

VOICE OF THE POOR AND VOICE OF AN IDEAL IN VICTORIAN POLITICAL POETRY

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ABSTRACT

The Victorian Era (1820-1900) was an era of political and social reforms as well as tremendous changes in literary history of England. It was an age of transition, in social standards, in political concepts as well as in religious faith. From the Reform Acts (1832, 1867 and 1884) to the abolishment of slavery (1833) and the (moderate) control & child labour (1848), the voice of the people would consider more and more on political ground against the upper classes. But preferably, they had to display they had a voice, and that not only the royalty of the society could decide for their future. The period (1830-1855) at a time of awesome unsteadiness, began riots, pamphlets and Victorian political poetry. What is Victorian political poetry? Through 19th century portrayals and critics, we will ponder the Radical poetry and the political writings of a laureate Victorian poet, Alfred Lord Tennyson.

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INTRODUCTION

The sway of Romanticism on Victorian idea is inherent any work of 19th century, poetry included. The major work "Preface" to the Lyrical Ballads (1800) of William Wordsworth is still known as one of the most masterful literary definition of poetry. He suggested that the language of poetry should be closefisted to the people's way of speaking to personify more living feelings, and so to the reach the truth. Matthew Arnold, the major Victorian poet, literary critic and great philosopher, described poetry to this idea of natural feelings in the theory of 'real estimate':

"The best poetry is what we want; the best poetry will be found to have a power of forming sustaining and delighting us, as nothing else can [...] In reading poetry, a sense for the best, the really excellent, and of the strength and joy to be drawn from it, should be present in our minds and should govern our estimate of what we read. But this real estimate, the only true one, is liable to superseded, if we are not watchful, by two other kind of estimate, the historic estimate and the personal estimate, both of which are fallacious. A poet or a poem may count to us historically, they may count to us on grounds personal to ourselves, and they may count to us really'.

(Matthew Arnold, "The study of Poetry" in Essays in Criticism, P.237)

Nevertheless, this excerpt displays that Arnold protected Wordsworth's definition of poetry without actually defending Romanticism, as it impacts the reader with the personal estimate and so is not the best poetry.

Besides, Matthew Arnold linked poetry with religious feeling, like Romantics, as the vital originality of poetry is defined as an act a pure creation.

Another philosopher and literary critic, John Stuart Mill, on a completely different point of view, opposed his theory on poetry to both Wordsworth and Arnold. From the point of view of him, poetry is not a question of showing the truth, would it be create literary or religious feelings, but a question of understanding and believing. The reader does not need to witness the truth of poetry to be convinced of it:

‘The object of poetry is confessedly to act upon the emotions; and therein is poetry sufficiently distinguished from what Wordsworth affirms to be its logical opposite, namely, not prose, but matter of fact or science. The one addresses itself to the belief, the other to the feelings. The one does its work by convincing or persuading; the other by moving. The one acts by presenting a proposition to the understanding, the other by offering interesting objects of contemplation to the sensibilities’. (John Stuart Mill, “Thoughts on poetry and its varieties” in *Roman et poesie en Grande-Bretagne au xixe siecle*, p.154)

It is known that Victorian political poetry concluded from the influence of George Crabbe, a surgeon, and one of the first English Radical poet and an inspiration for Lord Tennyson later on. He penned poetry about the severe living of the working classes of the countryside with much detail. Nevertheless, society was changing, and the bad infirmities of the peasantry made them move to the cities to work in factories, and soon Crabbe's poetry would become out-of-date. In his *Monthly Repository* (1806-1838), a Unitarian newspaper converted to Radicalism in 1831, William Johnson Fox, a literary critic and a political and religious orator, preferred a new kind of political poetry, Chartist Poetry, and more especially Ebenezer Elliott.

The feelings of a neglected part of the Victorian society is shown by the Chartist poetry; the portrayals of factories and the life of labour classes refine nowadays historians to weigh a point of view hard to analyse, owing to little documents about them. Their vogue was between the Romantic emotion, this ‘impassioned truth’ Elliott talked about, and the restraint of verdict with political beliefs in reforming society, newly the way John Stuart Mill terminated poetry. Unfortunately for the Radicals, the movement stopped in 1848 and soon after edition of its poetry did too. Gerald Massey’s *Voices of Freedom and Lyrics of Love* (1850) is one of the last Chartist collection of poems. However Still, it was far from being the end of Victorian political poetry, as penned the journalist and literary critic George Troup:

‘The number of volumes in verse issued during this dull year [1848] indicate that the poets or versifiers do not despair of the world, and refuse to consider their art proscribed. [...]

We strenuously contend against the gloomy notion that imaginative power, and the feelings that make poetry, are fading far amongst us. The statement is utterly untrue, and can only originate in an utter ignorance of the present and a wilful worshipping of the past.’ (George Troup, “Poets and Poetry” in *Roman et poesie en Grande-Bretagne au XIXe siecle*, p.171)

Indeed, Alfred Tennyson, the great Victorian poet laureate, even admired by Queen Victoria herself, drawn on his own way of pondering about society and a explicit kind of poetry; so personal that even today it is hard to distinguished it. Dr. Jone Hodson and Dr. Anna Barton, specialists of Romantic and Victorian literature at the University of Sheffield, enabled Tennyson of ‘fake Victorian’ or ‘Romantic Victorian’, a sort of Victorian author who pondered he was born one generation too late, as such discarded Victorian literature and desired to compose Romantic poetry. But we have already

illustrated that Romanticism keen influenced Victorian literature; so was Tennyson 'a worshipper of the past', or did he occupy himself about the world of his time and its problems?

