

THE GREAT TRADITION
IN
ENGLISH LITERATURE
FROM SHAKESPEARE
TO SHAW

英国文学的伟大传统

从莎士比亚到肖伯纳

2

22.1104
5296
52

The Great Tradition in
English Literature
from
SHAKESPEARE
to
SHAW

Volume II

Robert Burns to Bernard Shaw

ANNETTE T. RUBINSTEIN



MODERN READER PAPERBACKS
NEW YORK AND LONDON

**Copyright © 1953 by Annette T. Rubinstein
All Rights Reserved**

Library of Congress Catalog Card Number: 69-19792

**First Modern Reader Paperback Edition 1969
First Printing**

Manufactured in the United States of America

CONTENTS

THE GREAT ROMANTICS AND THE DEMOCRATIC REVOLUTION

The French Revolution	375
An Advance Guard	380
Robert Burns	381
William Blake	392
The Spirit of 1789	407
William Wordsworth	407
Samuel Taylor Coleridge	426
William Hazlitt	457
Against the Unholy Alliance	492
Lord Byron	493
Percy Bysshe Shelley	516
The Last of the Great Romantics	554
John Keats	554
Charles Lamb	579

THE VICTORIAN AGE AND THE INDUSTRIAL REVOLUTION

From the Romantics to the Victorians	617
Industrial England and Its Poetry	628
Robert Browning	653
Her Majesty's Loyal Opposition	674
The Victorian Novelists	689
Charles Dickens	693
George Eliot	752
Thomas Huxley and Human Progress	798

THE END OF AN EPOCH

If Winter Comes	834
George Bernard Shaw	875
Bibliography	927
Index	929

The Great Romantics and the Democratic Revolutions

258

67A

THE FRENCH REVOLUTION

It is almost impossible for those of us who have not read in detail some of the contemporary records of the period to imagine the extraordinary effect of the French Revolution on the life and thought of England in both cultural and political terms.

It served as a catalytic agent to crystallize, bring to the surface, and make articulate all of the suppressed discontent we have sensed seething far beneath the surface of eighteenth century England; it intensified the general humanitarian sympathy of the more sensitive middle-class intellectuals for the economic hardships of the people, and it made possible an immediate critical expression of the disorientation and bewilderment of the young artists and writers. These young poets and essayists were almost the first of their kind to struggle for a living in the open market, producing their wares as a commodity to sell the public, and finding that this new freedom for the artist was, too often, only freedom to starve.

This expression was not, however, merely unhappy or rebellious. The early success of the revolution so short a distance away, and the enormous wave of popular enthusiasm which swept the mechanics of at least such large cities as London and Manchester, convinced the first generation of romantic writers and philosophers that they spoke for the immediate future and would live to see liberty, equality and fraternity enthroned on earth as it was in heaven—or, rather, in England as well as France and America.

It is interesting and significant to note how for the first time, despite the undeniable influence of Rousseau, the golden age of mankind was assumed by one writer after another to be located, not

in the dim mythical past or in some far off hidden island, but in the present place and almost present time.

Even after he had lost faith and hope and gained a comfortable income Wordsworth would still say:

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!

Why should I not confess that Earth was then
To me, what an inheritance, new-fallen,
Seems, when the first time visited, to one
Who thither comes to find in it his home?
He walks about and looks upon the spot
With cordial transport, moulds it and remoulds,
And is half-pleased with things that are amiss,
'T will be such joy to see them disappear.

The more candid Coleridge, ten years after he had transferred his adherence to church and state, would still wistfully recall his early enthusiasm

Oh, never can I remember those days with either shame or regret. For I was most sincere, most disinterested. My opinions were, indeed, in many and most important points erroneous; but my heart was single.

