
UNIT 1 ROMANTICISM

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1.0 OBJECTIVES

In this unit we shall offer you a broad introduction to the general concerns that went into the shaping of British nineteenth century Romanticism. Subsequent units take up the critical ideas of William Wordsworth, Samuel Taylor Coleridge and P.B. Shalley. Here we shall talk of the general thrust of the movement as a whole.

1.1 INTRODUCTION

In its most coherent early form, as it emerged in the 1790's in Germany and Britain, Romanticism is generally treated under the head 'the Romantic Movement' or 'Romantic Revival'. The stress was mainly on freedom of individual self-expression. The ordered rationality of the preceding age (the Augustan Period) was viewed as mechanical, impersonal and artificial. The new preoccupations came to be sincerity, spontaneity and originality. These replaced the decorous imitation of classical models upon which neo-classicists like Dryden, Pope and Johnson placed much value. The turn now was toward emotion and inspiration seeing the artist as a kind of prophet or a genius also came in the wake of such a general thrust. Most of the Romantic poets saw themselves as free spirits expressing their own imaginative truth.

1.2 DEFINING ROMANTICISM

Romantic criticism serves as a convenient title for a body of critical writing with a particular historical background and certain broad features which define its special nature. The question of the definition of the term 'Romanticism' has occasioned a good deal of controversy among literary critics. There are many critics who believe that in literary theorizing and imaginative literature we come across not one particular Romanticism but several Romanticisms. This point of view is very cogently argued

in A.O. Lovejoy's essay, 'On the Discrimination of Romanticisms'. This view is grounded in a sound truth about the essential nature of Romanticism. As we shall see later, Romanticism places the greatest emphasis on individuality and the subjective dimension of human experience. This stress on individuality implies the autonomy of every individual and the consequent variety and difference. The cardinal Romantic belief that every individual is different from every other individual justifies the assertion that there cannot be any one Romanticism but several Romanticisms. This very fact, however, helps us define the common characteristic or characteristics of Romanticism. Viewing man as an autonomous and individual entity, as Romanticism in all its various forms does, entails a particular view of human life and man's relationship and external reality.

Rene Wellek is, therefore, right in identifying certain common features which define Romanticism. In his view it is a compounded of a particular view of imagination, a particular attitude to nature and a particular style of writing. A point that Wellek does not, however, mention is the political dimension of Romanticism. It arises out of the very affirmation of individual worth that Romantic poets and critics make from time to time. It begins with the affirmation of the worth of the common man and leads to the affirmation of universal brotherhood. Imagination, in this view, is a mysterious creative faculty of which all arts including literature are, in a way, an expression and which, in the end, determines man's relationship with external reality. To these common characteristics we should also add the historical fact that we generally associate the rise of Romanticism with nineteenth century Europe.

That, however, does not imply that Romanticism was something altogether new. In fact the Romantic impulse has always existed side by side with another impulse termed as the classical impulse which places more emphasis on external reality and views art as a reflection on this reality.

The Western critical horizon was, however, dominated from the Greek and the Roman classical times up to the eighteenth century by the view of art which accords primacy to external reality. The Romantic impulse was either excluded or assimilated into this predominant tendency as an unrecognizable component. In the neo-classical age this approach was further strengthened by the ebullient and overconfident scientific materialism. Aristotle, Horace and Quintilian continued to be the undisputed masters and law-givers in the realm of art. The neo-classical emphasis, in addition to the unquestionable principle of mimesis fell also on the end that art was supposed to serve – the Horatian prescription that it should aim at delight and instruction. Towards the end of the eighteenth century, however, we witness the beginnings of an orientation of attitudes and values questioning the basis of the imitative-rationalist aesthetic and paving the way for the Romantic view of life and art. The movement of Enlightenment and writings emanating from what is known as 'Sentimentalism' strengthened this tendency.

Pioneering work for this shift was done in Germany. The 'Strum Und Drang' (Storm and Stress) movement whose leading lights were men like Goethe, Schiller and Herder, began to assert the independence of the subjective dimension of the individual. Kant and Fichte stressed the principle of subjective reference in preference to the objective order. Fichte proclaimed that the non-Ego owes its existence to the Ego and that the existence and shape of the world depend entirely on individual imagination. The Schlegel brothers – A.W. Schlegel and Friedrich Schlegel – and poets like Heine and Uhland formally inaugurated the German Romantic movement.

In England the first signs of unmistakable change become discernible when Kames and Twining begin to distinguish between painting and sculpture as predominantly imitative arts in contrast to music and poetry which are predominantly expressive. Young's *Conjectures on Original Composition* (1759) was the most significant assertion of the expressive view of art in its day and had a tremendous influence on the 'Strum Und Drang' movement in Germany although it did not attract as much attention in England. Blake's theoretical pronouncements and creative output

emphatically reject the mimetic view of art in all its forms. The shift is almost complete with the appearance of Wordsworth and Coleridge.

1.3 THE ROMANTIC EPISTEMOLOGY

The epistemology of the Romantic or the Expressive theory of art is radically different from the one that underlies the mimetic or the imitative-rationalist aesthetic. The components of the Romantic epistemology are: (i) the active-projective view of human self or mind, (ii) distrust of reason and (iii) individualism. On the mimetic view, human mind is a passive recipient of external impressions and does not in any way modify them. Plato uses the analogy of a mirror for it which faithfully reflects external reality. Aristotle uses a different analogy, but means exactly the same, when he compares the human mind to a piece of wax taking on the impressions of a signet ring. This view of human mind continued to dominate the thinking of the West with minor deviations here and there and squarely suited the empirical worldview of the seventeenth century. Locke described human mind as 'tabula rasa' in his *Essay Concerning Human Understanding*. Hartley explained the working of the human mind in mechanical terms through his theory of association of ideas and Hume came out with a more-or-less plausible scientific explanation of the way in which this association of ideas worked. As he wrote in his *Treatise of Human Nature*:

The qualities from which this association arises, and by which the mind is after this manner conveyed from one idea to another, are three, viz. Resemblance, Contiguity of time and place, and Cause and Effect.

In the mimetic view, again, man was important not as an individual but as a member of the human race. All value was attached to what was general and in contrast everything individual was considered special. Reason was regarded as an infallible faculty and the ultimate guide and saviour.

The Romantic theory of knowledge is a questioning of this worldview. Human mind or self is not passive but active and projective. It not only modifies what it receives but, in a significant sense, creates it. Man is an individual and autonomous entity, a mysterious reservoir of boundless potential and it is not the general which is most valuable but that which is individual and particular. Blake wrote:

To Generalise is to be an Idiot. To particularise is the lone distinction of merit.

Compare this with what Dr. Johnson wrote on the subject and you will grasp the essence of the difference between the neo-classical rationalist epistemology and the Romantic epistemology. In the *History of Rasselas: Prince of Abyssinia* Johnson speaks through Imlac:

The business of the poet is to examine, not the individual but the species; to remark general properties and large appearances.... [He] must neglect the minute discriminations, which one may have remarked and another neglected.

What Johnson recommends to the poet to neglect is the only thing of importance from the Romantic point of view. This naturally accounts for the fact that Pope wrote the *Essay on Man* and when Wordsworth attempted the same subject, he ended up by writing *The Prelude*, an autobiographical poem, the story of a particular individual. The projected grand poem of Wordsworth, *The Recluse*, of which *The Prelude* was to be the first part, was to be a poem about Man, Nature and the Universe but Wordsworth could not go beyond *The Prelude*.

Again, from the Romantic point of view, reason has a limited role in life and cannot be regarded as an infallible guide. Blake mocked at what he called 'rational demonstration' and Wordsworth believed that the 'meddling interest' misshapes the beauteous forms of things and amounts to a murder of sorts. In *Biographia Literaria*, Coleridge tells us that at a very early stage in his life he had found the limitations of reason and its untrustworthiness as a guide.

But in spite of these radical assertions Wordsworth and Coleridge did not discard reason in its most exalted mood. It would be in order to suggest, then, that instead of rejecting reason, as might at first appear from their pronouncements, they sought to accommodate it.

1.4 THE ROMANTIC THEORY OF ART

The theory of art emerging from this epistemology places the whole emphasis on the inner dimension of the individual artist. It rejects the mimetic conclusion that art is imitation or at best an interpretation or that poetry is a matter of wit which makes up agreeable pictures and pleasant visions by combining different ideas. Art is not imitation or interpretation; it is not the presentation of a basic universal norm or the denominator of a type but creation in the most significant sense. Poetry is the expression of the inner man and if at all it reflects external nature it is external nature modified by imagination. The cause of poetry is not, as Aristotle thought, 'formal', determined by what the poet imitates, nor is the cause of poetry, as the pragmatic critics believe, 'final', determined by the ends that poetry is supposed to serve. The cause of poetry is 'efficient', determined by the inner impulse and creative imagination of the poet.

The emphasis on expression, on the inner being made outer, is the common denominator of the various definitions of poetry formulated by the Romantics although they differ on points of detail. Wordsworth defined poetry as 'the spontaneous overflow of powerful feelings'; Coleridge, in 'Of Poesy of Art', remarks that all fine arts are a revelation of the inner world of man; Shelley defines poetry as 'the expression of imagination' and Byron says that 'poetry is the lava of imagination whose eruption prevents an earthquake.'

Central to the Romantic or expressive theory of art is a cluster of ideas which, in practice, are woven together, but for our convenience they are discussed here separately. These are the ideas of Imagination, Inspiration, Organicism and Emotion as the principles of integration in art.

1.5 IMAGINATION

The imitative-rationalist aesthetic took on a predominantly mechanical colour in the eighteenth century. Poetry was regarded as craftsmanship whose mastery depended on following certain rules. Critics like Boileau and Racine sought to lay down, once for all, standards of lasting validity in arts. The writing of a book was often compared with the making of a clock or an engine. Gottsched laid down a grotesquely mechanical recipe for the making of a tragedy:

Let the poet first choose a moral precept which he wants to impress on his audience by means of the senses. Then he invents a general story to illustrate the truth for famous people to whom something similar has happened and from them he borrows names for the characters in his story in order to give it a semblance of reality. After this

he thinks up all the attendant circumstances necessary to make the main story really probable, and these are called the sub-plots and episodes. He then divides his material into five pieces, all of approximately equal length, and arranges them so that each section follows from the preceding section, but he does not bother further whether everything corresponds to the historical happenings, nor whether the subsidiary characters bore these or other names.

