

## **In what ways are Romantic-period writers relevant today?**

### **London to Damascus: How Romanticism Has Resurfaced in Syrian Resistance**

Since its zenith in the late 18<sup>th</sup> and early 19<sup>th</sup> Century, the encroachment of tyrannical and industrial forces which arguably set the Romantic period into motion has not subsided. It is perhaps not unsurprising, therefore, that the tenets once championed by Romantic-period writers, particularly the reverence of nature and an embracement of imagination, have since found solidarity with marginalised nations far beyond the borders of Western Europe. The same fervour with which Shelley branded poets the “legislators of the world” could be heard echoing throughout the protests which triggered the Syrian uprising. The assault on the natural world which followed during the civil war has also afflicted communities who sought its refuge against oppression, a phenomenon which had already been mourned by Romantic writers centuries prior. However, with the toppling of the Assad regime seemingly relaxing some restrictions on freedom of speech, there may yet be room for contemporary Syrian societies to heed the Romantic call for a return to artistic expression.

The advocacy of Romantic writers for resistance against oppression could have stemmed from the profound social transformations they were exposed to. Revolutions in the United States and France resulted in the ousting of a colonial power and the deposition of a monarchy, indifferent to the suffering of its people, respectively; such upheaval was, at least initially, viewed favourably by Romantic writers as a step towards social equality. Indeed, Lord Byron even participated in one such uprising himself, pledging a “half helping hand” for the Greek cause against the Ottoman Empire. This backdrop is, in many ways, similar to the events antecedent to the Syrian Civil War. Inspired by the revolutions in Tunisia and Egypt, young people conveyed their message with graffiti; the most notable example read “It’s your turn Doctor”, in reference to Bashar al-Assad, a ruler who had long been accused of crimes against his people. The importance of literary devices, such as this slogan, in uniting protestors had already been acknowledged by Romantic-period writers; Percy Shelley’s unfinished essay ‘A Defence of Poetry’ argued that poets were “not only the authors of language”, but also the “founders of civil society.” However, rather than receiving concessions from the government, the Syrian protestors were met only with extreme violence and intensified surveillance, which in turn precipitated the wider civil conflict. Although this was much larger in scale than any movement witnessed by Shelley, a parallel can be drawn between these protests and the Peterloo Massacre of 1819, in which British security forces attacked peaceful protestors demanding parliamentary reform. Shelley’s subsequent call to “Rise like lions after slumber / In unvanquishable number!” seemingly mirrors the spirit of the wider Arab Spring, which sought to return power to the common people, whose strength could be found in their great quantity.

The ensuing Syrian Civil War was characterised not only by multiple factions and innumerable civilian casualties, but also a campaign of intense ecological destruction. One such tactic was the policy of scorched-earth; while retreating from a territory, an army or militia would destroy forests or crops, in order to prevent nature from providing concealment or nourishment to their enemy. This was accompanied by the deployment of chemical weaponry, which targeted humans and nature alike with harrowing indiscrimination. This policy was mourned by Lord Byron as early as 1816; his poem ‘Darkness’ alludes to “Forests ... set on fire”, and the resulting “pang / Of famine”. This rather apocalyptic scenario seems to encapsulate Romantic-period concerns about the destruction of nature and its consequences for the population, a fear which had been realised by the onset of the Industrial Revolution. William Blake similarly lamented the “charter’d Thames” as being characteristic of a bleak and decaying ‘London’, with the only natural feature mentioned in the poem falling under human sovereignty. This inclination to not only debilitate but also control aspects of nature could be found within the Syrian conflict, as efforts between rival factions to exercise

authority over the Wadi Barada springs culminated in water supplies being cut off and weaponised. As such, Romantic-period criticism of environmental destruction would still appear to resonate strongly with a 21<sup>st</sup> Century reader.

However, following the upheaval of the Assad Regime in 2024, a nascent optimism can be observed within the population, as previous restrictions on art and literature appear to deteriorate. Perhaps the most striking example can be found in the transformation of bookshops in the country; once regularly raided and censored by the regime, texts detailing the authentic experiences of prisoners and theological discussion have returned to stores in Damascus. This contemporary example of artistic expression transcending and outlasting political turmoil resounds firmly with the sentiment of 'Ode on a Grecian Urn', in which Keats famously states that "Beauty is truth, truth beauty." The epanalepsis permeating this statement could suggest an inseparability between truth and beauty; as such, it would not be insensible to assume that the release of Syrian literature from tyrannical shackles is an event that aligns with the Romantic idealisation of independent thought. The gradual return of these texts could even be described as akin to the tentative "whistles" and "twitter" which emerge from the apparent decay in Keats' ode 'To Autumn'. Consequently, it seems that the self-belief of Romantic-period literature in its ability to outlast oppression and censorship has been adopted by modern-day Syrian people.

In conclusion, the principles espoused by Romantic-period writers appear to have resurfaced at each stage of the Syrian conflict. The revolutionary courage propagated by Byron and Shelley mirrors the protestors who marched, and wrote, in the face of despotism. The consequences of humans attempting to control nature is no less devastating in the present day as it was in the early 19<sup>th</sup> Century. Nevertheless, as reflected in the odes of Keats, regeneration from the ashes of decay can be removed from neither Romantic-period literature nor contemporary Syrian society.

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