This early Jacobinism (as radicalism in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries came to be called) was so widespread that we can read the minutes of an annual dinner in 1789, chaired by a peer of England, Earl Stanhope, where the highly respectable Whig reformer, Dr. Price, made an address congratulating the French National Assembly on the revolution. He said, in part:

The Revolution in that country . . . the prospect it gives to the two first kingdoms in the world of a common participation in the blessings of civil and religious liberty. . . . I have lived to see 30 millions of people spurning at slavery and demanding liberty with an irresistible voice . . . and now methinks I see the ardour for liberty catching and spreading, a general amendment beginning in human affairs; the dominion of kings changed for the dominion of laws, and the dominion of priests giving way to the dominion of reason and conscience.

By 1792 the repercussions of the revolution in France had reached such heights that a Corresponding Society founded to work for Parliamentary Reform had 30,000 members in London alone, and included such men as William Blake, Thomas Holcroft, Thomas Paine and Horne Tooke. Its founder, a Scottish bootmaker named Thomas Hardy, maintained that every citizen should possess arms and know their use and, more realistically, encouraged combinations of working men for better conditions and wages.

The danger, not of revolution but of real economic reform, was apparent in such a case and "the gentlemen always shoot first." Edmund Burke, whose antiwar stand and speech on *Conciliation With the Colonies* in 1775, had made him the outstanding liberal in Parliament, promptly deserted the Whig party and its co-leader, Fox. Burke then wrote his *Reflections on the French Revolution* with a deliberate demagogic incitement to reactionary terrorism, and a characterization, that soon became infamous, of the "swinish multitude." In his picture of the sufferings of French royalty and nobility, as Thomas Paine said, "He pitied the plumage and forgot the dying bird." And in his panic-mongering threats of invasion, he laid the ground for the real reign of terror which seized, not France, but England, for the next fifteen years.

James Mackintosh, a leading contemporary political writer and speaker (who was himself soon after flattered and bribed into joining the government party), said of Burke's pamphlet:

His eloquence is not at leisure to deplore the fate of beggared artisans and famished peasants, the victims of suspended industry and languishing commerce. The sensibility which seems scared by the homely miseries of the vulgar is attracted only by the splendid sorrows of royalty and agonizes at the slenderest pang that assails the heart of sottishness and prostitution, if they are placed by fortune on a throne.

And the American Joel Barlow, friend of Thomas Paine and Robert Fulton and semiofficial emissary to France at this time wrote of Burke:

What is the language proper to be used in describing the character of a man who in his situation, at his time of life, and for a pension of only fifteen hundred pounds a year, could sit down deliberately in his closet and call upon the powers of

earth and hell to inflict such a weight of misery upon the human race?

But whatever we think of Burke we must admit he soon earned his fifteen hundred pounds. (As a matter of fact, the government bound itself to pay the pension for three successive lifetimes so that he could sell it, and he actually realized thirty-seven thousand pounds on the deal before his death in 1797.)

Hundreds of working men and other active political agitators were transported for life on charges of "seditious" utterances. The right of habeas corpus was suspended, all "combinations" of mechanics were declared illegal, public meetings of more than forty were for a time forbidden, and Thomas Paine, who had written *The Rights of Man* in answer to Burke's pamphlet, was found guilty of treason by a jury that declared it did not even have to hear the case for the crown before condemning the accused! Fortunately the accused was not the prisoner. Paine himself did not attend the trial for he had been warned by the poet, Blake, of the likelihood of immediate arrest and, instead of returning to his lodgings where the police waited with a warrant, had escaped to France.

Twelve leaders of the London Corresponding Society were tried for treason, but their personal eminence, an unexpectedly honest jury, and the remarkably able defense of the philosopher, William Godwin (better known in literary history as Shelley's father-in-law), secured a sentence of not guilty seven minutes after the conclusion of the case. The government withdrew warrants already issued for the arrest of over a hundred more members, but the prosecution had succeeded in its major objective of destroying the society and intimidating or rendering ineffective its spokesmen.

