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Principal Investigator & Affiliation: Prof. Tutun Mukherjee, University of Hyderabad

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Paper Coordinator & Affiliation: Dr. Anita Bhela, Delhi College of Arts and Commerce,
University of Delhi

Module Number & Title: Prose and Criticism in Romantic Period: Wordsworth, Coleridge,
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Content Writer's Name & Affiliation: Dr. Aratrika Das, Assistant Professor, Ramjas
College, University of Delhi

Name & Affiliation of Content Reviewer: Dr. Anita Bhela, Delhi College of Arts and
Commerce, University of Delhi

Name & Affiliation of Content Editor: Dr. Anita Bhel, Delhi College of Arts and
Commerce, University of Delhi

Romantic Criticism – An Introduction

A thousand handicraftsmen wore the mask

Of Poesy. Ill-fated, impious race!

That blasphemed the bright Lyrist to his face,

And did not know it, no, they went about,

Holding a poor, decrepid standard out

Mark'd with most flimsy mottos, and in large

The name of one Boileau!

- John Keats, "Sleep and Poetry" (1817)

Keats condemns the mechanical rules of writing as arbitrary and artificial. Any adherence to regularity is an external restraint superimposed on the poet. Poetry must transcend the particularities of time and space, and transport the reader to an imagined realm. This is at the heart of the above passage – and the quintessential – characteristic of what is identified as the Romantic period. The term 'Romanticism' describes the literary and philosophical engagement of the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries. While Enlightenment, as Immanuel Kant defines in "What is Enlightenment?", is a process of man's liberation from bondage and oppression through the faculty of reason; Romanticism ushered in an alternative school of thought that emphasized subjective emotions (against reason and intellect), spontaneity (against order), and a radical scepticism with regard to the precepts of Enlightenment. Published first in 1798, William Wordsworth and Samuel Taylor Coleridge's *Lyrical Ballads* embody the intellectual impulses of this period, and is often seen as a critical manifesto of Romanticism. The Preface to *Lyrical Ballads* (1800) argues that poetry ought to

convey authentic human feelings, use the ordinary “language of conversation”, the ‘lower’ forms of diction, and emerges from the poet’s feelings and imagination. Coleridge, however, departs from Wordsworth’s definition of poetry as “the real language of men” and the Poet as “a man speaking to men”, and proposes a critical study of aesthetic experience in *Biographia Literaria* (1817). Coleridge’s distinctions between fancy, primary imagination, and secondary imagination and the ‘revolutionary Powers’ of the mind re-appears in Percy Bysshe Shelley’s *Defence of Poetry* wherein the higher imaginative powers of the mind enables man to realise love, beauty and delight. From *Lyrical Ballads* to *Defence of Poetry*, this paper traces the trajectory of romantic prose writings that critique the certainties of the intellect and establish poets, as Shelley puts it, “the unacknowledged legislators of the world” (220).

Rene Wellek’s classic definition: “Imagination for the view of poetry, nature for the view of the world, and symbol and myth for poetic style” (10) identifies nature, imagination, and symbolism as the defining features of Romanticism. The Romantics reject the emphasis on reason, and retreat from the neoclassical norm of writing. This subjective turn of aesthetic theory is influenced by John Locke’s *Essay Concerning Human Understanding* (1690). Locke argues that the human mind does not have innate or *a priori* ideas, and like a blank sheet of paper (*tabula rasa*), absorbs ideas derived from sensations. The mind, first, senses, perceives the world through sensory faculties, and then, reflects, generates ideas based on the perceptions. Knowledge is built up of perceptible qualities that give rise to sense impressions. Locke’s theory of association of ideas is developed further by David Hartley in *Observations on Man* (1749). Hartley proposes that external objects create vibrations in the mind which thereafter form the basis of ideas. Through a process of association, man arrives at knowledge, that is, morality and divinity.

