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The Shaping of the "Second Europe" by Revolutions 1750 - 1914

Literary Responses to Industrialism and Science: From Optimism to Pessimism and Realism

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Introduction

Literature too shows the impact of the Industrial Revolution and the changes being wrought by industrialism, and the advance of science and technology. Running through 19th century writing after the Romantics are the themes first of optimism, then of doubt and questioning, and finally of pessimism, realism, and naturalism. We have time for only two writers, which means that we are distorting as we attempt to summarize some important trends. But something is better than nothing. So keep in mind my caution that you are missing a lot while I discuss Alfred, Lord Tennyson and Gustave Flaubert.

Alfred, Lord Tennyson (1809-1892): From Faith in Science to Blind Faith

In Tennyson we see the first two of the themes, optimism and questioning faith. His life spanned the century and the immense body of his work shows the full impact of the social, economic and intellectual currents of this momentous century. Tennyson was born in 1809 to a family with rich relatives but modest circumstances itself. Perhaps this caused him to worry all his life about having enough money. He also worried about mental illness which ran in his family, along with habits of excessive drinking. Tennyson himself was under a doctor's care for his mental health for weeks in 1843. He was educated at Trinity College, Cambridge where he made a name for himself as a poet and met Arthur Henry Hallam, the most important friendship of his early years. Hallam's early death in 1832 shook him deeply and led to one of his best poems, *In Memoriam* (1855). In the 1840's Tennyson

became a successful poet, received a civil pension from the government, and was made Poet Laureate on the strength of his success and popularity as a poet. He became a favorite of the royal family and dedicated Idylls of the King (1862) to Prince Albert's memory. In 1883 Queen Victoria persuaded him to accept an elevation to the peerage as Lord Tennyson. He had seen by the time of his death in 1892 the full range of the century. His work reflects the changes in his own life as well as the passing intellectual, scientific and religious currents of the century.

In an early work, Locksley Hall (1842), Tennyson seems to feel the optimism which characterized the general temper of the age of industrial growth and progress. The poem contains the reaction of the narrator to his rejection by his lover and a remembrance of the love and the former life at Locksley Hall lost. Mood change follows mood change as he ranges from earlier happier times to the time of the narration. And in those reveries about earlier happier times and an imagined happier future are the lines suggesting Tennyson's own optimism about the future based on faith in science and in material progress:

Men, my brothers, men the workers, ever reaping something new: That which they have done but earnest of the things that they shall do:

For I dipt into the future, far as human eye could see,

Saw the Vision of the world, and all the wonder that would be;

Saw the heavens fill with commerce, argosies of magic sails, Pilots of the purple twilight dropping down with costly bales;

Heard the heavens fill with shouting, and there rain'd a ghastly dew From the nations' airy navies grappling in the central blue;

Far along the world-wide whisper of the south-wind rushing warm, With the standards of the peoples plunging thro' the thunder-storm;

Till the war-drum throbb'd no longer, and the battle-flags were furl'd In the Parliament of man, the Federation of the world.

There the common sense of most shall hold a fretful realm in awe, And the kindly earth shall slumber, lapt in universal law.

By 1855 Tennyson had doubts about his earlier optimistic belief in science and progress. When he wrote In Memoriam, attempting to come to grips with questions about why Hallam had died young and about other mysteries of life, faith in science and material progress had given way to a questing faith which continued to believe in the order and purpose of all life, despite evidence to the contrary. By 1855 evolution was in the air (Darwin published Origin of Species in 1859), and any attentive observer could see that material progress was not all the Industrial Revolution was producing. So In Memoriam is a work of poetic faith, but it is a blind faith despite circumstances that there is design to creation and order underneath it all which man can only hope exists. Some lines, chosen at random, illustrate this kind of faith:

In Memoriam (1855)

Strong Son of God, immortal Love,

Whom we, that have not seen thy face,

By faith, and faith alone, embrace,
Believing where we cannot prove;
Thou wilt not leave us in the dust:
Thou madest man, he knows not why,
He thinks he was not made to die;
And thou hast made him: thou art just.
Our little systems have their day;
They have their day and cease to be:
They are but broken lights of thee,
And thou, O Lord, art more than they.
We have but faith: we cannot know;
For knowledge is of things we see;
And yet we trust it comes from thee,
A beam in darkness: let it grow.
Oh, yet we trust that somehow good
Will be the final goal of ill,
To pangs of nature, sins of will,
Defects of doubt, and taints of blood;
That nothing walks with aimless feet;
That not one life shall be destroy'd,
Or cast as rubbish to the void,
When God hath made the pile complete;
That not a worm is cloven in vain;
That not a moth with vain desire
Is shrivell'd in a fruitless fire,

