## The Romantic Age

There exists some controversy regarding the time span of the Romantic Age. Traditionally the limits of the Romantic period were set at 1798 (the publication of the *Lyrical Ballads*) and 1832 (the Reform Bill). Some scholars, however, believe that the Romantic Age began with the onset of the French Revolution in 1789. Some even contend that the Romantic Age extends from 1785 (when Johnson died and Blake and Burns published their first poems) to 1830 (when the major writers of the preceding century were either dead or became unproductive). Broadly, we may declare that the period between the second half of the eighteenth century and the first quarter of the nineteenth century constitute the Romantic Age.

The Romantic Age was marked by turbulence when England experienced major social, political and cultural changes. The Industrial Revolution, which began in mid eighteenth century, ushered in an era of mechanical progress that displayed no signs of slowing down in foreseeable future. From a primarily agricultural country, England was rapidly transforming to a modern industrial nation. This change affected social and economic conditions. A new landless class emerged that either migrated to the towns to work as industrial labourers, or remained in the country as farm hands. The population was becoming increasingly polarized into what Disraeli would later call the "two Nations" – the two classes of the capitalists and the labourers, the rich and the poor.

This was also the age when British Empire expanded aggressively both westward and eastward. The defeat of Tipu Sultan in the battle of Seringapatam (1799) had consolidated British Empire in India. The East India Company became the de facto ruler of the sub-continent. In West Indies, British plantations, thriving on black slave labour, generated immense wealth for the plantation owners. Britain, therefore, emerged as the most powerful colonial presence in the world.

The last decades of the eighteenth century also witnessed one of the great events of modern history – the French Revolution. The effect of this cataclysmic event on English culture merit detailed examination.

## England and the French Revolution

The early period of the French Revolution evoked enthusiastic support from English liberals. Mary Wollstonecraft's *A Vindication of the Rights of Men* defended the French Revolution against Edmund Burke's attack in his *Reflections on the Revolutions in France* (1790). Tom Paine's *Rights of Man* (1791 – 1792) also supported the French Revolution. The concepts of Liberty, Fraternity and Equality, which came from the French Revolution, thrilled English intellectuals. William Godwin's *Inquiry Concerning Political Justice* (1793) foretold an inevitable evolution of society to a final egalitarian state when all government would wither away and all property would be equally

distributed. In his spiritual autobiography *The Prelude*, Wordsworth described liberal sentiment in the following manner:

"But Europe at that time was filled with joy
France standing on the top of golden hours,
And human nature seeming born again."

He also observed:

"Bliss was it in that dawn to be alive,
But to be young was very heaven!"
(Book XI)

This sympathy for the French Revolution, however, did not last for long. The revolution became increasingly grim and violent with the "September Massacres" of the imprisoned nobility in 1792. This was followed by the execution of the king and the queen; the guillotining of thousands during the Reign of Terror; and the execution, in turn, of those who had directed the Terror. Wordsworth wrote:

"But now, become oppressors in their turn,
Frenchmen had changed a war of self-defense
For one of Conquest, losing sight of all
Which they had struggled for; and mounted up,
Openly in the eye of Earth and Heaven,
The scale of Liberty. I read her doom
With anger vexed, with disappointment sore,
But not dismayed,…"
(Book XI)

French invasion of Switzerland Disappointed Coleridge – a disappointment that he expresses in *France: An Ode*:

forgive me, that I cherished
One thought that ever blessed your cruel foes!
To scatter rage, and traitorous guilt,
Where Peace her jealous home had built;
A patriot-race to disinherit
Of all that made their stormy wilds so dear;
And with inexpiable spirit
To taint the bloodless freedom of the mountaineer-
O France, that mockest Heaven, adulterous, blind,
And patriot only in pernicious toils!
Are these thy boasts, Champion of human kind?
To mix with Kings in the low lust of sway,
Yell in the hunt, and share the murderous prey;
To insult the shrine of Liberty with spoils
From freemen torn; to tempt and to betray?

This feeling was shared by other English liberals, who, like these poets, became increasingly disillusioned.

The French Revolution had begun with a call for liberty. It ended with the triumph of reactionary despotism. In England, the fear of the Jacobins (and later

Napoleon) induced the government to introduce harsh, repressive measures. Public meetings were banned and habeas corpus was suspended. The advocates of political changes were charged with high treason and were arrested.

Despite its political failure, the French Revolution had a great influence on English literature. In particular, it aroused the millennial expectations in some writers. At the outbreak of the French Revolution Joseph Priestly and other Unitarian leaders hailed the event as the stage preceding the millennium prophesized in Revelation. Blake, Wordsworth and Coleridge saw in it an apocalyptic sign. Even when the later events in France dashed the hopes of English liberals, a number of Romantic writers salvaged their apocalyptic hope by giving it a new interpretation. They transferred the agency of apocalypse from mass action to the individual mind – from a political to a spiritual revolution. Many of Shelley's works like *Prometheus Unbound* and *Ode to the West Wind* reflect this thought. Some like Coleridge and Wordsworth sought solace in nature. The following lines from *France: An Ode* bear evidence to this:

> And there I felt thee! -on that sea-cliff's verge,
> Whose pines, scarce travelled by the breeze above,
> Had made one murmur with the distant surge!
> Yes, while I stood and gazed, my temples bare,
> And shot my being through earth, sea, and air,
> Possessing all things with intensest love,
> O Liberty! my spirit felt thee there.

The French revolution thus generated the feeling that this was an age of new beginnings when everything was possible, not only in political and social realm but also in intellectual and literary enterprises as well. In his *The Spirit of the Age* Hazlitt justly pointed out that the new poetry had its origin in the French Revolution.

## Romanticism and Millennial Hope

### Natural Supernaturalism

"Natural Supernaturalism" is a term borrowed by M. H. Abrams from Carlyle's *Sartor Resartus*. It refers to the general tendency of the Romantics to "naturalize the supernatural and to humanize the divine."[1]

According to Abrams the Biblical drama of creation, which has a beginning, a middle, and an end, has greatly influenced Western Thought. Of special relevance is the concept of the millennium, the time of general felicity that follows the return of Christ. The Romantics accepted the Biblical vision of human destiny but reconstituted it to make it intellectually acceptable. Abrams points out that while they rejected "the dogmatic understructure of Christianity", they tried to save "what one could save of its experiential relevance and values."[2] Thus Coleridge, Keats, and even Shelley tried to retain "the irreducible minimum of the Christian creed" within a secular metaphysical system.

[1] M. H. Abrams, *Natural Supernaturalism*, 68.
[2] Ibid