Both Locke and Hartley believed that knowledge is derived from experience and an appropriate environment is crucial to the development of benevolence and love. This notion of association is crucial to Wordsworth's theory of poetry that illustrates the "primary laws of our nature: chiefly as far as regards the manner in which we associate ideas in a state of excitement" (3). For Wordsworth, poetry is dependent on the habits of association and natural landscape is vital to the development of the poet's mind. At the same time, for Wordsworth, the source of the poem is not the external nature, but the poet's individual consciousness. Unlike Locke who believed that the sensory experience of the external world shaped the human nature, Wordsworth stressed the individual consciousness that creates perceptions and in turn poetry. This emphasis on the inner feelings of the poet as a resource for poetry, rather than the external world, became a major turn in Romanticism. Introspection and reflection become the hallmarks of poetic creation. The subject of reflection, the poetic self, thus occupies the center stage in Romantic aesthetic theory.

When Wordsworth's Preface to *Lyrical ballads* defines the poet as 'a man speaking to men', he alerts to a democratisation of letters that was emerging in this period, and turns to hermeneutics and interpretation to explain the phenomenon of poetry. The psychological impulse of the poet to create poetry, and the interpretative act of reading poetry is married together. Sublime, for example, does not remain a characteristic of the natural landscape, but a power of the mind itself – as Wordsworth puts it in *Prelude* (1805) - the "mind/ Is lord and master" over "outward sense" (270-1). This psychological impulse becomes the meta-value of Romantic poetry rather than the formal structures of rhetoric. Therefore, poetry, for Wordsworth and Coleridge, reflects a transcendent vision. This vision is always created by a poet. A poet is an imaginative, sensitive, and a conscious being. Theorising about poetry becomes a theory of who is a poet, about the creative process, and responses to this creative process.

William Wordsworth – “Preface to *Lyrical Ballads*”

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 coloring of imagination, whereby ordinary things should be presented to the mind in an unusual aspect (154)

The Preface imparts not just a “systematic defense of the theory” upon which the poems of *Lyrical Ballads* were composed, as Wordsworth states; it also presents a systematic theory of poetic complexity and poetical limits set against a world of experience and material things. Wordsworth defines poetry as “the spontaneous overflow” of feelings that are recollected in tranquillity. Language, form, and meter are added to this ‘overflow’ of feelings. Wordsworth argues against the poetic diction, the “gaudiness and inane phraseology” and the “vague, glossy and unfeeling language” of poets. For Wordsworth, poetic diction alienates human sympathy. There is no essential difference between the language of prose and of metrical composition. Poetry should be composed in the “real language of men” and the less-restrained language of the low and rustic. Meter is not essential to poetry, but only an additional source of pleasure.

Expanding his apologia for the rejection of poetic diction and privileging of ordinary language, Wordsworth defines a Poet as a man speaking to men. A poet has greater knowledge of human nature, a greater power of communication, and can communicate not only feelings he individually experiences, but also those he perceives in his environment. Poetry, for Wordsworth, is the most philosophic of all writings, with its object as truth that is general and operative. Poetry embodies the “breath and finer spirit of all knowledge” and is emblematic of a deep sympathy between man and nature. The verbal artifices and poetic

expressions are therefore mere ornamentation. Because the rules of meter are fixed, poetic diction can have a restraining effect with the use of meter.

M. H. Abrams in *The mirror and the lamp* characterises this emphasis on the human mind as the progenitor of poetry as the shift from mimetic to ‘expressive’ critical standards. Hayden argues that the ‘Romantics’ were interested not in the expressive but rather in ‘creative theory’. Wordsworth’s Preface is a manifesto that expresses some of the poet’s most familiar and powerful ideas within a conveniently small space. The conception of animistic powers ready to feed the mind, the superiority of natural to human law, and the potential moral application of that law, are all discernible within the Preface. Wordsworth defends the ideational content of what his mind perceives in solitary, unmediated contemplation of nature against the claims of that knowledge is reason and intellect. This conflict must be understood as parallel to the tension in Wordsworth’s socio-historical context of French Revolution. The dictates of the ideally unchained individual conscience and the subjective lyric are forces against the institutionalized dictates of the society. The connection is made clear by the fact that Wordsworth’s meditation is understood to have not just aesthetic but moral consequences. Wordsworth asserts that the essentially private contemplation in which he is engaged is the only proper foundation of moral conscience. His “thoughts and feelings” demonstrate his superior nature, they must be seen not as *perceptions* but *creations*: “thoughts and feelings” which proceed “by his own choice” and “from the structure of his own mind.”