Or but subserves another's gain.
Behold, we know not anything;
I can but trust that good shall fall
At last -- far off -- at last, to all,
And every winter change to spring.
So runs my dream: but what am I?
An infant crying in the night:
An infant crying for the light:
And with no language but a cry.
Are God and Nature then at strife,
That Nature lends such evil dreams?
So careful of the type she seems,
So careless of the single life;
And he, shall he,
Man, her last work, who seem'd so fair,
Such splendid purpose in his eyes,
Who roll'd the psalm to wintry skies,
Who built him fanes of fruitless prayer,
Who trusted God was love indeed
And love Creation's final law --
Tho' Nature, red in tooth and claw
With ravine, shriek'd against his creed --
Who loved, who suffer'd countless ills,
Who battled for the True, the Just,
Be blown about the desert dust,

Or seal'd within the iron hills?
O life as futile, then, as frail!
O for thy voice to soothe and bless!
What hope of answer, or redress?
Behind the veil, behind the veil.
If e'er when faith had fall'n asleep,
I heard a voice `believe no more'
And heard an ever-breaking shore
That tumbled in the Godless deep;
A warmth within the breast would melt
The freezing reason's colder part,
And like a man in wrath the heart
Stood up and answer'd "I have felt."
No, like a child in doubt and fear:
But that blind clamour made me wise;
Then was I as a child that cries,
But, crying, knows his father near;
And what I am beheld again
What is, and no man understands;
And out of darkness came the hands
That reach thro' nature, moulding men.
Love is and was my King and Lord,
And will be, tho' as yet I keep
Within his court on earth, and sleep
Encompass'd by his faithful guard,

And hear at times a sentinel
 Who moves about from place to place,
 And whispers to the worlds of space,
 In the deep night, that all is well.
 Whereof the man, that with me trod
 This planet, was a noble type
 Appearing ere the times were ripe,
 That friend of mine who lives in God,
 That God, which ever lives and loves,
 One God, one law, one element,
 And one far-off divine event,
 To which the whole creation moves.

By 1889 Tennyson had moved completely to religious faith as a resolution to all doubts. In [Crossing the Bar](#) we see this faith, dependent on no external circumstances, but resting on God alone.

"Crossing the Bar" (1889)
 Sunset and evening star,
 And one clear call for me!
 And may there be no moaning of the bar,
 When I put out to sea,
 But such a tide as moving seems asleep,
 Too full for sound and foam,
 When that which drew from out the boundless deep
 Turns again home.
 Twilight and evening bell,
 And after that the dark!
 And may there be no sadness of farewell,

When I embark;
 For through from out our bourne of Time and Place
 The flood may bear me far,
 I hope to see my Pilot face to face
 When I have crossed the bar.

Gustave Flaubert (1821-1880): Pessimism, Realism, and Naturalism

The other theme in 19th century writing--pessimism, realism, and naturalism--is exhibited in the work of Gustave Flaubert. Flaubert's life uncannily resembled that of characters in his greatest work, Madame Bovary. His father, like Charles Bovary, was a physician in Rouen, France. He studied law but, after suffering a seizure (perhaps epilepsy), failed his exams and turned to his real love, writing. In 1856 Madame Bovary appeared in serial form and then in book form in 1857. It was immediately judged immoral by the authorities and Flaubert was prosecuted, escaping conviction for some reason. In the 1860's and 70's he enjoyed recognition for having pioneered a new style of writing, realism/naturalism, and continued to produce works. None is equal to Madame Bovary, one of the major works in 19th century literature and perhaps the foremost example of its genre.

Madame Bovary is about ordinary people living ordinary lives. It has no heroic figures, only commonplace people exhibiting the vices and failings of ordinary people. Flaubert depicts them without sentiment or moralizing: silly, foolish, gross, grasping, hypocritical, vulgar, stupidly ambitious people. The central figures are Charles and Emma whose lives the reader follows from childhood to death, and who are touched, sometimes disastrously, by a range of other characters. Charles is seen first at school as a simple, not too bright, student, then studying for his medical exams, practicing medicine in Yonville, a small rural town, and meeting Emma while tending to her father. Emma captivates Charles with her beauty and manners. He marries her and takes her to Yonville. There their lives wind down in dull monotony, which satisfies Charles, but leaves Emma cold. Emma yearns for the excitement of romantic love. And she finds it in ways not unusual in any small town, for Emma while different from Charles, is no different from any other ordinary woman in any other ordinary French town. The affairs she has with Rodolphe and Leon are stereotypical of a life as a type. Both end disastrously for Emma. In addition, her mean ambition runs her into debt, unforgivable in middle class society. The only happy character is Homais, the local pharmacist who is a caricature of the Enlightenment man, informed about the latest trends, believing in the latest bit of knowledge that makes its way down to him, striving to get ahead in the world. None of these characters is free. All are driven by forces greater than themselves, determined by their environment like any other animals. Emma is driven by boredom, romanticism, and money. And destroyed.