Brailsford in his well-known book on *Shelley, Godwin and Their Circle* makes an illuminating comment on the comparative immunity of the group of intellectual leaders. Speaking of Godwin's publication of *Political Justice* in 1793, he says

Godwin was fortunate in evolving a theory which excused him from attempting the more dangerous exploits of civic courage. His ideal was the Stoic virtue, the isolated strength which can stand firm in *passive* protest against oppression and wrong. He stood firm, and Pitt [the prime minister] was content to leave him standing. . . . The prudence which teaches one man to be a Whig will make of another a Utopian.

However, perhaps only Coleridge, of all the important romantic poets, can fairly be accused of Utopianism. The older men were mostly Jacobins first and reactionaries later—the younger died young in the faith for which they had lived; and Hazlitt, the only one of the former who was long to outlive the Congress of Vienna (which insured the victory of counterrevolution in Europe for almost half a century) never wrote anything more Jacobin than his *Spirit of the Age* in 1825.

Incidentally, Hazlitt gives perhaps as complete an explanation as is necessary for the apostasy of so many of the hopeful young radicals of his youth in his famous essay, published in 1817, two years after the Congress of Vienna and the passage of the Corn Laws, on "Toad Eaters and Tyrants." This reads, in part,

Thus, in the year 1792, Mr. Burke became a pensioner for writing his book against the French Revolution, and Mr. Thomas Paine was outlawed for his Rights of Man. Since that period, the press has been the great enemy of freedom, the whole weight of that immense engine (whether for good or ill) having a fatal bias given to it by the two mainsprings of fear and favor. . . . We shall not go over the painful list of instances; neither can we forget them. But they all or almost all contrived to sneak over one by one to the side on which "empty praise or solid pudding" was to be got; they could not live without the smiles of the great, nor provide for an increasing establishment without a loss of character; instead of going into some profitable business and exchanging their lyres for ledgers, their pens for ploughs, they chose rather to prostitute their pens to the mock-heroic defence of the most bare-faced of all mummeries, the pretended alliance of kings and people! . . . Such is the history and mystery of literary patriotism and prostitution for the last twenty years.

Hazlitt concludes this essay by showing how much more realistic and steeled with class hatred was the radicalism of those romantics whose revolutionary spirits had weathered the storm. He says:

We formerly gavè the Editor of the Times a definition of a true Jacobin as one "who had seen the evening star set over a poor man's cottage, and connected it with the hope of human happiness." . . . Since that time our imagination has grown a little less romantic: so we will give him another, which he may chew the cud upon at his leisure. A true Jacobin, then, is one who does not believe in the divine right of kings, or in any

other alias for it. . . . To be a true Jacobin a man must be a good hater. . . . The love of liberty consists in the hatred of tyrants. The true Jacobin hates the enemies of liberty as they hate liberty, with all his strength and with all his might and with all his heart and with all his soul. . . . He never forgets nor forgives any injury done to the people. . . . He makes neither peace nor truce with tyrants. His hatred of wrong ceases only with the wrong. The sense of it, and of the bare-faced assumption of the right to inflict it deprives him of his rest. . . . The love of truth is a passion in his mind as the love of power is a passion in the minds of others. Abstract reason, unassisted by passion, is no match for power and prejudice, armed with force and cunning. . . . Hence the detection of modern apostates.

The main body of the romantics to whom Hazlitt refers were the "Lake Poets"—Coleridge, Wordsworth and, by courtesy, Southey; the younger Byron and Shelley; and the "cockney" Lamb, Keats and their friend, Leigh Hunt. But before we turn to them we must consider two isolated figures, Burns and Blake. These, while not well enough known in their own time to have any substantial influence on this romantic revolution in English literature, nevertheless formed its advance guard and gave surpassing expression to some of its most fundamental ideas and attitudes.

AN ADVANCE GUARD

The dispossessed and inarticulate peasantry—the oppressed and miserable city proletariat—found voices of their own in the first two great writers of the romantic revolution which, briefly, formed the second great age of English poetry.