S. T. Coleridge – *Biographia Literaria*

On 30 March 1815, Coleridge wrote to Byron of his intention to add to his poems “A general Preface will be pre-fixed, on the principles of philosophic and genial [having to do with genius] criticism relatively to the Fine Arts in general; but especially to Poetry” (26). Several

weeks later when Wordsworth's 1815 *Poems* with its new Preface to *Lyrical Ballads* is printed, Coleridge asserts – “altho’ Wordsworth’s Preface is half a child of my own Brain ... yet I am far from going all lengths with Wordsworth . . . I rather suspect that some where or other there is a radical Difference in our theoretical opinions respecting Poetry – / this I shall endeavor to go to the Bottom of” (83). Eventually in 1817 Coleridge publishes *Biographia Literaria*, an extended dialogue with – and a critique of – Wordsworth’s two Prefaces (1800 and 1815).

Biographia Literaria is an autobiographical, philosophical, religious and critical text. The first four chapters present literary events of Coleridge’s life from Christ’s Hospital to 1798; chapters 5–9 summarise his intellectual migration from various mechanistic and associative systems to rest on religious and transcendental principles; chapters 12 and 13 discuss fancy, primary and secondary imagination; chapter 14 is a philosophic discussion of perceptions, imagination, and the aesthetic experience of fine arts, particularly poetry. Sections in chapters 10, 12, 13, and 24 explain Coleridge’s religious and moral beliefs, wherein Coleridge rejects the mechanistic view of the universe and adopts a principle of imagination that rests on the Logos or the Word. In chapters 17-20 and 22, Coleridge critiques Wordsworth’s theoretical principles of poetry. Rejecting empiricism and materialism as adequate explanations of human psyche, Coleridge develops an argument on how the mind works, processes details, reflects, associates, and connects impressions and ideas derived from the senses. Poetry in *Biographia Literaria* emerges as a nexus of philosophy, life, religion, friendship, theory and practise of writing.

Coleridge describes poetry in chapter fourteen as “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 distinct gratification from each component *part*” (32). A single word or stanza in a poem does not gratify or achieve perfection.

In the same chapter, Coleridge defines the poet as:

The poet, described in ideal perfection, brings the whole soul of man into activity, with the subordination of its faculties to each other, according to their relative worth and dignity. He diffuses a tone and spirit of unity, that blend, and (as it were) fuses, each into each, by that synthetic and magical power, to which we have exclusively appropriated the name of imagination. This power, first put in action by the understanding, and retained under their irremissive, though gentle unnoticed, control (*laxis effertur habenis*) reveals itself in the of reconciliation of opposite or discordant qualities: of sameness, difference; of the general, with the concrete; the idea, with the individual, with the representative; the sense of novelty and freshness, with old and familiar objects; a more than usual state of emotion, more than usual order.... (43)

For Coleridge, “what is Poetry?” fuses with “who is a Poet?” and finally “what is Art?” Imagination, as Coleridge defines in chapter seven, is “a superior degree of the faculty [of synthesis], joined to a superior voluntary control over it” (22). The mind not only gathers details (fancy), but also creates something new by the coming together of all images (imagination). Fancy is the passive power of the mind. Imagination is the active power – of forging new territories. The passive power enables the mind to pause, make sense, and sequentially, through a series of apprehensions, consolidate images into perceptions and meanings. Fancy works with “fixities and definites” untransformed individually or by the work as a whole; through “choice” or “memory”. The active power of Imagination transforms, rearranges the “fixities and definites” to create:

The IMAGINATION... 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, 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... (23)

While fancy observes and is a function of memory, imagination associates, and discovers connections between disparate images to create something new. This skilful arrangement of parts to create a harmonious whole is what Coleridge further classifies as Primary and Secondary imagination. The power of perception, an innate ability of man, is the primary imagination. Secondary imagination is a heightened degree of the conscious will which a poet possesses. A poet with the “synthetic and magical power” of secondary imagination becomes an agent of the unifying process. The formless mass of experience that fancy accumulates is dissolved, dissipated, diffused, and unified by the poet through secondary imagination. This act of creation by the poet “with form, connections, and unity” is an aesthetic experience. In chapter fourteen, Coleridge describes the reading experience as: “The reader should be carried forward, not merely or chiefly by the mechanical impulse of curiosity, or by a restless desire to arrive at the final solution; but by the pleasurable activity of the mind excited by the attractions of the journey” (34).