In such a view obviously there was no place for the creative imagination. The word 'imagination' did exist in the eighteenth century but it was used in a mechanical sense. Images, it was believed, move across the mind's eye in succession. If they recur in the same spatial and temporal order as in the original experience it is memory but if they recur in a different order or combine to produce a new whole, it is imagination.

From the Romantic point of view, imagination is a mysterious creative faculty which transcends reason. Its procedure is not analytical but synthetic. It grasps truth all at once through an act of intuition and does not follow the circumlocutions and often unsure route of reason. It does not merely reproduce external data but is active and productive in character, determinative and not determined. In the famous Kantian typology, it is the synthetic power which determines sense *a priori* in respect of its form. In common language it bridges the gap between sensation and thought. By itself sensation gives us a world which is chaotic and by itself thought cannot impose an order upon this chaos. To bridge the gulf we require what Coleridge called 'the shaping spirit of imagination.'

Among the English Romantics, Blake stands out for his denial of the existence of anything except imagination. In his system, imagination is nothing less than God operating in the human mind. He rejects Plato's theory of knowledge as recollection and art as imitation. Plato worshipped the daughters of memory while Blake's muses are the daughters of imagination.

Although imagination is not so central a concept in Wordsworth's theoretical pronouncements, he, in his 'Preface' of 1815, accords to it the same place as do the other Romantics:

Imagination in the sense of the word as giving title to a class of the following poems, has no reference to images that are merely a faithfully copy, existing in the mind, of absent external objects; but is a word of higher import, denoting operations of the mind upon those objects, and processes of creation or of composition, governed by certain fixed laws.

This is a clear refutation of the mechanical view of imagination held by the neo-classicists of the eighteenth century.

Wordsworth then proceeds to illustrate the operation of imagination by the use of the word 'hang' in Virgil, Shakespeare and Milton, and by the use of certain other words in his own poetry. After discussing 'the conferring, the abstracting and the modifying powers of the imagination', he adds:

...the imagination also shapes and creates:...by innumerable processes; and in none does it more delight than in that of consolidating numbers into unity and dissolving and separating unity into number, ... alternations proceeding from, and governed by, a subline consciousness of the soul in her own mighty and almost divine powers.

Coleridge's theory of imagination is the most compact and comprehensive of all the Romantic statements on imagination. In his view it is a vital and creative power 'which dissolves, diffuses and dissipates' in order to recreate. This theory deserves a detailed treatment which is given to it in the following pages. (See Coleridge: *Biographia Literaria*).

Shelley and Keats also affirm the importance of the role of imagination in the production of art. Shelley's critical treatise, *A Defence of Poetry* is examined separately a little later. Keat's letters – a mine of original critical thought – contain significant remarks on the subject. To him imagination is a surer guide to truth than reason and comprehends truth in the form of beauty. In a letter of Benjamin Bailey, he writes:

I am certain of nothing but the holiness of heart's affections and the truth of imagination. What the imagination seizes as beauty must be truth.... The imagination may be compared to Adam's dream – he awoke and found it truth.

Imagination is such a central concept in the Romantic theory of art that its mode of actual operation in poetry needs to be examined in greater detail. Wordsworth's poetry supplies us with an ideal illustration of how imagination works in the process of creation. Fortunately for us, he has himself chosen, in his 'Preface' of 1815, the poems that he would use to explain the working of the imagination. These are 'There Was a Boy' and 'Resolution and Independence'.

'There Was a Boy' had been first published as an independent poem in the *Lyrical Ballads* (1800). Now it forms a part of *The Prelude*. Here is the text of the poem:

There Was a Boy

There was a Boy, ye knew him well, ye Cliffs
And Islands of Winander! Many a time
At evening, when the stars had just begun
To move along the edges of the hills,
Rising or setting, would I stand alone
Beneath the trees, or by the glimmering Lake,
And there, with fingers interwoven, both hands
Press closely, palm to palm, and to his mouth
Uplifted, he, as through an instrument,
Blew, mimic hootings to the silent owls
That they might answer him. – And they would shout
Across the wat'ry Vale, and shout again,
Responsive to his call, with quivering pearls,
And long halloos, and screams, and echoes loud
Redoubled and redoubled; concourse wild
Or mirth and jocund din! And when it chanced
That pauses of deep silence mocked his skill,
Then sometimes, in that silence, while he hung
Listening, a gentle shock of mild surprise
Has carried far into his heart the voice
Of mountain torrents; or the visible scene
Would enter unawares into his mind
With all its solemn imagery, its rocks,
Its woods, and that uncertain Heaven, received
Into the bosom of the steady Lake.

The poem does not describe external scenes and sights as much as it tells us how imagination, the subjective experience, interacts with external reality and dips it in colours of its own so that something new is created or at least 'half-created' as

Wordsworth would put it in 'Tintern Abbey', another great poem of imagination. The beauty of the poem, therefore, lies not in accurate description but in the passionate and loving way in which the external world is perceived. As Blake, referring to himself, said, the Romantics did not see *through* their eyes but saw *with* their eyes as the instruments of a subjective power. Look at the way the boy enters into the scene with jocund mimicry of the owls' hootings and watches the responses in an impassioned state. Then comes a moment of revelation, an epiphany (Wordsworth called such moments 'spots of time') when the boy has a brief pause. Suddenly a new reality dawns on him:

...And, when there came a pause
Of silence such as baffled his best skills;
Then sometimes, in that silence, while he hung
Listening, a gentle shock of mild surprise
Has carried far into his heart the voice
Of mountain torrents; or the visible scene
Would enter unawares into his mind
With all its solemn imagery, its rocks,
Its woods, and that uncertain heave received
Into the bosom of the steady lake.
The following lines need special attention:
Then sometimes in that silence, while he hung
Listening, a gentle shock of mild surprise
Has carried far into his heart the voice...

Thomas de Quincey, in a marvellous comment upon these lines, singled out the use of a particular word which metamorphosed everything. He said:

The very expression 'far' by which space and its infinities are attributed to the human heat, and its capacities of reechoing the sublimities of nature, has always struck me with a flash of sublime revelation.

'Resolution and Independence' (See Appendix for the text) is quoted by Wordsworth to illustrate 'the conferring, the abstracting and the modifying power of the imagination' and a perusal of the poem along the lines suggested by Wordsworth reveals that it is a central poem for an understanding of the use of imagination in poetry. The poem grew from an extremely ordinary, even petty, origin recorded by Dorothy Wordsworth in her *Journals*. In the entry made on October 3, 1800, she writes:

We met an old man almost double. He had on a coat thrown over his shoulders, above his waistcoat and coat. Under this he carried a bundle, and had an apron on and a night-cap. His face was interesting. He had dark eyes and a long nose. John, who afterwards met him at Wytherburn took him for a Jew. He was of Scotch parents but had been born in the army. He had had a wife, and 'a good woman, and it pleased God to bless us with ten children' All these were dead but one, of whom he had not heard for many years, a sailor. His trade was to gather leeches, but now leeches are scarce, and he had not strength for it. He lived by begging, and was making his way to Carlisle, where he should buy a few godly books to sell. He said leeches were very scarce, partly owing to this dry season, but many years they had been scarce - he supposed owing to their being much sought after, that they did not breed fast, and were of slow growth.

The poem was written in 1802 so that two years intervened between the event that supplied the germ and actual writing of the poem. This is an apt illustration of Wordsworth's way of composing poetry, of what he called 'emotion recollected in tranquillity'. How has creative imagination performed its wonders here? First the beggar is transformed into a self-respecting leech-gatherer, who lives independently and honourably, to be an appropriate vehicle of the message that he has to deliver. Secondly he is invested with a prophetic grandeur and saintly purity. The poem opens on an unusually bright and pleasant morning. On the previous night it has rained torrentially but now the sun is shining warm and bright and the whole nature is rejoicing including the poet. But suddenly from a climax of joy he sinks into a dejection whose source is unknown and undefinable so that he thinks that it is the unhappy lot of poets to experience such emotional ups and downs. Brooding on this, he sinks deeper and deeper into the morass of despondency. The unseen must intervene; a rescuer must appear and he does. But who is he? It is a decrepit leech-gatherer but at the same time he is an excellent embodiment of fortitude, resignation and independence.

Wordsworth sent the first draft of the poem to Mary Hutchinson, his future wife, and her sister Sara (later to be Coleridge's beloved). It seems that they commented on it in detail but their comments are not available. What fortunately, we have is Wordsworth's reply which is of immense value from the point of view from which we are looking at the poem. Wordsworth wrote:

[14 June 1802]

My Dear Sara

I am exceedingly sorry that the latter part of the Leech-gatherer has displeased you, the more so because I cannot take to myself (that being the case) much pleasure or satisfaction in having pleased you in the former part. I will explain to you in prose my feeling in writing that Poem, and then you will be better able to judge whether the fault be mine or partly both. I describe myself as having been exalted to the highest pitch of delight by the joyousness and beauty of Nature and then as depressed, even in the midst of those beautiful objects, to the lowest dejection and despair. A young Poet in the midst of the happiness of Nature is described as overwhelmed by the thought of the miserable reverses which have befallen the happiest of all men, viz. Poets – I think of this till I am so deeply impressed by it, that I consider the manner in which I was rescued from my dejection and despair almost as an interposition of Providence. 'Now whether it was by peculiar grace A leading from above'. A person reading this Poem with feelings like mine will have been awed and controlled, expecting almost something spiritual or supernatural – what is brought forward? 'A lonely place, a Pond' by which an old man *was*, far from all house or home' – 'not stood, not sat, but *was*' – the figure presented in the most naked simplicity possible. This feeling of spirituality or supernaturalness is again referred to as being strong in my mind in this passage – 'How came he here thought I or what can he be doing?' I then describe him, whether ill or well is not for me to judge with perfect confidence, but this I can *confidently* affirm that, though I believe God has given me a strong imagination, I cannot conceive a figure more impressive than that of an old Man like this, the survivor of a Wife and ten children, travelling alone among the mountains and all lonely places, carrying with him his own fortitude, and the necessities which an unjust state of society has entailed upon him. You say and Mary (that is you can say no more than that) the Poem is *very well* after the introduction of the old man; this is not tried, if it is not more than very well it is very bad, there is no intermediate state. You speak of his speech as tedious: everything is tedious when one does not read with the feelings of the Author –

'*The Thorn*' is tedious to hundreds; and so is the *Idiot Boy* to hundreds. It is in the character of the old man to tell his story in a manner which an *impatient* reader must necessarily feel as tedious. But Good God! Such a figure, in such a place, a pious self-respecting, miserably infirm, and [] Old Man telling such a tale!