Robert Burns and William Blake, born within two years of each other in the stony Scottish fields and narrow London streets, were utterly dissimilar in individual taste, temperament and genius. But they were identical in their passionate love of freedom, their hatred for tyranny, their deep, lifelong sympathy with the working class of whom they were born and whose lives they shared, and their vehement partisanship in the revolutionary struggles of their own time—first in America, then in France, and always in Scotland and England.

Robert Burns—1759-1796

Burns was born January 25, 1759, in Ayrshire, in a poor clay farm cottage rented by his father. He himself, in an autobiographical passage, describes how, at his birth

A blast of Janwar' win'
Blew hansel in on Robin.

It is a matter of record that only a few days later a storm blew down the badly patched gable and mother and child had to take refuge with a neighbour. Although his father was extremely hard working and frugal, as more babies followed Robert into an inhospitable world, he was forced to leave his poor home for a poorer one. When Burns was seven they moved and the next eleven years were one ceaseless losing struggle to make the stony ground yield enough for both rent and porridge.

Burns' brother Gilbert mentions as a recurrent event the letters and visits from the landlord's agent or "factor" which reduced the whole family to tears and Burns himself describes such scenes:

I've noticed, on our Laird's court-day,
An' mony a time my heart's been wae,
Poor tenant bodies, scant o' cash,
How they maun thole a factor's smash;
He'll stamp an' threaten, curse and swear,
He'll apprehend them, pound their gear,
While they maun stan', in aspect hurnable,
And bear it a', an' fear an' tremble.

However, by the time Burns was eighteen several of the sons could assist with the labor of the farm and the family was able to secure a better lease in a more favorable situation.

Although there had been little time for formal schooling—Burns as the eldest was doing a man's work long before he was fourteen—the father valued learning as part of both religion and patriotism. The children had his example and encouragement in reading during their scanty leisure such books as were available of Scottish history and biography, odd plays of Shakespeare, old issues of the *Spectator*—in short anything that came to hand—as well as the Bible which they had practically memorized. Furthermore, the father had combined with four neighbours to raise a small salary for a young

teacher who boarded with one or another of the group and taught all the children for several years. In some ways Burns strayed far from his father's godly path, but he always admired and himself continued the tradition of sturdy independence of spirit, pride in his own useful, arduous life, and affectionate respect for his poor fellow workers which his father felt and taught. He has given us a moving picture of his father in "The Cotter's Saturday Night" and in such songs as:

My father was a farmer upon the Carrick border, O
And carefully he reared me in decency and order, O;
He bade me act a manly part, though I had ne'er a farthing, O,
For without an honest, manly heart no man was worth re-
garding, O.

In addition to his unusually wide reading Burns had early been interested by the remnants of the old Scottish songs and ballads still current in the countryside, and was accustomed to sing or whistle them to lighten a long day behind the plow, fitting in missing verse or chorus or composing new words to an old widowed tune.

Burns was almost always falling in—or out—of love during this time and his seemingly whimsical fickleness had a real base in the obvious impossibility of providing any decent maintenance for a wife and family. He proposed to, and was decisively rejected by, the daughter of a neighboring farmer in 1781 and left the farm to seek his fortune in trade in a nearby town. A small business venture he managed to set up failed completely, and he returned, with a heightened distaste for the monotony and hardships of farm life, to find his father dying of consumption and the farm implements, animals, and even family furniture attached for unpaid rent and other debts.

Burns and his brother Gilbert undertook the lease of a barren upland farm a few miles distant. They salvaged some scanty equipment by putting in a formal claim as their father's creditors for arrears of wages, and moved their widowed mother and young brothers and sisters to this new home in March, 1784. By now, Burns had somewhat of a scandalous reputation, not as an idler but as one who played hard in the intervals of working hard, and who drank strong drinks and sang strong songs in taverns of an evening.

