

English Literature of the Romantic Period, 1798-1832

Professor Pramod K Nayar

Department of English

University of Hyderabad

Criticism: Coleridge and Wordsworth

In this lesson, we will look at the literary criticism in the age of the English Romantics (1798 to 1832). Several of these concepts have already been encountered in the previous lessons, such as the Preface to the *Lyrical Ballads* and Coleridge's *Biographia Literaria*.

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The Romantic age saw the publishing of major essays and works of criticism. This includes the famous 'Preface' to the *Lyrical Ballads*, Coleridge's *Biographia Literaria* – a monumental work, Percy Shelley's *A Defense of Poetry*, STC's lectures, among others. Formulations of the ideas of the imagination, specific aesthetic ideals have figured in all these texts.

We will look at these critical texts in succession.

Preface to the *Lyrical Ballads* (1800)

In the Preface to the *Lyrical Ballads*, Wordsworth argued for the subject and language of new poetry to be rooted in the rustic life of England:

The principal object, then, proposed in these Poems was to choose incidents and situations from common life, and to relate or describe them, throughout, as far as was possible in a selection of language really used by men, and, at the same time, to throw over them a certain colouring of imagination, whereby ordinary things should be presented to the mind in an unusual aspect; and, further, and above all, to make these incidents and situations interesting by tracing in them, truly though not ostentatiously, the primary laws of our nature: chiefly, as far as regards the manner in which we associate ideas in a state of excitement. Humble and rustic life was generally chosen, because, in that condition, the essential passions of the heart find a better soil in which they can attain their maturity, are less under restraint, and speak a plainer and more emphatic language; because in that condition of life our elementary feelings coexist in a state of greater simplicity, and, consequently, may be more accurately contemplated, and more forcibly communicated; because the manners of rural life germinate from those elementary feelings, and, from the necessary character of rural occupations, are more easily comprehended, and are more durable; and, lastly, because in that condition the passions of men are incorporated with the beautiful and permanent forms of nature.

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The principal object was to choose incidents and situations from common life and to relate or describe them throughout as far as possible in the language used by men: to, that is, use the language of the common person. Why? It is essential because as he puts it, "the manners of

rural life germinate from those elementary feelings, and from the necessary character of rural occupations are more easily comprehended and more durable”.

When Wordsworth says, that “the essential passions of the heart find a better soil in which they can attain their maturity,” he means that the rustics are more “genuine” (quotes are of course from our present position). Wordsworth believes that it is in the rustic life, in the rustic people that there are more genuine emotions.

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In the rural condition, men speak, he believed, from their own personal experience. They convey whatever they have to convey in “simple and unelaborated expressions”. Therefore this language is a more permanent, and a far more philosophical language. He went on to claim that the subject and content from rustic subjects had to be modified, “purified” is the word he used, by the poetic mind to make them poetry. That is, it was not enough to just adopt the language of the rustic people, you had to adapt it.

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Wordsworth defines poetry thus, in the Preface to the *Lyrical Ballads*:

I have said that poetry is the spontaneous overflow of powerful feelings. It takes its origin from emotion recollected in tranquility: the emotion is contemplated till, by a species of reaction, the tranquility gradually disappears, and an emotion, kindred to that which was before the subject of contemplation, is gradually produced, and does actually exist in the mind.

He defines poetry as the spontaneous overflow of powerful feelings, and then qualifies this. Note the emphasis on contemplation; Wordsworth is not proposing emotions as they are, he is talking about emotions as recollected, modified, contemplated, rationalized. In other words he seeking an intellectualization of emotion

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In terms of diction, Wordsworth proposed in the Preface to the *Lyrical Ballads*, “My purpose was to imitate, and, as far as possible, to adopt the very language of men.” He then goes on,

the language of such Poetry as is here as recommended is, as far as is possible, a selection of the language really spoken by men; that this selection, wherever it is made with true taste and feeling, will of itself form a distinction far greater than would at first be imagined.

He also claimed that this language should be closer to the language of prose:

that not only the language of large portion of every good poem, even of the most elevated character, must necessarily, except with reference to the metre, in no respect differ from that of good prose; but likewise that some of the most interesting parts of the best poems will be found to be strictly in the language of prose when prose is well written.

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The intellectualization of emotions merges with what we have just said here: the language of prose. That is, Wordsworth speaks about diction which captures emotion but delivers it in a particular way. Wordsworth is not speaking about emotions just continuously overflowing, he is speaking about regulated emotions, emotions that have been intellectualized, modified and cast into the language of good prose.