?

Do you pity Emma? Or Charles? Does Flaubert care?

Madame Bovary aroused such controversy because of Flaubert's themes and his detachment as a writer. Charles Bovary is the first respectable figure, a physician, presented as an incompetent fool. He understands neither medicine, as evidenced by his bungling of the operation on the local village simpleton, nor his wife. He fails both as a doctor and a husband. Homais, also respectable, is held up as an object of scorn. The priest, Bournisien, is held up as useless. He does Emma no good when she goes to him at one point for help. Emma herself is the first adulterous wife presented without judgment by a writer. In his stance as a writer and in his choice of words Flaubert aimed for objectivity and dispassion, characteristics which mark the school of realistic and naturalistic writers.

These characteristics show not only in the objective depictions of characters living as ordinary persons live, but also in the graphic and vivid descriptions of scenes from those lives. Some examples will help.

When Hippolyte is operated on by Charles and the operation goes wrong, this is a description of his condition:

And so, taking great precautions not to disturb the position of the limb, they removed the box, and a ghastly sight met their eyes. The foot was so hideously swollen that it was nothing but a shapeless mass of pulp covered with patches of ecchymosis caused by the famous machine. Hippolyte had said some time back that it was hurting him, but they hadn't taken any notice. It was now evident, however, that he had had some cause for complaint, and they let him be free for a few hours. But no sooner had the oedema subsided a little, than the two professional gentlemen thought it well to replace the apparatus, strapping it tighter than ever to accelerate the cure. Finally, three days later, Hippolyte being unable to bear it any longer, they unscrewed it again, and were much amazed at what they saw. A livid swelling had spread all up the leg, on which, here and there, were pustules oozing with dark-coloured matter. Things were looking serious; Hippolyte was beginning to get rather low, and the Widow Lefrancois shifted him into the little parlour near the kitchen, so that he might at least have something to take his mind off it a little.

Another vivid descriptive scene displaying realist and naturalist elements in the novel is the final meeting between Rodolphe, Emma's first lover, and Charles.

Charles was not listening, Rodolphe saw he wasn't, and watched the changes of his expression as memory after memory passed through his mind. His face grew flushed, his nostrils quivered, his lips trembled. There was, indeed, a moment when Charles, filled with sombre rage, fixed his eyes on Rodolphe, who, in a kind of panic, stopped what he was saying. But soon the old funereal weariness overspread his countenance again.

'I'm not angry with you,' he said.

Rodolphe held his peace. And Charles, with his head in his hands, repeated in a flat voice, with the resigned accent of an infinite sorrow,

'No, I'm not angry with you, now!'

Then he said a great thing, the only great thing he ever said in his life,

'It's Fate must bear the blame!'

Rodolphe, who had directed the course of this same Fate, thought him very civil for a man in his position; rather comic, indeed, and a trifle cheap.

No one was to blame. Charles was a victim, like Emma. Rodolphe was a predator. This is life in naturalistic

literature. Other examples abound of elements of realism and naturalism, for example, Emma's death in all its gory detail. But I will spare you that.

Literary Responses and the Second Europe

What is there in the works we have examined of Enlightenment principles? Perhaps those ideas can be found in the optimistic writings of Tennyson. But not in his later works. Maybe in Locksley Hall with its optimism about the progress to be enjoyed by man through science and technology, with the image of a peaceful world in "slumber, lapped in universal law". But not in In Memoriam or in Crossing the Bar. One gets the impression Tennyson is clinching his teeth and hoping against hope there is meaning. But nature red in tooth and claw is there in the back of his mind. No design or purpose, just surging sentient life.

As for Flaubert, I know you will not find anything of Enlightenment optimism about man, the world, or the future there. Man is a victim in Flaubert, living in a world which treats him as just another animal. The worst qualities of the human character seem to make you a winner in his world. What do you think?