My dear Sara, it is not a matter of indifference whether you are pleased with this figure and his employment; it may be comparatively so, whether you are pleased or not with *this Poem*; but it is of the utmost importance that you should have had pleasure from contemplating the fortitude, independence, persevering spirit, and the general moral dignity of this old man's character. Your feelings upon the Mother, and the Boys with the Butterfly, were not indifferent: it was an affair of whole continents of moral sympathy. I will talk more with you on this when we meet – at present, farewell and Heaven for ever bless you!

In spite of the self-righteous tone of Wordsworth's letter, he did revise the poem, dropped a few tedious lines and inserted the marvellous ninth stanza beginning with, 'As a huge stone...'. On the operation of imagination in this final version Wordsworth himself commented in his '*Preface*' of 1815.

He draws our attention to stanza nine and the end of stanza eleven and adds that 'the imagination is employed upon images in conjunction, by which they modify each other.' And then he comments:

In these images, the conferring, the abstracting and the modifying powers of the imagination, immediately and mediately acting, are all brought into conjunction. The stone is endowed with something of the power of life to approximate it to the sea-beast; and the sea-beast stripped of some of its vital qualities to assimilate it to the stone; which intermediate image is thus treated for the purpose of bringing the original image, that of the stone, to a nearer resemblance to the figure and condition of the aged man; who is divested of so much of the indications of life and motion as to bring him to the point where the two objects unite and coalesce in just comparison.

In other words, the imagination transforms one object into another. It also performs another function to which Coleridge draws our attention in *Biographia Literaria* and that is,

To give the charm of novelty to things of everyday, and to excite a feeling analogous to the supernatural, by awakening the mind's attention from the lethargy of custom, and directing it to the loveliness and the wonders of the world before us.

Coleridge's '*Dejection : An Ode*' is another important poem which explains the Romantic idea of imagination. Essentially it is a dirge on the gradual loss of the poet's imaginative powers – 'the shaping spirit of imagination.' This shaping spirit enables a poet to enter into a harmonious relationship with the external nature and produces 'joy' the poise born of being at peace with one's own self and with the universe. As the poet's imaginative powers depart, he is unable to see any beauty and charm in nature. He is, therefore, led to the conclusion that:

I may not hope from outward forms to win
The passion and the life, whose fountains are within
O Lady! We receive but what we give,
And in our life alone does nature live
Ours is her wedding garment, ours her shroud!

A close study of the Romantic view of imagination leads us to the conclusion that for the Romantics it was an undefinable and mysterious faculty. Blake deifies it and Coleridge presents it as a human analogy of the divine act of creation. Such a view links imagination with inspiration.

1.6 INSPIRATION

Ever since I.A. Richards propounded his materialistic aesthetic, the word 'inspiration' has either fallen out of use or is used with a great deal of difference. In Romantic criticism, however, it is one of the most central concepts. Literally, to be inspired is to be breathed on by Apollo (the God of poetry in Greek Mythology) or in the Christian context by the Holy Spirit. In the Hindu and Islamic contexts the source of inspiration will be Saraswati and Allah respectively. Modern psychology would explain the phenomenon with reference to the individual subconscious or the Collective Unconscious. The Romantics assert their faith in unmistakable terms in the idea of inspiration.

In Coleridge's 'Kubla Khan', we come across the most marvellous account of the inspired poet:

Could I revive within me
Her symphony and song,
To such a deep delight 'would win me,
That with music loud and long,
I would build that dome in air,
That sunny dome! Those caves of ice!
And all who heard should see them there,
And all should cry, Beware! Beware!
His flashing eyes, his floating hair!
Weave a circle around him thrice,
And close your eyes with holy dread,
For he on honey-dew hath fed,
And drunk the milk of paradise.

To Shelley, poetry is the result of involuntary inspiration so that 'when composition begins, inspiration is already on the decline.' Keats told Woodhouse that to write poetry he waited for the happy moment and having written a poem, it seemed to him somebody else's creation. In a letter he wrote:

If poetry comes not as naturally as leaves to a tree it had
better not come at all.

On this view the lyric would be the best form of poetry and the long poem, an impossibility, as inspiration cannot be sustained for too long a time.

1.7 ORGANICISM

How does a work of art which, on the Romantic view, is a result of inspiration achieve form and unity? Plato would answer the question with reference to his belief in innate ideas which unconsciously enter a work of art and impart a form to it. Others refer the presence of form in a work of art to instinct such as the one possessed by bees and ants. The Romantics explain it by speaking of the work of art as an organism. Blake rejects Burke's theory of art which is based on the dichotomy between conception and execution. Other Romantics use metaphors from the animal and the plant world to explain the unity of a work of art. Wordsworth, in his sonnet, 'A Pet', exhorts the poet that his work should grow like a forest tree or a meadow flower. Shelley describes the process of the poem's creation in terms of a child

growing in the mother's womb. Coleridge uses the marvellous analogy of a growing plant for a poem's growth which assimilates every kind of nutriment – sunshine, water, manure – to its genius and transforms it completely. In accord with this he defines beauty in art as 'multeity in unity.' In his view, even knowing is growing and, in the memorable coinage of I.A. Richards, 'knowledge' is equated with 'growledge'.

1.8 FORMS OF POETRY

The diverse elements of a work of art are mingled together, according to the Romantics, by an informing and dominating passion or emotion. Blake, Wordsworth, Shelley and Keats express this in their different ways and Coleridge uses a very cogent analogy to explain this. In a letter to Southey he compares the operation of emotion or feeling in a poem with the movement of breeze through the leaves. He believes in mechanism, in the theory of the association of ideas, to explain the movement of the leaves without presupposing the existence of the breeze. In *Biographia Literaria* (Chapter IV), Coleridge explains how the presence of an emotion in a poem leads to an artistic fusion while its absence spells chaos.

As a result of the Romantic emphasis on subjectivity, individualism, emotion and inspiration the forms of poetry also underwent a thorough revaluation. All forms of art are determined by the aesthetic that underlines them. That aesthetic is, in turn, significantly related to its intellectual and socio-cultural background. The Greeks regarded gods as supreme and man as a puppet of fate and attached utmost importance to the reality that lies outside of us. Very naturally, therefore, drama, particularly tragedy, was the highest art form with them. In the post-Renaissance Europe the spirit of quest and adventure not only informed forms of art but also drastically modified them. The pragmatic and mechanical outlook of the neo-classical age effected a corresponding modification in art-forms. Epic, prose-satire, comedy of manners and long, didactic, verse 'essays' suited the new temperament.

From the Romantic point of view, the centre of interest was man and not the external reality and this led to a total revaluation of the existing art forms. Blake found the conventional modes of expression acting as a clog upon free expression. In *Jerusalem*, Plate 3, he, therefore, announced that he was discarding the neo-classical verse-forms as 'fettered poetry', and 'fettered poetry fetters the human race.' Wordsworth's 'Preface' to the *Lyrical Ballads* is, from one point of view, a manifesto of the new aesthetic of free expression. It laid emphasis on spontaneity, sincerity and natural expression of feeling in place of artificiality and conventionality. Coleridge buttressed the new aesthetic by laying its philosophical foundation through his active-projective view of human mind, his theory of creative imagination and his idea of organicism. In their different ways Byron, Shelley and Keats – all emphasize sincerity and intensity as criteria of value. Consequently, literary kinds and their ranking undergo a drastic revision. The lyric now becomes the poetic norm as it accords best with the Romantic view of poetry as self-expression. Coleridge and Mill regard the lyric as the most poetic of all forms of poetry. The lyric in its various forms – elegy, sonnet song, ode, etc. – is the purest expression of feeling, rendered generally in the first person which is not the I-representative' (as Coleridge phrases it) but stands for the proper person of the author. As is natural, the lyric receives in the hands of the Romantics an unprecedented freedom, flexibility and intensity. Lyricism so dominates the Romantic age that even its narrative poems and dramatic works are characterised by it and it generally interfered with their narrative continuity and objectivity.

The climax of the 'egotistical sublime', finding expression in brilliant lyricism, is however, to be found in Wordsworth. He tells us that all his poems, long and short, should be regarded as 'the components of a Gothic cathedral' in which the poet

himself constitutes the principle of unity. Such a preoccupation of an author with his own self closes for him nearly all possibilities of becoming a dramatic artist. This is why drama fared worst in the Romantic age in spite of manifold theatrical opportunities. The plays that the Romantic poets wrote fail to be genuine dramatic works because of their essential lyrical temperament. Wordsworth's play *The Borderers*, Coleridge's *Remorse* and Keats's *Otho the Great* are not the literary achievements by which their authors are known. Similarly Byron's *Manfred* and *Cain*, and Shelley's *Prometheus Unbound* and *Hellas* are dramatized poems and lack real dramatic tension and conflict. Only Shelley's play, *The Cenci* seems to assume a real dramatic shape.

1.9 SOME MODERNIST AND POSTSTRUCTURALIST VIEWS OF ROMANTICISM

T.S. Eliot and F.R. Leavis, two of the more influential critics of this century were not much favourably inclined towards the Romantics. One leading New Critic, Cleanth Brooks, in his 1939 book *Modern Poetry and the Tradition* was of the opinion that modern poetry seriously put into question the assumed importance of Romanticism in literary history. He even declared Shelley to be too resistant to irony to function as a model for a new poetics.