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Building on this, Wordsworth would offer a provisional definition of the poet as well. In the Preface to the *Lyrical Ballads*, he says a poet addresses other people, he is a man speaking to men.

...what is meant by the word Poet? What is a Poet? to whom does he address himself? and what language is to be expected from him?—He is a man speaking to men: a man, it is true, endowed with more lively sensibility, more enthusiasm and tenderness, who has a greater knowledge of human nature, and a more comprehensive soul, than are supposed to be common among mankind; a man pleased with his own passions and volitions, and who rejoices more than other men in the spirit of life that is in him; delighting to contemplate similar volitions and passions as manifested in the goings-on of the Universe, and habitually impelled to create them where he does not find them. to these qualities he has added a disposition to be affected more than other men by absent things as if they were present; an ability of conjuring up in himself passions, which are indeed far from being the same as those produced by real events, yet (especially in those parts of the general sympathy which are pleasing and delightful) do more nearly resemble the passions produced by real events, than anything which, from the motions of their own minds merely, other men are accustomed to feel in themselves:— whence, and from practice, he has acquired a greater readiness and power in expressing what he thinks and feels, and especially those thoughts and feelings which, by his own choice, or from the structure of his own mind, arise in him without immediate external excitement.

In the course of this series of definitions of poetry, of poetic diction, of the poetic subject and here, of the nature of the poet himself, Wordsworth, as we have argued before, is trying to build an audience for the kind of poetry the Romantics are writing. It is not, of course, an easy task and there is a defense constantly of the kind of poetry that they were writing. As noted in earlier lessons Wordsworth is trying to develop a public taste for poetry.

Coleridge, *Biographia Literaria* and Criticism

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Coleridge's task was slightly different in *Biographia Literaria* and the criticism encoded in there. *Biographia Literaria* as a genre itself, as a volume, as a piece of work is a mixed genre. It is autobiographical, philosophical, religious and critical. A considerable section of it was written as a response towards Wordsworth's Preface (which they were supposed to have coauthored), where Coleridge thought, Wordsworth had altered what they had decided on the craft of poetry. In fact critics now see *Biographia Literaria* as Coleridge's preface to his own poetry.

The key sections in the four volume *Biographia Literaria* are as follows. In the first volume Coleridge discusses form and perceptions, which he would identify as a primary imagination. In the second volume he would demonstrate how these perceptions and images are transformed in poetry – which he explains as the secondary imagination. This secondary imagination is for Coleridge the poetic imagination.

There is also the famous Coleridge distinction between fancy and imagination. Put together these ideas and concepts have been the centerpiece of Romantic Criticism and its legacies. Coleridge believes Wordsworth's 1800 preface emphasized too much the language of the 'rustic'. Then they appear to have fundamentally different views in terms of the language itself. Wordsworth treated language as individual words or vocabulary. But for Coleridge, language comprises not only words and combinations of words but new uses of them, including rhythms, order and grammar. Thus, he objected to "the mere adoption of such words" (that is rustic words) because poetic composition implies an "order".

Coleridge defines poetry in this fashion,

The art... of representing external nature and human Thoughts and Affections, both relatively to human Affections; to the production of as great immediate pleasure in each part, as is compatible with the largest possible Sum of Pleasure in the whole. Poetry is a species of composition, opposed to Science as having intellectual pleasure for it is Object and attaining its end by the language natural to us in states of excitement; but distinguished from other species, not excluded by this criterion, by permitting a pleasure from the Whole consistent with a consciousness of pleasurable excitement from the component parts, and the perfection of which is to communicate from each part the greatest immediate pleasure compatible with the largest Sum of Pleasure on the whole.

For Coleridge art is not a copy but an imitation of nature. It does not aim to be reality but to represent reality. Then comes his famous definition and distinction between fancy, the primary imagination and the secondary one.

The Primary imagination is a repetition of the finite mind, the secondary imagination is an echo:

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 secondary I consider as an echo of the former, co-existing with the conscious will, yet still as identical with the primary in the kind of its agency, and differing only in degree, and in the mode of its operation. It dissolves, diffuses, dissipates, in order to re-create; or where this process is rendered impossible, yet still at all events it struggles to idealize and to unify. It is essentially vital, even as all objects (as objects) are essentially fixed and dead.