In chapter 18, Coleridge argues that there neither is nor can be any essential difference between the language of prose and that of metrical composition. Metrical composition

implies an 'order', one that in poetry is directed by "that prospectiveness of mind, that *surview*, which enables a man to foresee the whole of what he is to convey" (58). Coleridge stresses the organic integration of all resources of language in poetry, something that reconciles opposites into an organic whole. A poet, "an ideal perfection", speaks in "delight from the *whole*, as is compatible with a distinct gratification from each component *part*"; that 'the parts...mutually support and explain each other" (13).

Dialectic unity between Wordsworth and Coleridge

While Wordsworth described imagination as a mode of association, Coleridge believed that powers of imagination perceive, create, transform and unify our perceptions. For Wordsworth, imagination associates and can explain the human powers of creativity. For Coleridge, mind in its dynamic, active relation to the world has primacy; possesses a power unmentioned and unaccounted for in the materialists' schemes – "the living Power and prime Agent of all human Perception", that allows man to create perceptions in a manner constitutive not only with nature but with the creator of nature, God ('the infinite I am'). This power produces the fine arts and poetry. Fancy is valued but confined to the reorganisation and recombination of already existing, separate sense impressions; it juxtaposes or yokes but does not transform or unify. Imagination, for Coleridge, metamorphoses. *Biographia Literaria* echoes Wordsworth's distinction between science and poetry, but critiques Wordsworth's emphasis on the language of the rustic. Wordsworth responds to the neoclassical poetic diction wherein individual vocabulary and experience was considered inappropriate for poetry, and develops the notion of a poetic diction that imitates the language of common experience. Coleridge, on the other hand, claims that the rustic's language "purified from all provincialism and grossness, and . . . made consistent with the rules of grammar . . . will not differ from the language of any other man of common-sense" (52-4).

For Coleridge, the best parts of language are derived from the mind. This understanding of creative power of the mind re-appears in Keats's idea of "negative capability", and Shelley's *Defence of Poetry* in which he distinguishes between the materialistic 'reason' and the spiritual imagination.

P. B. Shelley – "A Defense of Poetry"

"A Defence of Poetry" is an essay by Percy Bysshe Shelley written in 1821 and first published posthumously in 1840 in *Essays, Letters from Abroad, Translations and Fragments* by Edward Moxon in London. Shelley aims to provide a justification of poetry against the attacks of an age of scientific materialism. He insists on the social and moral utility of poetry and how poetry produces its useful effect on men. Refusing to justify poetry either as mere pleasure or as didacticism, Shelley develops a theory for art that is aware that imagination is not autonomous. The 'defense' is about the act of writing itself, and attempts to reconceive the Poet, who will otherwise become an empty sign. Shelley develops a romantic ideology of vision that draws the reader's attention to the hermeneutic problem of fiction.

Shelley begins his defense against Thomas Love Peacock's account of poetry, "The Four Ages of Poetry", as a sentimental anachronism in the modern age of reason and science.

Shelley asserts:

in the infancy of society every author is necessarily a poet, because language itself is poetry. . . . Every original language near to its source is in itself the chaos of a cyclic poem: the copiousness of lexicography and the distinctions of grammar are the works of a later age, and are merely the catalogue and the form of the creations of poet (82).