Then came Northrop Frye, a towering figure in twentieth century criticism. He saw in Romanticism a healing energy or a conception of creativity that could unify the mental elements in the creative process. His 1947 study of Blake, *Fearful Symmetry*, is a landmark.

The thrust in the direction of rehabilitating the Romantics which was initiated by Frye was continued with some reservations by a group of major American critics known as the 'Yale School'. The members of this school are Harold Bloom, Geoffrey Hartman, J. Hills Miller and Paul de Man. Despite all their internal differences, these Yale Critics have collectively created a Romanticism that cannot be read as awareness of oneness with nature. Hartman sees in British Romanticism a 'division in the self'. His work on Wordsworth has brought about a break with the view of Wordsworth as healer and of the poet as organic subject. For de Man Romantic alienation is melancholic rather than literating. Bloom is more enthusiastic than the other three because, for him, the erotic and the imaginal need to be seen as worthy compensations for the loss of social function and consensus.

M.H. Abrams is one of the major twentieth century champions of Romanticism. He believes in an affirmative Romanticism, one that confirms us in what it is to be most admirably 'human'. To describe the particular achievement of Romantic writing, Abrams uses the phrase 'apocalypse of the imagination'.

1.10 LET US SUM UP

Imagination, inspiration and organicism are all crucial to Romantic poets. Equal stress is placed on freedom, individualism, emotions, spontaneity, sincerity and authenticity. Distrust of rationality went with this. The inner life mattered more to the Romantics. Theirs was an expressive theory of art. Lyricism dominated the age genre-wise and formal perfection of the neo-classical kind was not sought after by most Romantics. They believed in a kind of transcendentalism also and this made the supernatural a fit subject for someone like Coleridge the poet. Liberty, fraternity and equality were valued, the French Revolution being an obvious influence.

1.11 KEY FIGURES

Romanticism

Goethe, Johann Wolfgang Von (1749-1832) German poet, author of *Faust*

Herder, Friedrich : German philosopher, poet and critic (1744-1803)

Kant, Immanuel : German philosopher of the eighteenth century (1724-1804)

Locke, John (1632-1704) : English philosopher who wrote *Essay Concerning Human Understanding*.

Racine, Jean : Seventeenth Century dramatist and poet

Schiller, Friedrich : German dramatist lyric poet and critic (1759-1805)

The Schlegel Brothers : A.W. Schlegel and F.V. Schlegel were influential German Romantic critics in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth century.

1.12 QUESTIONS

1. In what main respects was British Romanticism of the nineteenth century different from the neo-classicism of the preceding age?
2. Why do Romantic poets place such value on imagination and emotions as opposed to rationality?
3. What effect did the Romantic stress on individuality and spontaneity of expression have on their choice of poetic forms?
4. What place does 'organicism' (the belief that a poem grows like a plant or a tree) have in the Romantic view of the poetic process?

1.13 SUGGESTED READINGS

M.H. Abrams, *The Mirror and the Lamp* New York Oxford University Press, 1953.

David Daiches, *Critical Approaches to Literature* London, 1956 (Indian Edition, Orient Longman, 1967)

T.S. Eliot, *The Use of Poetry and the Use of Criticism*, London, Faber and Faber, 1933.

Rene Wellek, *A History of Modern Criticism 1750-1950*, Vol. 2 (London: Jonathan Cope, 1955).

Wimsalt and Brooks, *Literary Criticism : A Short History* Vol.3, London, Routledge Kegan Paul, 1957.

UNIT 2 WORDSWORTH : PREFACE TO THE *LYRICAL BALLADS*

Structure

- 2.0 Objectives
- 2.1 Introduction
- 2.2 The Definition of Poetry
- 2.3 The Poet's Characteristics
- 2.4 The Value of Poetry
- 2.5 Poetic Diction
- 2.6 Coleridge's Views on Poetic Diction
- 2.7 The Cultural Concern of Wordsworth's Criticism
- 2.8 Let Us Sum Up
- 2.9 Questions
- 2.10 Suggested Readings

2.0 OBJECTIVES

In this unit we shall give you some idea of Wordsworth's theory of poetry as spelt out in the 'Preface' to the second edition of the *Lyrical Ballads*. His view of poetic diction and Coleridge's estimate of Wordsworth's view of poetic diction would also be briefly taken up.

2.1 INTRODUCTION

The *Lyrical Ballads* was a volume of poems which was first issued anonymously by Wordsworth and Coleridge in 1798. The two had met in 1795 and there was a mutual recognition of genius. Both poets believed that verse stripped of high literary contrivance and written in the language of the lower and middle classes could express the fundamentals of human nature.

The first volume of 1798 was published with a short 'Foreward' in which Wordsworth stated very briefly the main points of his argument. The second edition was published in 1800 with many new poems added, and a much longer and more detailed Preface. It was revised and expanded in 1802 with significant additions about the definition of the poet and the universality and value of poetry.

The Preface is a revolutionary critical statement from a poet deeply imbued with the sense of a mission to free poetry from a hackneyed and artificial style of writing and take it nearer to life as it is actually lived and make it an authentic expression of sincere feeling and mode of experience. Without undoing the past or forsaking the healthy elements of his tradition, Wordsworth is effecting a break and inaugurating a new era in poetry.

The subject matter of the Preface can be discussed under four heads: (i) What is poetry? (ii) What are the defining characteristics of a poet? (iii) The value of poetry and (iv) The question of poetic diction.

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To the question : 'What is poetry'? Wordsworth's answer is:
 ...all good poetry is the spontaneous overflow of powerful feelings:
 but though this be true, poems to which any value can be attached,
 were never produced on any variety of subjects but by a man, who
 being possessed of more than usual organic sensibility, had also
 thought long and deeply. For our continued influxes of feeling are
 modified and directed by our thoughts, which are indeed the
 representatives of all our past feelings; and, as by contemplating
 the relation of these general representatives to each other we
 discover what is really important to men, so, by the repetition and
 continuance of this act, our feelings will be connected with
 important subjects, till at length, if we be originally possessed of
 much sensibility, such habits of mind will be produced, that, by
 obeying blindly and mechanically the impulses of those habits, we
 shall describe objects, and utter sentiments of such a nature and in
 such connection with each other, that the understanding of the
 being to whom we address ourselves, if he be in a healthful state of
 association, must necessarily be in some degree enlightened, and
 his affections ameliorated.

As is obvious, the emphasis in this statement is on spontaneous expression but the role of the rational mind, of premeditation, of getting accustomed to a particular mode of thinking and feeling, is duly recognised. Poetry is not the turning loose of emotions and feelings. Feelings are continuously directed by thoughts or, in Eliot's words, the poet thinks his feelings and feels his thoughts. Wordsworth's own practice, as a poet, of letting an emotion or a complex of feelings settle and mature gradually until they are ripe for delivery, and of revising his poetic compositions is an illustration of this idea. He himself modifies his definition of poetry in a later passage of the Preface:

I have said poetry is the spontaneous overflow of powerful feelings: it takes its origin from emotion recollected in tranquillity. Hence two things are to be observed : spontaneity and powerful feeling. The one ensures unhindered experience of the other an energy which conveys feeling 'spontaneously'.

Thus poetry is not lifeless artistry or mere craftsmanship as the imitative-rationalist aesthetic of the eighteenth century generally pre-supposed; it originates from and is sustained by a genuine and sincere personal feeling and, paradoxically, in this lies its universal appeal. As Wordsworth wrote in his 'Essay Supplementary to the Preface' (of the 1815 edition of his poems), poetry is 'the reflection of the wisdom of the heart and the grandeur of the imagination.' Such a poetry touches the deepest chords in man and has a humanizing and sensitizing effect. Wordsworth elaborates:

Aristotle I have been told has said, that poetry is the most philosophic of all writing: it is so: its object is truth, not individual and local but general and operative; not standing upon external testimony, but carried alive into the heart by passion; truth which is its own testimony, which gives competence and confidence to the tribunal to which it appeals, and receives them from the same tribunal. Poetry is the image of man and nature.

The last sentence should give us pause. On the face of it, it goes against the grain of spontaneity – 'man and nature' are too generalised to be of value as individuals. Both denote a tendency in Wordsworth to proceed from the individual to the general which in this case is not average but universal. Therefore, we need to modify

'spontaneity' and 'feeling' to maintain that these tendencies point to a new universalised 'diction'.

In such passages as these Wordsworth sticks to the basic Romantic belief that sincere feeling and passionate expression alone can redeem poetry but he simultaneously reconciles it with his faith in universal human nature. This balancing classical tendency in him grew and became more and more pronounced with the passage of time.

2.3 THE POET'S CHARACTERISTICS

Wordsworth identifies three main characteristics of a poet. First, he is exceptionally sensitive 'endued with more than lively sensibility, more enthusiasm and tenderness... and a more comprehensive soul than are supposed to be common among mankind.' This enables him not only to feel that which happens to him personally but also to experience vicariously that which may happen to others. Secondly, he is 'a man speaking to men,' that is to say, poetry is not mere self-indulgence and that the poet is a social being with a responsibility. A great poet ought to rectify men's feelings, to give them new compositions of feeling, to render their feelings more sane, pure and permanent. This was later on developed by Wordsworth into a doctrine: 'Every great poet is a teacher. I wish either to be considered a teacher or as nothing.' This is not crude didacticism but a way of describing the humanising influence of poetry. Thirdly, the poet is endowed with an extraordinarily strong imagination so that he is affected by absent things as if they were present. Wordsworth himself possessed a very strong imagination so that the beauteous forms seen by him once were ever present to his mind's eye and could induce appropriate feelings and states of mind. Wordsworth sees the poet as a man who being possessed of more than usual organic sensibility has also thought long and deeply. The good poet needs to weld the two qualities of thought and feeling. The one will not work without the other. The poet is different from other men not in the kind but in the degree of his qualities.