Much of this was no doubt justified but far more was due to a small town's shock at his open mockery of its strict Calvinist religion, and still more to his outspoken championship of such "dis-

reputable" causes as American Independence, Negro freedom, and his undisguised contempt for "the unco guid" of every kind and the increasingly reactionary bourgeois values by which they lived.

As early as 1781 he had written in mockery of England's part in the war with the colonies:

I murder hate, by field or flood,
Though glory's name may screen us;
In wars at hame I'll spend my blood,
Life-giving wars of Venus.
The deities that I adore,
Are social peace and plenty;
I'm better pleased to make one more
Than be the death o' twenty.

More seriously, a little later when a National Thanksgiving was proclaimed for a naval victory, he wrote:

Ye hypocrites! are these your pranks,
To murder men, and gie God thanks?
For shame! gie o'er, proceed no further—
God won't accept your thanks for murther!

In a letter a few years later praising some verses a friend had written against the slave trade, Burns said:

The characters and manners of the dealer in the infernal traffic is well done, though a horrid picture . . . The thought that the oppressor's sorrow on seeing the slave pine is like the butcher's regret when his destined lamb dies a natural death is exceedingly fine.

Burns never wavered in these and his other radical opinions. His free-thinking in religion as well as politics merely became more fixed and mature as he became older, as we can see by comparing a letter written in 1788 with one on the same subject written in 1794. The first reads, in part,

An honest man has nothing to fear.—If we lie down in the grave, the whole man a piece of broken machinery, to moulder with the clods of the valley—be it so; at least there is an end of pain, care, woes and wants: if that part of us called Mind does survive the apparent destruction of the Man—away with old-wife prejudices and tales. . . .

And the second, in 1794:

All my fears and cares are of this world: if there is another, an honest man has nothing to fear from it.—I hate a man that wishes to be a Deist, but I fear, every fair unprejudiced Enquirer must in some degree be a Sceptic—It is not that there are any very staggering arguments against the Immortality of Man; but that like Electricity, Phlogiston, etc. the subject is so involved in darkness that we want Data to go upon.—One thing frightens me much: that we are to live forever, seems too good news to be true.

Although Burns never changed his early opinions or beliefs he gradually became aware of the futility of an isolated "Bohemian" revolt against bourgeois values and ideas, which could only express itself in personal recklessness or dissipation. He soon realized that bouts of hard drinking and casual lovemaking were worse than useless expressions of his rebellion at the incessant unprofitable labor of a tenant-farmer's life.

Before that, however, he wrote some of the best expressions of this fruitless but sympathetic rebellion of those to whom "the world is not a friend nor the world's law." Most explicit of these was his comic operetta, *The Jolly Beggars*, completed before the publication of his earliest book in 1785, but not published until some years after his death. The concluding song begins:

See the smoking bowl before us!
Mark our jovial, ragged ring!
Round and round take up the chorus
And in raptures let us sing;
A fig for those by law protected!
Liberty's a glorious feast!
Courts for cowards were erected,
Churches built to please the priest!
What is title? what is treasure!
What is reputation's care?
If we lead a life of pleasure,
'Tis no matter, how or where!
With the ready trick and fable
Round we wander all the day;
And at night in barn or stable
Hug our doxies on the hay.

When he and his brother first set up for themselves at Mossgiel, he deluded himself into thinking that prudence and industry might insure sufficient success to provide the material for a tolerable life: ordinary comforts; some money for books and, perhaps, occasional short trips; above all, a reasonable amount of leisure for reading and writing.

A letter to a friend written some two years after his father's death tells us something of these illusory hopes, and shows us that Burns soon realized how useless good resolutions without capital were when faced with the innumerable emergencies characteristic of small commodity farming. He wrote:

I read farming books, I calculated crops, I attended markets, and, in short, in spite of the devil, the world, and the flesh, I should have been a wise man; but the first year, from unfortunately buying bad seed—the second, from a late harvest, we lost half our crops. This overset all my wisdom, and I returned like the dog to his vomit, and the sow that was washed to her wallowing in the mire.