Fancy, on the contrary, has no other counters to play with, but fixities and definites. The Fancy is indeed no other than a mode of Memory emancipated from the order of time and space; while it is blended with, and modified by that empirical phenomenon of the will, which we express by the word CHOICE. But equally with the ordinary memory the Fancy must receive all its materials ready made from the law of association.

Fancy operates by choice between already present objects and images but the secondary imagination acts with the co-presence and control of the conscious will. Fancy, therefore, is rather limited, Coleridge argued, to the reorganization and recombination of already existing, separate sense impressions. It is rather mechanical. For Coleridge, secondary imagination is the key.

Secondary imagination is also not common. It is the mark of the artistic genius which dissolves and dissipates in order to recreate. Coleridge called this process of the secondary imagination “esemplastic”, the process by which it can shape into one to convey something new.

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Coleridge also classified readers, perhaps in cheek. He described four sorts of readers:

1. Sponges that suck up every thing and, when pressed give it out in the same state, only perhaps somewhat dirtier – . 2. Sand Glasses – or rather the upper Half of the Sand Glass, which in a brief hour assuredly lets out what it has received – & whose reading is only a profitless measurement & dozing away of Time – . 3. Straining Bags, who get rid of whatever is good & pure, and retain the Dregs. – and this Straining-bag Class is again subdivided into the Species of the Sensual, who retain evil for the gratification of their own base Imaginations, & the calumnious, who judge only by defects, & to whose envy a beauty is an eye-sore, a fervent praise respecting an other a near-grievance, and the more virulent in its action because the miserable man does not dare confess the Truth to his own Heart – . 4 and lastly, the Great-Moguls Diamond Sieves – which is perhaps going farther for a Simile than its superior Dignity can repay, inasmuch as a common Cullender would have been equally symbolic/but imperial or culinary, these are the only good, & I fear the least numerous, who assuredly retain the good, while the superfluous or impure passes away & leaves no trace

Poets and Philosophers

Shelley in *A Defence of Poetry* argued that poetry subsumed into itself all other forms of thought. That is, poetry includes morality as well. Shelley says in *A Defence of Poetry*,

But poets, or those who imagine and express this indestructible order, are not only the authors of language and of music, of the dance, and architecture, and statuary, and painting: they are the institutors of laws, and the founders of civil society, and the inventors of the arts of life, and the teachers, who draw into a certain propinquity with the beautiful and the true that partial apprehension of the agencies of the invisible world which is called religion. Hence all original religions are allegorical, or susceptible of allegory, and, like Janus, have a double face of false and true. Poets, according to the circumstances of the age and nation in which they appeared, were called, in the earlier epochs of the world, legislators, or prophets: a poet essentially comprises and unites both these characters. For he not only beholds intensely the present as it is, and discovers those laws according to which present things ought to be ordered, but he beholds the future in the present, and his thoughts are the germs of the flower and the fruit of latest time. Not that I assert poets to be prophets in the gross sense of the word, or that they can foretell the form as surely as they foreknow the spirit of events: such is the pretence of superstition, which would make poetry an attribute of prophecy, rather than prophecy an attribute of poetry. A poet participates in the eternal, the infinite, and the one; as far as relates to his conceptions, time and place and number are not. The grammatical forms which express the moods of time, and the difference of persons, and the distinction of place, are convertible with respect to the highest poetry without injuring it as poetry; and the choruses of Æschylus, and the book of Job, and Dante's "Paradise" would afford, more than any other writings, examples of this fact, if

the limits of this essay did not forbid citation. The creations of sculpture, painting, and music are illustrations still more decisive.

The poet is above all else, something that transcends the social. For Shelley, the poet is neither a man speaking to men, as Wordsworth said, nor is he somebody who just imagines and brings everything together in an esemplastic creation, as Coleridge said. For Shelley, the poet is a prophet. What Shelley does throughout his *Defence of Poetry* and his poem *Ode to the West Wind* is to say that we need to listen to these poets.

To recap, we have seen a range of ideas about poets, poetry, poetic diction and the connection between the poet and the social order. Wordsworth's argument was that poets are men speaking to other men and that poetic diction must be close to the language of the rustics, but that must be modified. Coleridge distinguished between fancy and imagination, and the secondary imagination which dissipates, dissolves and recreates.

Shelley moves it out of this debate entirely to say that the poet is an unacknowledged legislator of mankind and our job is, or our job ought to be, to listen to these poets as prophets.

Additional Reading

James Engel, 'Biographia Literaria' in Lucy Newlyn (ed) *The Cambridge Companion to Coleridge*, Cambridge UP, 2006. 59-74.