2.4 THE VALUE OF POETRY

Wordsworth is acutely conscious of the fact that the poet's medium is language and that 'language and the human mind act and react on each other.' This is a more balanced view than those views – old and new – which make language active and place man entirely on the receiving end. From Wordsworth's point of view the poet has a positive role to play though he does it indirectly by manipulating the medium of language:

...the medium through which, in poetry, the heart is to be affected, is language; a thing subject to endless fluctuations and arbitrary associations. The genius of the poet melts down these to his purpose.

Language in poetry is manipulated to sensitize and humanize the readers. This universal function of poetry has become much more urgent in the modern industrial and mechanical age:

For a multitude of causes unknown to former times are now acting with a combined force to blunt the discriminating powers of the mind, and unfitting it for all voluntary exertion to reduce it to a state of almost savage torpor.

Wordsworth, however, feels that 'making strange' can be affected by doing without the elaborate 'poeticisms' or the degenerate classical wit. Whatever the emphases, Wordsworth is among those who lay stress on ridding the language of clichéd shop-worn expression.

Wordsworth asserts that with the growth of science, poetry will be needed more than we need it now:

If the labours of the man of science should ever create a material revolution, direct or indirect, in our condition and in the impressions which we habitually receive, the poet will sleep than no more than at present; he will be ready to follow the steps of the man of science, not only in those general indirect effects, but he will be at his side, carrying sensation into the midst of objects of science itself.

Here again Wordsworth does not regard science as the enemy of poetry but complementary to it.

2.5 POETIC DICTION

The 'Preface' to the *Lyrical Ballads* puts forward Wordsworth's theory of poetic diction which has occasioned a lot of controversy ever since it was first elaborated. The main thesis has never been questioned but Wordsworth's casual remarks around it and his practical application of the theory have been subjected to severe criticism. The crux of the theory is the seminal Romantic view that poetic style is organic and not prescriptive. There should be a correlation between the creative language and the form that is given to it. As Wordsworth wrote in his 'Essay on Epitaphs', language is not the dress of thought but its incarnation. Since every poet's mode of experience is peculiar to him, it will find expression in a style appropriate to it. Consequently no general poetic style can be prescribed for all poets to follow. This principle, Wordsworth found, was violated by those of his predecessors who stuck to a general poetic diction characterised by known stylistic devices and figures of speech. These devices and figures of speech, when used by the first poets, must have been quite natural. The earliest poets wrote naturally, feeling powerfully, in a figurative language. Their decadent successors, in the neo-classical age, however, took their style as an infallible model and imitated it artificially. Gray said that 'the language of the age is never the language of poetry' and Dryden asserted that the best language is that of the king and his courtiers. Wordsworth rejected the artificial and stagnant poetic diction both in theory and practice. He asserted that in place of the stereotyped poetic diction he will use the real language of men and that too of the rustics whose language, like their way of living, is most natural and not artificial. T.S. Eliot has pointed out in *The Use of Poetry and the Use of Criticism* that Wordsworth was motivated by the democratic impulse to reject the language of the king and the aristocrats. That may be partly true but essentially he was asserting his faith in the organic view of style. Metaphors and figures of speech were not, to him, bad in themselves; they were bad if they were not organic to a poem but added to it like ornaments from without:

If the poet's subject be judiciously chosen, it will naturally, and upon fit occasion, lead him to passions the language of which, if selected truly and judiciously must necessarily be dignified and variegated, and alive with metaphors and figures.

Wordsworth here is not going the whole hog for rustic language, but qualifies his enthusiasm for it. His own great poems were the product of a process like this but in his enthusiasm to dislodge the hackneyed poetic diction of his day, he made some

indiscreet remarks. To say that he proposed 'to adopt the very language of men', that 'there neither is, nor can be any essential difference between the language of prose and metrical composition' and that metre is a charm 'superadded' to poetry is not quite in conformity with the organic view of style. It amounts to prescribing one style in place of the other. In his creative output, Wordsworth obeyed his creative impulse so that, in Coleridge's words, his poetic triumphs were achieved in spite of the unbalanced remarks quoted above.

It must be, however, borne in mind that Wordsworth takes care to use certain qualifiers while advocating the use of the real language of men. The word 'selection' is used again and again in this context. 'A colouring of imagination thrown over it' is what he finally recommends. In the end 'selection' is advanced as a principle for every practising poet to follow. Besides, it should be mentioned that his own practice is somewhat different.

2.6 COLERIDGE'S VIEW ON WORDSWORTH'S THEORY OF DICTION

An important subject of Coleridge's *Biographia Literaria* is an exposition and evaluation of Wordsworth's poetry. To him Wordsworth was the greatest poet of the age. He may not place him, as did Keats, only next to Shakespeare but after Shakespeare and Milton he considered him to be the third great poet of English and declared that their age will be known by Wordsworth. In a letter he wrote that Wordsworth was the only man 'to whom at all time and in all modes of excellence I feel myself inferior.' In yet another letter he wrote: 'I feel myself a little man by his side.' As a poet, he found Wordsworth's greatness in 'the union of deep feeling with profound thought; the fine balance of truth in observing, with the imaginative faculty in modifying the objects observed; and above all the original fight of spreading the tone, the atmosphere, and with it the depth and height of the ideal world around forms, incidents and situations.' This glowing admiration did not prevent him from pointing out the essential drawbacks in Wordsworth's theory of poetic diction.

According to Coleridge, Wordsworth was fully justified in his criticism of the artificiality and unnaturalness of a poetic diction which had become stagnant and hindered rather than helped capture the exact curve of a creative writer's experience but he disagrees with Wordsworth's view that the language of poetry should be 'the language of natural conversation of men under the influence of natural feelings.' Coleridge objected to this view for three reasons which he elaborates thus:

First, that in any sense this rule is applicable only to certain classes of poetry; secondly, that even to these classes it is not except in such a sense, as hath never by any one (as far as I know or have read) been denied or doubted; and lastly, that as far as, and in that degree in which it is practicable, yet as a rule it is useless if not injurious, and, therefore, either need not, or ought not to be practised.

Coleridge also objects to Wordsworth's eulogisation of the language of the rustics. Wordsworth thought that 'because such men hourly communicate with the best objects from which the best part of language is originally derived; and because, from their rank in society and the sameness and narrow circle of their intercourse, being less under the action of social vanity, they convey their feelings, and notions in simple and unelaborated expression.' Coleridge says that Wordsworth himself grants that the language of these men is to be purified from all defects. In that case, Coleridge adds, it is not different from the language of any other man of common sense. The only difference is between the mode of comprehension of rustic and an educated man. For the rustic all facts are insulated whereas the educated man sees their mutual

connections. Besides, as Coleridge points out in a different context, Wordsworth relies on a certain degree of education in his rustic; if only 'by constant reading of the Bible in the King James version.'

Coleridge also points to the contradictions which exist in the ideas expressed in the *Preface* to the *Lyrical Ballads*. On the one hand, Wordsworth would recommend for poetic use the very language of men and on the other hand insist on the principle of selection. Similarly on the one hand, he would deny any essential difference between the language of poetry and that of prose and on the other hand dilate on the utility of metre and the way it affects the use of language in poetry. Coleridge says that there is no doubt that poetry and prose make use of the same vocabulary but the way language is manipulated and words ordered (best view in the best order in Coleridge's words) in poetry, makes its language different from that of prose. As Coleridge writes:

The true question must be whether there are not modes of expression, a construction and an order of sentences, which are in their fit and natural place in a serious prose composition, but would be disproportionate and heterogeneous in metrical poetry; and, *vice versa*, whether in the language of a serious poem there may not be an arrangement both of words and sentences and a use and selection of (what are called) figures of speech, both as to their kind, their frequency, and their occasions, which on a subject of equal weight would be vicious and alien in correct and mainly prose. I contend that in both cases this unfitness of each for the place of the other frequently will and ought to exist.

The principal different between the language of prose and that of poetry is metre 'that spontaneous effort which strives to hold in check the workings of passion.' The employment of metre also involves the use of the will and the volition of the poet. It also determines the use of a particular language in poetry which has to be different from that of prose. 'I write,' says Coleridge, 'in metre, because I am about to use a language different from that of prose.' Finally, Coleridge points out, parts of Wordsworth's theory of diction was contradictory to his own practice. Far from being written in the real language of men, Wordsworth's poetry is composed in a diction which is 'impassioned, lofty and sustained.' This means that he has, in practice, discarded his theory. Reading Wordsworth's theories of diction and his poetic compositions in comparison, Coleridge wonders how to reconcile them:

To me it will always remain a singular and noticeable fact; that a theory which will establish this *lingua communis* is not only as the best, but as the only commendable style, should have proceeded from a poet, whose diction, next to that of Shakespeare and Milton, appears to me of all others the most individualised and characteristic.

2.7 THE CULTURAL CONCERN OF WORDSWORTH'S LITERARY CRITICISM

One of the most significant aspects of Wordsworth's literary criticism in general and the 'Preface' to the *Lyrical Ballads* in particular is a healthy concern for strengthening and promoting a humane culture. Culture is a term of manifold connotations ranging from the cultivation of mind and spirit to denoting a whole way of life, material, intellectual and spiritual. Some of the dictionary meanings of the word 'culture' are improvement or refinement by education and training; the thinkers with a dominant culture concern developed the figurative connotation of culture to

mean, as Arnold put it, acquaintance with 'the best that has been thought and known in the world'. In 'On the Constitution of the Church and the State,' Coleridge defines culture as 'the harmonious development of those qualities and faculties that characterise our humanity.' This, Coleridge believed, is achieved by the substitution of life and intelligence for the philosophy of mechanism which strikes death everywhere. Culture critics like Arnold, Carlyle and Ruskin, developed this line of thinking into a definite approach to literature with a peculiar orientation of its own. The emphasis was always laid on the harmonious development of human personality, taking its origin from inward growth. This is the quintessence of Arnold's argument in *Culture and Anarchy*. The role of culture, Arnold felt, had become particularly important in our modern world, of which the whole civilization is, to a much greater degree than the civilization of Greece and Rome, mechanical and external, and tends constantly to become so. Culture alone could fill up this lifeless and dehumanized world with life and vitality, sweetness and light. Arnold also believed that this task of humanization, of infusing sweetness and light into life can be best performed by literature.

