Continuity, Challenge or Change? European Culture and Intellectual Identity before and after the Enlightenment

Poetry, Purpose and Legacy

The aim of the Enlightenment was to illuminate the human experience, but with regard to the field of poetry the methods of this illumination were ultimately threatening. It was the rational mode of thought adopted during this period that catalysed the Industrial Revolution and led to, as a direct result, Romantic poets challenging ‘Enlightened’ thought and establishing identities wildly different from their predecessors. The Industrial Revolution was not the only movement that coincided with the Enlightenment; neoclassicism was also a child of this intellectual revolution, and a testament to the fact that when poetry is interpreted in a purely logical and practical way, the aspects of the art that do not focus on structure, form and the like are wholly ignored or, at the very least, rendered somewhat obsolete.

Although it is always difficult to place literature into a historical framework, it can be strongly argued that the emphasis on reason, analysis and clarity in Europe catalysed the development of a new movement in art as the Romantics fought to assert the value of the emotional, instinctive and irrational.

Broadly speaking, the change in pre- and post-Enlightenment poetry could be considered subtle to the point of little distinction; to a popular audience at least the recognisable mellifluousness of Keats and Wordsworth had been explored less obviously in Shakespeare’s inclination towards verbose, emotional language. Compare Sonnet 18 for example, ‘Shall I compare thee to a summer’s day…’, with Keats’ ‘blissful cloud of summer-indolence’.

However it is through an examination of the legacy that the Age of Enlightenment left on European poetry that the shift in our poets’ approach is made evident. Arguably one of the defining features of Romantic poetry comes not in the form of language or themes, but the poet’s intention in writing. This was a generation of poets with manifestos and defences of their chosen discipline, and it could even be suggested that those who classed themselves
as Romantic poets made the art that they made not for that art’s sake but as a means of challenging the values of an intellectual revolution that was spreading not only through their own country of Britain but the continent.

Even at the time the exact nature, and indeed name, of this intellectual revolution was much debated, however Jewish philosopher Moses Mendelssohn’s explanation, whilst succinct, embodies the fundamental principle that so offended the Romantics. Mendelssohn proposed that the Enlightenment was a process through which men were educated in the use of reason. Despite the Romantic rejection of this key notion, the individualistic focus of many Romantic poems was directly influenced by ‘Enlightened’ thought. When Descartes ascertained the indubitable existence of the self in 1637 with ‘je pense, donc je suis’, later ‘cogito ergo sum’, the philosopher spearheaded the Age of Enlightenment as European thinkers rejected a civilisation that had been built on a collective rather than individual core of faith, tradition and authority. Despite this, neo-classicist poetry favoured impersonality, with Dryden’s *Annus Mirabilis* a testament to this, and so the Romantics may have been challenging this impersonality rather than continuing the individualistic strain of thought of the Enlightenment.

Regardless, whilst the core principles of the Enlightenment were openly rejected by the Romantics, the spirit of individualistic rebellion is inextricably interwoven into their verse. Shelley in *A Defence of Poetry* explicitly tasked himself with rebellion as his essay implies that poetry was an art form consistently mocked or dismissed to the extent that a defence was warranted. The essay was written in response to an article, the author of which Shelley addressed in a fit of peak: “Your anathemas against poetry itself excited me to a sacred rage. . . . I had the greatest possible desire to break a lance with you ... in honour of my mistress Urania.” Shelley, like many of the Romantics, had a point to prove and it was this that distinguished him from many of his predecessors. Even though the neo-classicists had an ideology, they didn’t approach its realisation with even half as comparable passion as the Romantics.

The generation of poets that counted Shelley among them accused the neo-classicists of, as historian Keith Thomas puts it, 'shallow rationalism, naïve optimism, unrealistic universalism, and moral darkness.’ The descent into this
new form of thinking was viewed as a process of decay by post-Enlightenment poets, who arguably had a clearer purpose than the majority of their literary ancestors because they had explicitly tasked themselves with rebelling against this decay. Romantic ideology offered an alternative to Habermas’ ‘incomplete project of modernity’ that was European culture in the nineteenth century. Post-Enlightenment poetry challenged and changed not only the poetry of Europe, but also the culture, as it questioned the merit of urbanisation and industrialisation through its appeal to nature.

Many of the features of poetry that gained prevalence during the Romantic era remain heavily influential on European poetry today. The Romantic emphasis on imagination over intellect is inseparable from a popular understanding of poetry at present, whilst the Romantics’ subjectivity paved the way for the Modernists stream-of-consciousness-style found in the like of *The Waste Land* and Rilke’s *Duino Elegies*. The shift towards the Chaucerian common man saw a rejection of the ‘poetic diction’ of the eighteenth century as artificial and unnatural. The influence both of subjectivity and concern with daily life can be traced to contemporary poetry, from Larkin’s lasting popularity to, more recently, Armitage’s accessible and often highly ego-centric verse.

