



# The French Revolution and the English Novel

*Allene Gregory*

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From the PREFACE.

THIS study in the *tendenz* novel was begun with the idea of paralleling Dr. Hancock's book, *The French Revolution and the English Poets*, in furnishing detailed consideration of a literary form which Professor Dowden's general treatment of the period necessarily presents in outline merely.

It is evident, however, that the Revolutionary poets and the Revolutionary novelists must rest their claims to our interest on different grounds. A discussion of Wordsworth, Coleridge, Byron, and Shelley needs no justification. But it must be confessed that the novelists we are about to consider cannot escape the condemnation of mediocrity. There is scarcely one of them whose work has lived through the intervening century. What, then, shall be our apology for invading their well-merited obscurity?

There are two distinct uses of the historical methods in the study of literature. The first, admirably exemplified in Dr. Hancock's book, resorts to a study of the age and its antecedents for the purpose of gaining a truer appreciation of the work of authors whose greatness unquestionably warrants such effort. But there is a second use of the historical method with a somewhat different end in view. Some special phase of literature may be studied as a means of gaining insight into the intellectual and (in a broad sense) spiritual life of a historical period.

Considered with the second purpose in mind, there was perhaps no literary form in Revolutionary England so significant as these same obscure novels. The poets of the time were for the most part only temporarily in sympathy with the Revolution. They were carried away by the tide of popular enthusiasm, rather than expressing their own mature convictions. The drama, in some respects the most social of literary forms, was perhaps the least adapted to express so complex and reflective a philosophy. Moreover, censorship, official and popular, during the reaction served to eliminate from the drama the later developments of Revolutionism.

All this might seem to indicate that the proper field for a study of political philosophy is in the distinctively doctrinary and propaganda writings of the time rather than in any form of imaginative literature. But Revolutionism was more than an academic philosophy. It was a social religion, in the sense that it was to many men their "serious reaction to life as a whole."

Perhaps every faith by which men have lived is better than it seems from a mere analytical statement of its doctrines. Such formulations have often much the same relation to reality that an architect's plans and specifications have to the house they represent. The plans afford a general view and valuable information as to the soundness of construction; one would certainly wish to see them before making the house one's own. But the architect's plans do not tell the whole story. Those who have lived in the house may know that certain rooms that appear dark and ill ventilated are really little used; that tortuous passages have been made easy by custom; and that the main rooms afford scope for a life of dignity and service.

The real value of the novels we are about to consider lies not in their intrinsic merit, but in , the illustrations they offer of the practice of Revolutionary ethics, as conceived by its sympathizers and its opponents. They are a frank give-and-take criticism disguised as fiction; and in the course of them many values are made plain which the metaphysical treatises somewhat obscured. After reading *Political Justice* one wonders how any man whose sense of fact was not entirely atrophied could have taken Revolutionism seriously. In the novels one sees how sensible and kindly men like Holcroft and Bage made of it an eminently livable philosophy....

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