taylor, "If poetry comes not as naturally as leaves to a tree, it had better not come at all."⁸ These claims by Keats and Longinus focused on the benevolence of soul, and Shelley takes into account all forms of art like poetry, music and architecture to show how order and harmony is brought together through the depths of imagination. Joubert said, nothing is poetry unless it transports. Shelley compared poets with a nightingale whose melody dark transports men. To understand Shelley's argument that poets are architects and philosophers, one must take into account the importance of Plato's dictions which laid the foundations of western civilization. During the Italian Renaissance, scholars revisited the classical texts and embraced the intellectual wealth of the earliest philosophers from Athens like Plato, Aristotle. The culmination of the Renaissance saw the epitome in the fields of arts, science, poetry and architecture. To understand the intellectual accounts of the High Renaissance, it is important to understand the philosophy of Plato which reshaped human history during the Cultural Revolution. Plato stressed on the importance of 'Eudemonia' which meant prosperity and happiness of the self-leading to fulfilment of the individual. Shelley, who was directly influenced by these conventions, too stressed on the importance of such fulfilment and argued that it could be achieved through poetry because poetry delights with pleasure. Shelley claimed that the savage was to ages, as the child was to years and poetry that was conceived in the infancy of any society was not savage, but had sparks of inextinguishable genius that would pierce the minds of later generations when language develops fully and the lexicography and nuances of grammar is fully achieved. Thomas Love Peacock brought into light a very pertinent question that was prevalent in the nineteenth century; if poetry originated in the early stages of civilization, it must have been savage and for the nineteenth century society of Industrial Revolution and progressive endeavors, poetry was barbaric and absurd.

Romantic philosopher Jean Jacques Rousseau believed in the natural goodness and benevolence of children for being the seat of creativity and natural genius. The child, he argued, is the original rebel, without the constraints of the pretensions of civilization and monstrosities of the adult world. In his work *Emile*, he praised the spontaneity of the child and it is believed that the human soul in its pure form has its manifestation in the form of a child which lacks rationale and reason.⁹

Wordsworth rightfully said that the "Child is the father of man"¹⁰ and to nourish the human soul and achieve the state of Eudemonia, this creative genius needs to be understood. Poets have this faculty in abundance and Coleridge who was an addict of opium and laudanum had visions of ecstasy and when he looked deep within himself and was transported as he got inspiration from the oriental world which led him to compose the sublime passages in *Kubla Khan, Or, A Vision in a Dream: A Fragment*.

"In Xanadu did Kubla Khan
A stately pleasure-dome decree:
Where Alph, the sacred river, ran
Through caverns measureless to man
Down to a sunless sea."¹¹

Coleridge was exploring the recesses of mind and the depths of the unconscious and believed that the imagination was the soul itself because it had the ability to create new worlds, change lives. Shelley said that reading poetry strengthened the moral goodness in man much in the same manner exercise benefits the body. Poetry impersonated nature in an Elysian light which contents men. A poet, to achieve the moral goodness, must place himself in another man's shoes and imbibe his pain and pleasure and communicate the same with his fellowmen. In *The Rime of the Ancient Mariner* one sees the wedding guest unable to go to the feast after being transported by the story of the mariner. He became wiser and sadder and that's what poetry does to human souls-poetry helps us assimilate the pain of others through imagination and attain wisdom.¹²

In October 1815, a young Londoner named John Keats attended Guy's Hospital for his anatomy demonstration and as a trainee surgeon he had to experience a full surgery without anaesthesia, during which

the sympathetic imagination overpowered him and he soon left the course. He felt the pain of the patient in him and nurtured the power of empathy within him through the power of imagination. Keats wanted to heal through his poetry.¹³

“A poet is a sage; a humanist, physician to all men.”- *The Fall of Hyperion: A Dream*.¹⁴

For Keats, a poet has no self, it has no character and his genius lay in transcending ideas which enabled him to experience empathy in the pain and pleasure of other beings

“A poet is the most unpoetical of anything in existence, because he has no identity; he is continually in for, and filling, some other body.” -1818 *John Keats: to Richard Woodhouse*¹⁵

In Oxford, in the winter of 1811, an anonymous pamphlet entitled *The Necessity of Atheism* was posted to all of the bishops and heads of colleges at the university. It denounced the existence of god without proof. A clergyman ordered to burn all copies immediately because the writer committed blasphemy, a crime punishable with imprisonment. The basis of Christian church and European civilization was being questioned. It was later found out that Shelley was the author of that pamphlet. Shelley was a profound romantic and claimed that the necessary foundation of a free and enlightened life was atheism.

“All religious nations are founded solely on authority; all the religions of the world forbid examination and do not want one to reason... A God made by man undoubtedly has need of man to make himself known to man.” - *The Necessity of Atheism*¹⁶

Shelley argued that poetry is immortal because it ensures man’s moral improvement. Plato thought that nature’s beauty is within the attributes of peace, harmony which educates the human souls and according to Shelley, poets infer these attributes through poetry so that the wounds of humanity are healed. The importance of rejecting the herd-instincts or Doxa was preached by Plato and he emphasized that free-thinking was essential. Romanticism, thus was an extension of the Renaissance essence, which advocated free thinking by placing man in place of religion, and was to some extent a primer for the existential philosophy, which again replaced religion with man, questioned the purpose of our life. Sartre rejected Aristotle’s Essentialism, which claimed that man is born with an essence and must live up to it. Sartre rejected bad faith like Plato rejected Doxa and said man must live ‘authentically’. To live authentically is to find the meaning and purpose of one’s own existence and not blindly follow the institutions- be it our parents or the religious institutions. This is how “Existence precedes essence” according to Sartre.¹⁷ Romanticism, thus is not a step backwards but an ideal which regards empathy by connecting man with man while being connected to nature so as to avoid the barbarity of man’s lust and greed. Moving forward without empathy was without meaning for these philosophers as it stripped the natural goodness of man. The Romantic philosophy as well as the existential philosophy takes its roots from the Hellenic ideas advocated by philosophers like Plato and this tells us why the Romantic philosophy has its roots to the classical ideas while being radically modern in its outlook.

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