All this had been germinally anticipated by Wordsworth's 'Preface' and his subsequent critical writings. In all these writings Wordsworth shows a vital concern for culture which to him is a continuing spirit represented by what he termed 'the people' in contradiction to 'the public'. In the essay 'Supplementary to the Preface (1815)' he draws a clear distinction between the two:

Still more lamentable is his error who can believe that there is anything of divine infallibility, in the clamour of that small though loud portion of the community, ever governed by factitious influence, which, under the name of the PUBLIC, passes itself upon the unthinking, for the PEOPLE. Towards the PUBLIC, the writer hopes that he feels as much deference as it is entitled to; but to the PEOPLE, philosophically characterised, and to the embodied spirit of their knowledge, so far as it exists and moves, at the present faithfully supported by its two wings, the past and the future, his devout respect is due.

To the 'people', Wordsworth felt that he was responsible and attuned his calling as a poet to the demands of this responsibility. In a letter he wrote:

Every great poet is a teacher. I wish either to be considered a teacher or as nothing.

Poetry, he thought, was one of the most potent weapons of refinement and regeneration for mankind. This constitutes one of the most seminal strands of the theme of the 'Preface'. If a reader of poetry, believes Wordsworth, is in 'a healthful state of associations' he 'must necessarily be in some degree enlightened, his taste exalted, and his affections ameliorated through the study of poetry'. Poetry, from this point of view, is the finest fruit and flower of human knowledge. It is the image of man and nature. The first and last of all knowledge; it is an immortal as the heart of man. And the poet is the rock of defence for human nature; an upholder and preserver, carrying everywhere with him relationship and love.

To Wordsworth, literary art is not a jugglery of words but the manipulation of language for the exalted purpose of safeguarding and promoting healthy cultural values. This role of poetry had become particularly urgent in modern times when, as a result of the abstract materialism and the process of mechanisation, life and matter have been divested of all value.

In analysing the causes of this crisis Wordsworth very perceptively sees the beginnings of 'mass society' and 'mass culture'. Among the causes of this crisis he enumerates 'the accumulation of men in cities, where the uniformity of their occupations produces a craving for extraordinary incident.' He is pained to see that 'to this tendency of life and manners the literature and theatrical exhibitions of the

country have conformed themselves.' The invaluable works of elder writers, were driven into neglect by frantic novels, sickly and stupid German tragedies, and deluges of idle and extravagant stories in verse. This is the voice of the prophet of culture, foreshadowing Arnold, Carlyle, Ruskin, Leavis and Eliot.

As a natural corollary to his position, Wordsworth recommends the concern for culture as the criterion to evaluate poetry: In the 'Essay Supplementary to the Preface' (1815), he wrote:

In the higher poetry, an enlightened critic chiefly looks for a reflection of the wisdom of the heart and the grandeur of the imagination.

2.8 LET US SUM UP

Wordsworth's 'Preface' was largely an attempt to create a favourable climate for the new kind of poetry offered in the *Lyrical Ballads*. The stress is on spontaneity and on the expression of the poet's personality. Emotions are to be the raw material. The poet is a man speaking to men but is special in certain respects. The language of poems should, as far as possible, be close to the language of the common man. Wordsworth modified this by talking of a selection from common language. Coleridge criticised Wordsworth's view of the poetic diction. There is a cultural angle to Wordsworth's theory of poetry and the democratic impulse is always a motivating force.

2.9 QUESTIONS

1. What role do spontaneity, emotion and personality have in Wordsworth's theory of poetry?
2. How are the poet's special characteristics tied up with his new view of the value of poetry in Wordsworth's *Preface*?
3. On what counts does Coleridge attach Wordsworth's views on poetic diction?
4. What is Wordsworth's contribution as a critic of culture? In other words, how does he pave the way for Arnold's concern with culture.

2.10 SUGGESTED READINGS

David Daiches, *Critical Approaches to Literature*, London, 1956 (Indian Edition, Orient Longman, 1967).

Rene Welleck, *A History of Modern Criticism* Vol.2 (London: Jonathan Cope, 1955).

Wimsalt and Brooks, *Literary Criticism : A Short History* Vol.3, London, Routledge Vagan Paul, 1957.

UNIT 3 COLERIDGE : *BIOGRAPHIA LITERARIA*

Structure

- 3.0 Objectives
- 3.1 Introduction
- 3.2 Fancy and Imagination
- 3.3 Coleridge's View of Poetry and of 'The Poet'
- 3.4 The German Angle
- 3.5 A Comparison of Wordsworth and Coleridge as Critics
- 3.6 Let Us Sum Up
- 3.7 Questions
- 3.8 Suggested Readings

3.0 OBJECTIVES

In this unit we shall take up Coleridge's major critical work *Biographia Literaria* with special attention to his theory of Imagination and his view of poetry. In doing so, we shall also touch upon the influence of German thinkers on his thought.

3.1 INTRODUCTION

Biographia Literaria was begun by its author as a literary autobiography but ended up in discussions about Kant, and Schelling and Coleridge's perceptive criticism of Wordsworth's poetry and a comprehensive statement on creative imagination which constitutes his most signal contribution to literary criticism and theory. As was his wont, Coleridge has let his awe-inspiringly powerful mind loose on aesthetics, its philosophical foundations and its practical application in an almost desultory manner. The result is a mine of inexhaustible potential called *Biographia Literaria* to which critics of all shades of opinion have turned for help and inspiration and very seldom has any one of them been disappointed. Arthur Symonds justly described the work as ['the greatest book of English criticism']. Coleridge has sometimes been accused of borrowing from the Germans, particularly from Kant, Schelling and the Schlegels, but most of his ideas were originally arrived at and, in my case, the system into which these ideas were fitted was the creation of his own great mind.

Coleridge's whole aesthetic – his definition of poetry, his idea of the poet, and his poetical criticism – revolve around his theory of creative imagination. From this point of view chapters XIII and XIV of *Biographia Literaria* are most significant.

The statement of the theory of imagination in *Biographia Literaria* is preceded by a prolix and, at times, abstruse philosophical discourse in the form of certain theses or propositions whose crux is Coleridge's attempt to define Nature and Self. Nature – the sum of all that is objective – is passive and unconscious while Self or Intelligence – the sum of all that is subjective – is vital and conscious. All knowledge is the product of the coalescence of the subject and the object. This coalescence leads to the act of creation, I AM. It is in this state of self-consciousness that ['object and subject, being and knowledge, are identical'] and the reality of ['the one life in us and abroad'] is experienced and affirmed and chaos is converted into a cosmos. What happens is that the Self or Spirit views itself in all objects which as objects are dead and finite. Coleridge's theory of creative imagination is essentially grounded in this perception. Hence Coleridge's view of the imagination approximates to the views of

UNIT 3 COLERIDGE : *BIOGRAPHIA LITERARIA*

Structure

- 3.0 Objectives
- 3.1 Introduction
- 3.2 Fancy and Imagination
- 3.3 Coleridge's View of Poetry and of 'The Poet'
- 3.4 The German Angle
- 3.5 A Comparison of Wordsworth and Coleridge as Critics
- 3.6 Let Us Sum Up
- 3.7 Questions
- 3.8 Suggested Readings

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Schelling and Kant. Like Coleridge they recognise the interdependence of subject and object as complementary aspects of a single reality. Also they all agree about the self conceived as a totality: thought and feeling in their original identity and not as an abstraction.

Coleridge

3.2 FANCY AND IMAGINATION

Coleridge builds his theory on the basic distinction between Fancy and Imagination – terms which were used before him more-or-less indistinguishably to express the same import. He first refers to this significant distinction in Chapter IV of *Biographia Literaria*. The occasion is his consideration of the excellence of Wordsworth's mind as reflected in his poetry:

Repeated meditations led me first to suspect (and a more intimate analysis of human faculties, their appropriate marks, functions and effects matured my conjecture into full conviction) that fancy and imagination were two distinct and widely different faculties, instead of being, according to the general belief, either two names with one meaning, or, at furthest, the lower and higher degree of one and the same power.

Coleridge ultimately uses the term 'Fancy' for the eighteenth century view of imagination which was essentially mechanical and determined by the law of association. Imagination, on this view, does not modify, much less does it transform the materials that it deals with but merely reproduces them. In Kantian terms we should call it the reproductive imagination. 'Fancy', says Coleridge, 'has no other counters to play with, but fixities and definitives. ...Fancy must receive all its materials ready-made from the law of association.' Our brief discussion of the theory of association in the context of the eighteenth century view of imagination above would make it clear that although Coleridge does assign a minor role to Fancy in the production of poetry, it is with him essentially a pejorative term, because as Shawcross explains, the distinction between imagination as universally active in consciousness and the same faculty in a heightened power as creative in a poetic sense.

In contrast to Fancy, Imagination is essentially creative. Coleridge subdivides it into the Primary and the Secondary Imagination:

The Primary Imagination I hold to be the living power and prime Agent of all human perception, and as a repetition in the finite mind of the eternal act of creation in the infinite I AM.

The Primary Imagination is the elemental power of basic human perception which enables us to identify, to discriminate, to synthesize and thus to produce order out of disorder. In this it is analogous to the eternal act of creation in the infinite I AM. The Secondary or artistic Imagination co-exists with the conscious will and is different in degree and mode of operation from the Primary Imagination. First it is essentially vital even as all objects as objects are fixed and dead. That is to say, it is active and projective in nature and has a life-bestowing capacity which informs the world of objective phenomena with attributes which make it responsive and hospitable to man. Secondly, it dissolves, diffuses, dissipates, in order to recreate; or where this process is rendered impossible, yet still at all events, it struggles to idealise and to unify. In other words, the creative imagination, through a process of dissolution, diffusion and dissipation creates a chaos and then sets out to create a universe from it. It is a coadunating and esemplastic power which reconciles opposites, unifies disparate elements and synthesises dialectically opposed forces. It idealises and reshapes the

3.3 COLERIDGE'S VIEW OF POETRY AND 'THE POET'

Coleridge's definition of poetry and the poet naturally arises from his views on imagination. He begins with a distinction between 'poetry' and 'poem'. Poetry is a term of wider connotation which he uses to cover most of the forms of imaginative literature and other fine arts whose immediate purpose is to impart pleasure through the medium of beauty. In his essay entitled 'On the Principles of Genial Criticism', which forms of part of *Biographia Literaria*, he writes:

All the fine arts are different species of poetry... They admit, therefore, of a natural division into poetry of language (poetry in the emphatic sense, because less subject to the accidents and limitation of time and space); poetry of the ear, or music; and poetry of the eye, which is again divided into plastic poetry of the eye, which is again divided into plastic poetry or statuary and a graphic poetry, or painting. The common essence of all consists in the excitement of emotion for the immediate purpose of pleasure through the medium of beauty; herein contradistinguishing poetry from science, the immediate object and primary purpose of which is truth and possible utility.