Language is inherently metaphorical and expressive, hence poetic. From the idealistic defense of the morality of poetry, Shelley moves to a psychological support of his theory, explaining how “poetry acts to produce the moral improvement of man.” Shelley divides the mental faculty into two parts: reason and imagination. Reason implies a kind of logical process that enables one to connect ideas together and/or determine their relationships to one another. It is a passive thing. Imagination, meanwhile, acts upon those thoughts. It enables creation; it is the source of our artistic desires. For Shelley a poet receives inspiration through his imaginative apprehension of “the indestructible order,” or his participation “in the eternal, the infinite, the one.” Inspiration, moments of “transitory brightness” that come unbidden, is the heart of poetry, while composition, when the mind is already but “a fading coal,” produces at its best only “a feeble shadow on the original conception of the Poet” (135). If Shelley sees the poet as the happiest and best of men, it is not only because of his “most refined organisation” but also because he is capable of penetrating the veil of the world and apprehending the universal and eternal reality.

For Shelley, imagination arises “from within”. Shelley represents the imagination’s displacing power by rewriting the Aeolian lyre figure. From a transcendental a priori (such as nature or the imagination) to its effect in the phenomenal world, the Aeolian lyre is like the wind that moves the strings to the “invisible influence” of the causative imagination. This idea of imagination has two distinct sources: Neo-Platonism and the associationism. Neo-Platonism is evident in Shelley’s concept of the imagination as apprehending “the eternal, the infinite, the one”; thus, poets “imagine and express [the] indestructible order” (112) or “apprehend the true and the beautiful” (3). The Neo-Platonic aspect of imagination in Shelley’s Defence also informs such statements as “Poets are the hierophants of an unapprehended inspiration” (140). Associationist theory is apparent in Shelley’s treatment of imagination as the faculty of love or sympathy, the moral effect of poetry. Both the Neo-

Platonic and the associationist concepts of the imagination operate to free man from a Lockean world of sense impressions. The imagination that Shelley describes is capable of apprehending that reality that lies beyond the phenomenal world and is therefore unavailable to the senses: "...poetry defeats the curse which binds us to be subjected to the accident of surrounding impressions" (137). Imagination is not mechanically chained to the world of sense impressions, nor does it deal with sense-stimulated thoughts; rather it responds to those impressions and colours them with its "light". The autonomy of the imagination as it is here described provides an escape from the dry and fixed empirical concepts of the mind.

Shelley's notion of language's proximity to imagination departs from an earlier, empirical conception that subordinates word to referent in favour of understanding language as self-reflexive. For Shelley imagination is nothing but an effect of language. From Wordsworth to Shelley, a trajectory of aesthetic theory appears that, as William K. Wimsatt, Jr. and Cleanth Brooks puts it, prefer "the primitive, the naïve, the directly passionate, the natural spoken word" (339). In words of Kathleen M. Wheeler this trajectory is the precursor of the twentieth century post-structuralist theories: "Coleridge's concept of polarity, of opposition, is in many ways anticipatory of Derrida's concept of difference ... for Coleridge, as for Derrida, relations and oppositions form the substances of experience." The Romantic aesthetic theory posits a visionary idea of poetry, orchestrates carefully theorised claims on the value of a poet, and espouses a poetic selfhood that is inward, introspective, and reflective. This turn of self-consciousness in a context of French Revolution, industrialisation, and emerging scientific materialism is crucial to the legacy of Romanticism. Not only do the Romantics reject diction, craftsmanship and decorum of meter, their intense self-absorbing individualism that emphasized an organic unity with landscape, radically critiques the inorganic human community. Paul de Man and Geoffrey Hartman see this as a moment of blindness that offsets Romantic tradition by denying the *imitatio naturae* principle and

Enlightenment visualism, turning from the outward to the inward and establishing of the imaginative autonomy. But blindness is also insight – the “flash upon that inward eye” (Wordsworth’s phrase in the poem “I wandered lonely as a cloud”) – revealing the truth of nature that appears in metaphors, symbols, hieroglyphs, emblems. Unlike the Petrarchan or Elizabethan love-poems, the first-person Romantic lyric reinvents the organic form of English literary criticism. The revolutionary impulse of the Romantic aesthetic theory is complex and lies in each poet’s individual responses to the ideas of imagination, nature, nature, and poetry itself.

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