Despite their avocation of individualism, Romantic poets employed poetry as an instrument of intellectual freedom and, whether they intended it to be so or not, as a vehicle for political and social change. It is this view, coupled with the Romantics’ trademark passion, which most closely resembles a popular conceptual understanding of poetry today. Wordsworth’s *Preface* to his and Coleridge’s *Lyrical Ballads* can be identified as the manifesto that proved supremely influential for his contemporaries and successors, whether subconsciously or intentionally on the part of the latter.

For Wordsworth, in his *Preface*, proposed that “the real language of men” was as appropriate for poetry as it was for prose. Compare the universality and imagination of the lines ‘the sad heart of Ruth, when, sick for home, / She stood in tears amid the alien corn’ to the erudite allegorical satire of the likes of John Dryden and Alexander Pope. Both Dryden and Pope embodied the neo-classicist movement with regard to poetry, and both men arguably paid far greater heed to rules and tradition than imaginative content.
Despite the fact that Enlightenment poetry was written in a public sphere, most notably in France, poems were largely intended for a select audience who would appreciate the intellect, rather than instinct, behind them. Alexander Pope in fact mocked his literary critics and the unintelligent reading public he took them to represent with a poem called *The Dunciad*. Wordsworth’s encouragement of accessibility in verse directly contradicted Pope’s view as implied in this poem, clearly showing the challenge the Romantics posed to the intellectual and cultural norms at the turn of the eighteenth century.

However, in terms of the progression of this intellectual identity, the idea of writing in the language of men was not new to Europe. The stories that Homer collated into the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey* formed part of a rich oral tradition in which bards presented tales to an audience that would just have likely comprised of fishermen and farmers as it would have the Greek elite. The natural similes Homer frequently labours increase the accessibility of the stories for his audience, from his description of Hermes as a shearwater and the Suitors as fawns, whilst also ensuring that the events of the epic are explored in relation to the natural world. Although in a vastly different context and of course time period, the Romantics adopted many features that Homer employed. The link between the *Odyssey* and, say, *Ode To Autumn*, may seem abstruse, but when interpreted with relation to the shift in attitudes that the Enlightenment brought about, the circularity of artistic evolution is evident. Wordsworth, in ideology at the very least, returned to the language of men and placed poetry back into a popular sphere.

Because Enlightenment thinkers concerned themselves with epistemology, as a result the poetry at this time was often structured as an argument, as in the case of Dryden’s verse. The poems that took the shape of arguments often concerned themselves with public issues, using the poetry of later antiquity as an idolised model, adopting the mock-epic style and aesthetic of classical authors. The continual influence of Classical poetry is therefore evident, both on neo-classists and the Romantics. The poets of the Enlightenment looked to the likes of Horace’s Odes, written around the twenty-third century BC, whilst the latter generation of poets looked as far back as the
eighth century BC, concerning themselves with nature and universality, which are key aspects of Homeric literature.

Despite the explicit challenge that the Romantics posed to the neo-classicist poetry of the Enlightenment era, there is a certain level of synthesis (or ‘continuity’, to borrow a word from the Forum title) between Enlightenment and Romantic poetry. It was the opposing ideals of Enlightened and Romantic thought that academics in Germany in the eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries aimed to reconcile. Weimar Classicism sought to integrate the ideas of Romanticism, Classicism and the Enlightenment and in terms of shaping European identity, this movement legitimized the promotion of German language and culture as well as helping shape the development of German nationalism. The case study of Weimar Classicism demonstrates the combination of challenge, change and continuity found in art and academia during and post-Enlightenment. Even if at first glance the Romantics posed a direct challenge to earlier poetry, which of course they did, there are identifiable similarities between the two opposing styles as Weimar Classicists proved. By extension then, a certain poetic continuity can be said to run through the poetry of Europe both pre- and post-Enlightenment despite prevalent differences.

The influence that poetry exerted over European culture and identity is enormous and undisputed. After all, it was Shelley who proposed in *A Defence of Poetry* his famous claim that ‘poets are the unacknowledged legislators of the world’, the art they make irrevocably tied to the civilisation from which they themselves emerged. For Shelley ‘poets ... are the institutors of laws, and the founders of civil society...’, and the very fact that Shelley felt the need to defend his art and make it impossible to separate not only from the collective consciousness, but from a far more immediate social order, does well to illustrate the subtle shift in the poetic discipline that took place post-Enlightenment.

This shift, broadly speaking, can be interpreted with regard to intention; literary movements such as the neo-classicists were motivated in defence of a particular style or poetic ideal, but for the early Romantics their worldview began with the defence of poetry itself. The characteristic features of Romantic poetry, for example the implicit avocation of individualism coupled
with an intense passion for nature, emerged as a medium through which to express the value of the instinctive and irrational. The Romantic corpus defends poetry as perceived by its authors, a definition at odds with the poetry of Pope, Dryden and their literary counterparts.

The Romantics signified a huge upheaval in the artistic imagination and their passion has continued to inspire and influence right up to the present day. Nothing could be further removed from cold, clinical rationality as the Romantic poets espoused the value of an intensely personal human experience. As industrial and scientific change progressed through Europe, the ideal image of man emerged: man as a purely rational creature. It was to this ideal image that the Romantics posed a significant threat, because, above all, their poetry asserted what it was to be human.