The sensible response to this challenge tend to be a vexing "both: Tennyson assumed his style to Wordsworth's and Shelley's, attempted to circulate feelings with words like a Romantic and penned anti-Napoleonic tasks such as the Ode on the Death of the Duke of Wellington (1852), but at the equal duration Tennyson protected an ideal of an evolving society. Tennyson was the evidence that Romantic poetry and the Victorian idea were dissimilar, but not clashing:

'Our age was supposed to have risen over the ornamental in literature, and to be an entirely practical, [...] It brings men nearer to each other, and should in that way expand at once the heart and the mind-the intellectual and the moral power?' (George Troup, "Poets and Poetry" in *Roman et poesie en Grande-Bretagne au xixe siecle*, p. 170).

The poem which narrates Tennyson's interrogations the best on the place of man in Nature and the growth of the Earth is in fact the best known and appreciated:

In Memoriam A. H. H. (published in 1850, written from 1834), observing the death of his best friend, fellow poet and future brother-in-law Arthur Hallam (1811-1833). The motifs of the slight of the human being, time running out and burying recur throughout the 133 cantos with the rehtorical field of stones and hills:

'But I should turn my ears and hear
The moaning of the homeless sea,
The sound of streams that swift or slow
Draw down Aeonian hills, and sow
The dust of continents to be? (In Memoriam, xxxv, 1. 8-12, p. 1155)
"So careful of the type?" but no
From scarped cliff and quarried stone
She [Nature] cries, "A thousand types are gone;
I care for nothing; all shall go.
"Thou makest thire appeal to me:
I bring to life, I bring to death;
The spirit does but mean the breath:
I know no more. "[...]
Who trusted God was love indeed
And love Creation's final law-
Though Nature, red in tooth and claw
With ravine, shrieked against his creed-

Who loved, who suffered countless ills,
 Who battled for the True, the Just,
 Be blown about desert dust,
 Or sealed within the iron hills? (In Memoriam, LVI, 1. 1-8 and 13-20, p. 1159)

Additionally, the mid-1830s poetry delineates the interest of Tennyson for engineering and more especially new mean of travelling (train, hot air balloons...). In the poem "Locksley Hall" (1835) in the suite Poem of 1842, the record voice of an industrial utopia:

'There me-thinks would be enjoyment more than in this march mind,
 In the steamship, in the railway, in the thoughts that shake mankind[...]
 Not in vain the distance beacons. Forward, forward let us range,
 Let the great world spin forever down the ringing grooves of change.'
 (Locksley Hall" 1. 165-166 and 181 - 182, p. 1134)

Tennyson attempted to influence the discussion on the liaison between males and females. In another record in verse, *The Princess* (1842), the hero, a prince, displays why the behaviour of the princess, who declined to marry him and had pioneered a university for women, is wrong. This manual became an supercilious subject at a time when philosophers and politicians debated on the place of women in society. First, this poem appears to interlink the traditional point of view: the woman should not be educated and should comply her father and then her husband. Nevertheless, the final part marked a turning point from the separation of sexes:

'For the woman is not unto undeveloped man,
 But diverse : could we make her as the man,
 Sweet Love would be slain: his dearest bond is this,
 Not like to like, but like in difference.
 Yet in the long years liker must they grow;
 The man be more of a woman, she of man;
 He gain in sweetness and in moral height,
 Nor lose the wrestling thews that throw the world;
 She mental breadth, nor fail the childward care,
 Nor lose the childlike in the larger mind;
 Till at last she set herself to man,
 Like perfect music unto noble words;'
 ("The woman's & cause is man's" from *The Princess*, VII, 1.259-270, p. 1137)

From the point of view of prince, everybody should hold his place in society, men at work and women at home, but the diversities of character of both sexes should disappear through time. Then it is by gaining the integrity of women that men would stop killing each other, and women have to be mentally strong and sharp like men. Only then can the narrative voice of "Locksley Hall" have his utopia. Even if the image of women in *The Princess* remains antiquated for the 21st century reader, in the 19th century that was fanatical. Tennyson was a prophetic poet, both turned towards the past and towards the future, and always comparing his own society. Matthew Arnold supposed he was too influenced by the personal evaluation of the Romantics and the historical evaluation of Homer's *Odyssey* "The Lotus-Eaters" in 1833, "Ulysses" in 1842) or medieval myths (*The Lady of Shalott* in 1832, *The Idylls of the King* from 1856 to 1885, *Harold* in 1876...), to be a good pact. The triumph of *In Memoriam* permitted Tennyson to become the most famous poet of Victorian Age, and even a Poet Laureate after Wordsworth's death.

CONCLUSIONS

The definition of poetry, in the 19th century modified from one poet to another, from one critic to another, but the value of an idea in the poem walked out totally primordial for all. Victorian political poetry captures the image of a society in movement, evolving from the doctrine of sympathy of the Romantics to the Industrial Revolution. The same way as essays, poetry expresses points of view over the human condition, sometimes with more accuracy thanks to the experience of the poet.

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