In the poetry of language he would include, to begin with, even unrhymed imaginative writing. 'The writing of Plato and Bishop Taylor, furnish undeniable proofs that poetry of the highest kind may exist without metre... The first chapter of Isaiah (indeed a very large portion of the whole book) is poetry in the most emphatic sense.' How can we distinguish a poem proper from this poetry which too has language as its medium like the writings of Plato and the Book of Isaiah. Coleridge says that the poem proper combines the same elements, as are found in imaginative prose compositions, in a different manner because it aims at a different object. Sometimes the object may be merely to facilitate recollection as in 'Thirty days hath September'. Sometimes the purpose may be even communication of truth and such communication may give us pleasure but this pleasure is not the immediate end, but is indirectly obtained while pleasure is the immediate end of poetry.

But pleasure may be the immediate end of a work not metrically composed. Would then the superaddition of rhyme entitle these works to the name of poems? The answer is that nothing can permanently please, which does not contain in itself the reason why it is so and not otherwise. If metre is superadded all other parts should be made consonant with it. A poem is thus 'that species of composition, which is opposed to works of science by proposing for its immediate object pleasure, not truth; and from all other species (having this object in common with it) it is discriminated by proposing to itself such delight from the whole as is compatible with a distinct gratification from each component'. Such a poem Coleridge calls a legitimate poem, 'the parts of which mutually support and explain each other.' This organicism originates from a corresponding organic process whose source is the poet:

The poet, described in ideal perfection, brings the whole soul of man into activity, with subordination of its faculties to each other, according to their worth or dignity. He diffuses a tone and spirit of unity that blends and (as it were) fuses, each into each, by that synthetic and magical power to which we have exclusively appropriated the name of imagination.

Here it must be stressed that pleasure and truth which Coleridge seems to separate are given both by poetry and science. Coleridge's separation of the two seems arbitrary and can be explained both by the fact that Coleridge, like nineteenth century thinkers in general was not able to shed the dichotomies of the current philosophy.

3.4 THE GERMAN ANGLE

A number of Coleridge's key terms and distinctions are derived from German thought and he does this in quite an eclectic way. This means that he draws from a variety of sources and mixes up the borrowings. He borrows from German thought the conception of the ideas that views all experience as not merely general notions, but as a form of mental image or impression. Another idea which is largely German in origin is that the symbol and the mind both participate in a common spiritual life and that the experience of the beautiful is a consequence of this participation. There are also borrowings from Shelling.

Kant is the biggest influence as the fundamental philosophical distinctions put forward by Coleridge are essentially Kantian. He accepts the Kantian distinction between Reason and Understanding and this distinction is the groundwork of his speculation on the nature of fancy and imagination. Seen from the Kantian angle, reason is concerned with ultimate values or with the perception of unity in multiplicity. Understanding operates on a limited sphere.

Kant's reproductive imagination is close to Coleridge's fancy. His productive imagination is close to Coleridge's primary imagination and Reason is close to Coleridge's secondary imagination because it mediates between rationality and understanding by means of symbols. And yet Coleridge's recourse to the 'Idea' still assumes something of a Platonic rather than a Kantian meaning.

Kant explained the imagination in terms of a comprehensive epistemology and Coleridge followed in Kant's footsteps by describing the imagination as operating under Reason. Where Coleridge went beyond Kant was in his belief that Reason could give us more than a knowledge of the world of perception. And yet the symbols of the imagination have to accommodate themselves to the concepts of the understanding.

3.5 A COMPARISON OF WORDSWORTH AND COLERIDGE AS CRITICS

Here we shall briefly compare the achievement of Wordsworth and Coleridge as critics. Wordsworth's criticism was limited in scope whereas the range of Coleridge as a critic was vast. In his own way he was a system builder and always thought within a larger philosophical context. He considered criticism to be an important part of literary study. I.A. Richards in his book *Coleridge on Imagination* tells us that Coleridge's criticism is of a kind that required us to consider our most fundamental conceptions. He paved the way for appreciation of great poetry as is evident in his praise for Wordsworth's poetry. Wordsworth is mostly subjective but Coleridge gives ample evidence of both subjectivity and objectivity.

In Wordsworth's whole approach to poetry and expression there is an element of primitivism whereas Coleridge's theory accommodates formal concerns to a considerable degree. His concern with shape, with form, with embodiment and his taking metre to be an integral part of the poetic process all point to this. In this respect he is a precursor of the New Critics.

3.6 LET US SUM UP

Coleridge is the first critic in English to talk at length about the relationship between knowledge and poetic creation. His distinction between Fancy and Imagination is a very useful one. Fancy is arbitrary and aggregating. It is an associative process. Imagination is a creative one. In perception the imagination imposes form and order upon the material of sensation and half creates what it perceives, so in art it works upon the raw material of experience. It gives this raw material a new form and shape. The secondary imagination is essentially vital. To Coleridge the best example of the operation of the imagination in his times was the poetry of Wordsworth.

Coleridge was influenced by German thought but had enough originality to emerge as a major thinker in his own right. His influence as a critic has been remarkable, much greater than that exercised by Wordsworth's criticism.

3.7 QUESTIONS

1. What, according to Coleridge, is the difference between Fancy and Primary Imagination?
2. How is Primary Imagination different from Secondary Imagination?
3. What is Coleridge's ideal of a good poet? Who, among his contemporaries, fits the bill best?
4. Of the two – Coleridge and Wordsworth – who has had greater influence on modern criticism and in what respects?

3.8 SUGGESTED READINGS

M.H. Abrams, *The Mirror and the Lamp*, New York Oxford University Press, 1953.

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UNIT 4 P.B. SHELLEY : *A DEFENCE OF POETRY*

Structure

- 4.0 Objectives
- 4.1 Introduction
- 4.2 Defining Poetry : Imagination and The Ideal Order
- 4.3 Poetry and Radical Moral Transformation : The Question of Value
- 4.4 Let Us Sum Up
- 4.5 Questions
- 4.6 Suggested Readings

4.0 OBJECTIVES

In this unit, we shall take up P.B. Shelley's *A Defence of Poetry* and examine Shelley's view of poetry with special attention to how poetry is seen as an integral part of the fabric of society. His views on imagination and the ideal order and on the relationship between poetry and moral transformation would also be taken up briefly.

4.1 INTRODUCTION

Shelley's *A Defence of Poetry* was a reply to the attack made by his contemporary Thomas Love Peacock but we need to know a little about the larger context provided by Plato's attack on poetry and Sidney's 'Apologie' for it (Sidney's apology came some hundred years later but he did have Plato in mind all the time).

Plato had attacked poetry as being an image of an image and as something which weakens reason and self-control. Its appeal is to the emotions, to man's lower self. Poets think that they have knowledge of all subjects but that is far from being the actual case. Poetry is not a rational discourse nor is it a valid means of knowledge.

Sidney's argument was that the poet is a 'maker'. He does not imitate or express or discuss things which already exist; he invents new things. The world invented or created by the poet is a better world than the real one. It is not the mere exercise of the imagination. That justifies the poet's exercise of his imagination to create a better world. The imagination does not give us an insight into reality but an alternative reality and a supervisor one at that.

To Sidney poetry is superior as a moral teacher to both philosophy and history, because it does not deal with mere abstract propositions, as philosophy does, but with the concrete example, and as its examples are not tied to fact it can make them more apt and convincing than anything found in history. The poet not only exceeds the philosopher in his ability to create the perfect example, but also in his ability to move the reader to follow that example.

In 1820 Shelley's close friend and noted novelist, Thomas Love Peacock (1785-1866) wrote an essay entitled 'The Four Ages of Poetry' which appeared in a single issue of *Literary Miscellany*. According to Peacock, poetry passes through four distinct ages comparable to four ages of man. These are: the age of iron in which everything is crude and untutored (the period of primitive and medieval folk ballads and romances) as in the period of infancy; the age of gold in which the natural genius is full blown (the period of epic and tragic forms of fifth century Athens and

Renaissance Europe), youth; the age of silver in which the luxuriant growth of imagination is pruned through rules (the periods of Virgil and Lucretius and of Dryden and Pope), middle age; and the age of bronze in which poetry returns to an artificial simplicity, the second childhood of extreme old age (the declining classical period, the age of Wordsworth, Scott, Byron and others). Peacock asserted that as civilisation advances, poetry declines until its pursuit becomes a waste of time for an intelligent and enlightened person whose time would be better spent in the study of natural and social sciences. The essay excited Shelley to what he called 'sacred rage'. In several letters to Peacock himself, Shelley described it as a 'heresy' and an indiscriminating censure upon the temple of immortal song. In reply he wrote the brilliant treatise, *A Defence of Poetry* (1821). Peacock, in his presumption, had taken up the defence of reason and enlightenment against primitivism and superstition. Shelley turns the tables on him. The grand fabric of human civilisation is not the product of reason but that of imagination; it is not the reasoners who are the makers of history but men of imagination, the poets. To establish his thesis Shelley needed to define poetry, explain the creative process and evaluate it in terms of its influence on the life of the individual and the society. In essence, Shelley's defence is a retort to Peacock's 'rationalistic, cynical and humorous description of the decay and final disappearance of poetry in an age of utility'.