There is obvious and pathetic autobiography in his deservedly popular poem, "To A Mouse On Turning Her Up In Her Nest With The Plough, November, 1785," which ends:

That wee bit heap o' leaves an' stibble,
Has cost thee monie a weary nibble!
Now thou's turned out, for a' thy trouble,
But house or hald,
To thole the winter's sleety dribble,
An' cranreuch cauld!

But Mousie, thou art no thy lane,
In proving foresight may be vain:
The best-laid schemes o' mice an' men
Gang aft agley,
An' lea'e us nought but grief an' pain,
For promis'd joy!

Still thou art blest, compared wi' me!
The present only toucheth thee:
But och! I backward cast my e'e,
On prospects drear!
An' forward, tho' I canna see,
I guess an' fear!

Despite hardships, worry and failure during the next two years at Mossgiel, Burns managed to turn more consistently and seriously to what had for some time been a barely acknowledged ambition—his desire of expressing in poetry the heroic exploits of:

A country where civil, and particularly religious liberty,
have ever found their first support and their last asylum—; but
alas! I am far unequal to the task, both in native genius and in
education.

He completed his "reconstruction" of the large number of Scottish folk love songs and ballads which his work has rescued from obscurity and reconstituted a living part of English literature. In addition, he also wrote many of his best known, longer poems, such as "The Cotter's Saturday Night," "The Jolly Beggars," "To A Mouse," "A Mountain Daisy," "The Twa Dogs," and most of his sharpest antireligious satires such as "Holy Willie's Prayer" and "The Holy Fair."

This first full exercise of his creative power did not prevent Burns from feeling deep discouragement with his own failure and the abject poverty and misery he saw on all sides. His brother Gilbert later said that

Robert used to remark to me that he could not conceive a
more mortifying picture of human life than a man seeking work.

And Burns himself said in "Man Was Made to Mourn":

See yonder poor, o'erlabored wight,
So abject, mean and vile,
Who begs a brother of the earth
To give him leave to toil. . . .

He described a peasant farmer, worn out by unremitting toil before he had reached the prime of life:

For, ance that five-and-forty speel'd,
See crazy, weary, joyless eild,
Wi' wrinkled face,
Comes hostin' hirplin', owre the field
Wi' creepin' pace.

Feeling that he was one "So weary with disaster, tugged with fortune" that he had to set his life on any chance "To mend it, or

be rid on't," Burns determined on the desperate expedient of emigration to Jamaica. With that in mind, he solicited subscriptions for a memorial publication of his poetry. Six hundred copies were printed in 1786. Their success in the Scottish capital was so immediate and overwhelming that the poet, who had actually engaged steerage passage to the West Indies and had set out to board the ship, returned and went to Edinburgh instead, to find himself temporarily possessed of a huge number of noble patrons, and to become the six months' lion of fashionable society.

A second edition of his poems in April, 1787, sold over 3,000 copies, and a third was immediately demanded. Burns had already begun to resent the patronizing admiration of the genteel; he wrote in a letter March 22, 1787:

I have the advice of some very judicious friends among the literati here, but with them I sometimes find it necessary to claim the privilege of thinking for myself.

He began, ungratefully many thought, to seek his friends among "not very select society." In the third edition of his poems Burns defiantly included a new ballad on the American War, and on a trip with a member of the not very select society—a radical school teacher—he wrote on the window of an inn in Stirling his famous lines about the House of Hanover:

An idiot race, to honor lost:
Who know them best, despise them most.

On being reproved, he quickly added his "self-reproof":

Dost not know that old Mansfield, who writes like the Bible,
Says the more 'tis a truth, sir, the more 'tis a libel?

Commenting on the public acknowledgment of King George's insanity, Burns said:

I am not sure whether he is not a gainer by how much a mad-man is a more respectable character than a Fool.

Returning home he loaned his brother the better part of the money he had made, married Jean Armour with whom he had had a troubled love affair and who had borne him an illegitimate child