4.2 DEFINING POETRY : IMAGINATION AND THE IDEAL ORDER

A Defence of Poetry starts with the distinction between 'reason', the analytic operation of the human mind, and 'imagination', the synthetic process. Reason enumerates known quantities while imagination perceives and determines their value. Poetry is then defined, in a general sense, as 'the expression of imagination'. Using Platonism as his infrastructure, Shelley asserts that imagination has an uncanny and mysterious contact with the ideal order apprehended by imagination. A poet participates in the eternal, the infinite and the one and a poem is the very image of life expressed in its eternal truth. This is to use the word 'poetry' in a very wide and loose sense and Shelley does so deliberately. Poetry in its 'universal' sense denotes all manifestations of the creative, the poetical faculty in different spheres of life. Poets are not only the authors of language but also the institutors of laws, organisers of civil societies, founders of religions and inventors of the arts of life, as long as they, in their respective spheres, approximate to and reflect the ideal order. Architecture, painting, music, dance, sculpture, philosophy and forms of civil life are all expressions of the poetical faculty. In other words, all those who have contributed to the enrichment of human civilisation are poets and conversely (for that is what Shelley clearly implies) those who are not gifted with the poetical or creative faculty have neither made nor can ever make any contribution to human civilisation.

In a restricted sense, however, poetry is the expression of imagination in language and this, in Shelley's view, is its most ideal and effective expression. He narrows down the circle a little further by restricting the term to that form of writing which uses measured language. He dismisses the popular division of poetry and prose as untenable because even prose-writers like Plato and Bacon use measured language and are poets. This use of language is characterised by a harmonious recurrence of this harmony but, though preferable, is not essential to poetry. Similarly the poets, because of their contact with the ideal order and their apprehension of the beautiful do not use language literally but metaphorically. Such metaphorical language loses its freshness with the passage of time and is in need of regular renewal. If no new poets should arise to create afresh the associations which have been thus disorganised, language will be dead to all the nobler purposes of human intercourse.

And again, because poetry brings light and fire from the eternal regions where 'the owlwinged faculty of calculation dare not ever soar', it is not 'like reasoning a power to be exerted according to the determination of the will.' On the contrary, the poet

has to depend on an involuntary inspiration. 'When composition begins inspiration is already on the decline' and poetry tries to redeem the brief 'visitations of the divinity in man.' Poetry differs from logic in this respect that it is not subject to the control of consciousness and will. The finest passages of poetry are not the result of labour and study but the record of the best and happiest moments of inspiration.

P.B. Shelley

4.3 POETRY AND RADICAL MORAL TRANSFORMATION : THE QUESTION OF VALUE

One of the maturest insights of Shelley is that moral systems and ethical codes cannot by themselves effect a revolution. If it were so, the world would have been a paradise. For this change the hearts and minds of the people would have to be prepared first, and poetry, in his view, brings about this transformation. This is obviously a religious ideal and points to the Romantic predilection of claiming for poetry religious functions. We have it worked out germinally in Wordsworth's writings. Shelley reinforces it and the line of thinking culminates in Arnold's replacement of religion by poetry.

Poetry effects this transformation by means of imparting pleasure, not animal pleasure but pleasure of the higher and nobler kind (a union of wisdom and delight) which arises by a poet's contact with the eternal and his ability to make his readers participate in the experience. In this way, poetry awakens and strengthens the imagination and inculcates the great moral force of love:

The great secret of morals is love; or a going out of our own nature, and an identification of ourselves with the beautiful which exists in thought, action and person, not our own. A man, to be greatly good, must imagine intensely and comprehensively; he must put himself in the place of another and of many others: the pains and pleasures of his species must become his own. The great instrument of moral good is the imagination; and poetry administers to the effect by acting upon the cause.

Thus poetry which originates in imagination strengthens this faculty among those who are exposed to its influence. Poetry strengthens the faculty which is the organ of the moral nature of man, in the same manner as exercise strengthens the limbs. It is ever needed to save the human personality and social fabric from corruption and from being reduced to a torpid mass. Shelley substantiates his argument by attempting a brief survey of the role of poetry in human civilisation. Poetry, he concludes, has always been behind all that is valuable in human history. In the modern age, however, its role has become much more crucial. Far from being useless, as Peacock wrote, it is needed, more than ever before, today when the calculating faculty and the growing mechanism are corrupting and dehumanising modern man:

The cultivation of those sciences which have enlarged the limits of the empire of man over the external world, has, for want of the poetic faculty, proportionately circumscribed those of the internal world; and man, having enslaved the elements, remains himself a slave.

Poetry alone can rescue modern civilisation from doom:

The cultivation of poetry is never more to be desired than at periods when, from an excess of the selfish and calculating principle, the accumulation of the materials of external life exceed the quantity of the power of assimilating them to the internal laws of human nature.

Nor does Shelley concur with Peacock that poetry in his age is experiencing a decay. On the contrary, he sees a 'new birth', a new upsurge of creativity around him and *A Defence of Poetry* concludes on a passionate optimistic note:

Poets are the hierophants of an un-apprehended inspiration:
the mirrors of the gigantic shadows which futurity casts
upon the present; the words which express what they
understand not, the trumpets which sing to battle, and feel
not what they inspire; the influence which is moved not but
moves. Poets are the unacknowledged legislators of the
world.

Shelley's own poetry supplies a very good illustration of the role thus envisaged for poetry which he tries to use consciously as a weapon of reform. The whole of his poetic output from short lyrics to longer poems and dramatic compositions is surcharged with the passion of revolution. His ideal poet sings 'hymns unbidden,'

till the world is wrought
To sympathy with hopes and fears it heeded not.

Behind the apparent rhapsody there is an ideological structure, as Wassermann has shown. The Platonic concept that beneath the whole universe there is one regulative principle, is the underlying theme of Shelley's argument. Hence poetry is not mere art, it is vision, a vision of the perfect form of things. Of course, Shelley is talking about ideal poetry. For him poetry becomes an expression as well as a moulding influence of civilisation in its evolution from the most primitive barbarism. He links up decadence in letters to decadence in social values, as for instance in his censure of the Restoration Comedy of Manners. Whenever the occasion of the ideal order of censure fails, poetry also falls from its heights. We would do well here to note that Shelley is not indulging in 'rhapsodic didacticism' but attributing ontological and epistemological values to poetry.

But the value of Shelley's *A Defence of Poetry* lies not just in re-establishing a poetry as part of the fabric of society and the process of history. As Wellek thinks, it attempts a refutation of the contention of Peacock who saw 'four ages', the iron, the golden, the silver and the brass, in the history of English Poetry and who felt that the Lake Poets' were in the childhood phase of primitivism and medievalism. It brings out the intrinsic value of the poetic apprehension of life, and the uniqueness of the language of poetry.

The chief difficulty with *A Defence* is its grandiloquent style and its extremely subjective assertions. The terminology is unmistakably romantic. We shall, however, discover that it is not so vague or imprecise as it has been made out if we bring to it a sympathetic imagination. It is a frame of reference belonging to an order, not rational or positivistic, but romantic. Shelley would have it that poetry has its origin in inspiration. Yet he lays equal emphasis on the need for unity and organisation in poetry. It is not a mere letting loose of chaotic emotion. In fact Shelley, like Coleridge, realises the value of metre and versification as factors disciplining the process of emergence of a poem. Again, like the other Romantic critics, he makes no distinction between the poet and poetry. Poetry becomes a quality that permeates the entire universe and is not confined to the rhythmic pattern in verse or to a verbal structure. And his declaration that poets are 'the unacknowledged legislators of the world' is only an extension of this same principle.

4.4 LET US SUM UP

the record of the best and happiest moments of inspiration. Poetry imparts pleasure of a higher and nobler kind. Poetry can rescue civilisation from doom especially in times when the calculating faculty and growing mechanism constrict and dehumanize man.

P.B. Shelley

4.5 QUESTIONS

1. What role does Shelley envisage for poets in an industrial and materialistic culture?
2. How does Shelley put forward imagination as a positive factor against the onslaught of rationality?
3. What, according to Shelley, is the contribution of poetry to the fabric of society?

4.6 SUGGESTED READINGS

David Daiches, *Critical Approaches to Literature*, London, 1956 (Indian Edition, Orient Longman, 1967).

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Appendix I

Resolution and Independence

Resolution and Independence

There was a roaring in the wind all night;
The rain came heavily and fell in floods;
But now the sun is rising calm and bright;
The birds are singing in the distant woods;
Over his own sweet voice the Stock-dove broods;
The jay makes answer as the Magpie chatters;
And all the air is filled with pleasant noise of waters.
All things that love the sun are out of doors;
The sky rejoices in the morning's birth;
The grass is bright with rain-drops; on the moors
The hare is running races in her mirth;
And with her feet she from the plashy earth
Raises a mist; which, glittering in the sun,
Runs with her all the way, wherever she doth run.

I was Traveller then upon the moor;
I was the Hare and raced about with hoy;
I heard the woods, and distant waters, roar;
Or heard them not, as happy as a Boy;
The pleasant season did my heart employ;
My old remembrances went from me wholly;
And all the ways of men, so vain and melancholy.
But, as it sometimes chanceth, from the might
Of joy in minds that can no farther go,
As high as we have mounted in delight
In our dejection do we sink as low,
O me that morning did it happen so;
And fears, and fancies, thick upon me came;
Dim sadness, and blind thoughts I knew not nor could name.

I heard the Sky-lark singing in the sky;
And I bethought me of the playful Hare;
Even such a happy Child of earth am I;
Even as these blissful Creatures do I fare;
Far from the world I walk, and from all care;
But there may come another day to me,
Solitude, pain of heart, distress, and poverty.

My whole life I have lived in pleasant thought,
As if all needful things would come unsought
To genial faith, still rich in genial good;
But how can He expect that others should
Build for him, sow for him, and at his call
Love him, who for himself will take no heed at all?

I thought of Chatterton, the marvellous Boy,"
The sleepless Soul that perished in its pride;
Of Him who walked in glory and in joy"
Behind his plough, upon the mountain-side;
By our own spirits are we diified;
We Poets in our youth begin in gladness;
But thereof comes in the end despondency and madness.