

Preface to the Lyrical Ballads as the Manifesto of Romantic

Literature

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Abstract

Without any shadow of doubt, William Wordsworth occupies a towering and prominent place among the Romantic poets. Wordsworth's contribution to the development of romantic poetry is such that he has been hailed as the priest of Nature. In his work, *Preface to the Lyrical Ballads*, which he produced in collaboration with S.T. Coleridge in 1798, he advocates his own theory of poetry, the function of a poet, and last, but not the least, his conception of poetic-diction. Wordsworth strongly favours simple language that is used by the common people living in the lap of Nature. That is why, Wordsworth selects his subject matters from common life, and farmers, peasants, shepherds, and fishermen are at the centre of his poetry.

Key-Words: Romanticism, Neo-classicism, Tenets, Manifesto, Nature, Critic, Tranquility, Poetic-diction

Paper

Before we go on to consider the term Romanticism, and Romantic revival, it becomes

necessary to know some of the important aspects of Neo-classicism against which Romanticism is a reaction. Neo-classicism has been defined as a veneration for the Roman classic, thought, and way of life, as the classical system of France developed during the reign of Louis XIV, an adaptation, rather than an exact copy of the original Greek classic system. In any case, what it denoted was a regard for rules and principles set by Aristotle and other ancient Greek and Roman writers.

In the late seventeenth century and early eighteenth century, this Neo-classical system took proper hold over the English literary scene, the English mind and spirit. Neo-classicism rose in reaction to the excessive of metaphysical poets after Donne, when imagination was let loose in the most unrestrained fashion. English Neo-classicism was very much the result of French influence also which, in the beginning, was quite liberal, and it was later on that the rigidity of views set in, and

that too, more so in the minor personages of the age than otherwise.

The Neo-classicism stressed upon the imitation of nature, technical aspects of art, artistic finish etc. At the same time, however, Dryden, Pope, and Dr. Johnson, the Neo-classical critics, were not foolishly rigid about setting rules. Each of them was capable of admitting Shakespeare and was ready to admit the role of imagination and genius in poetic creation.

In such literary situations, it was William Wordsworth with the advent of whom on the literary scene, there began a reaction against the Neo-classical conventions. The undercurrents which were set in the eighteenth century were challenged and found an expression in the critical opinions of Wordsworth when his masterpiece *Preface to the Lyrical Ballads* was hailed as a landmark achievement in the history of Romantic literary criticism. With the publication of this book, there was set in motion a definite break with the classical tenets of the eighteenth century.

Preface to the Lyrical Ballads is generally considered to be a great event heralding a new era in the history of English

literature, or has rightly been called as the Manifesto of English Romantic Movement as says M.H Abrams: “preface owes its special position to the fact that it presented a set of propositions about the nature and criteria of poetry which were widely adopted by Wordsworth’s contemporaries.”¹

Wordsworth set out to accomplish this creation of taste with determination and aggressive enthusiasm which needed the demolition of existing tenets of criticism, which Wordsworth felt to be outdated and outmoded and no longer relevant. He discarded the adherence to rules and championed freedom and liberty from the bondage to any rigid principles. It was Wordsworth’s conviction that a poet should express his feelings and thoughts without being curbed by rules and regulations.

In Wordsworth’s views, poetry is the breath and finer spirit of all knowledge; it is an impassioned expression which is in the countenance of all sciences. Emphatically, may it be said of the poet, as Shakespeare hath also said of man, that he looks before and after.’ He is the rock of defense

for human nature; an upholder and preserver, carrying on everywhere with him relationship and love. His conception of a poem, 'spontaneous overflow of powerful feelings' should not be taken too literally, as a poem is an expression of 'emotions recollected in tranquility'.

Wordsworth further advocates that a poet is a man speaking to man: a man who is endowed with more lively sensibility, more enthusiasm and tenderness, who has a greater knowledge of human nature, and a more comprehensive soul, than are to be 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 volition and passions as manifested in the going on the universe, and habitually impelled to create them where he does not find them.

Wordsworth also stresses the simplicity of the language in poetry, and in his conviction that it must be often in liveliness and truth, fall short of that which is uttered by man in real life, under the actual

pressures of those passions, certain shadows of which the poet, thus, produce or feel to be produced, in himself. He concludes the fact that there is no essential difference in the language of poetry, and the impassioned and purified language of common speech which met with innumerable objections as pointed out by S.T. Coleridge.

In these volumes, there is also present little of what is usually called poetic-diction as much pain has been taken to avoid it as is ordinarily taken to produce it; this has been done for the reason already alleged, to bring of men; and further because the pleasure which the poet proposed to himself to impart, is of a kind very different from that which is supposed by many persons to be proper object of poetry. Wordsworth's attack on poetic diction did rid poetry of certain inane phraseology, unnecessary figure of speech, and artificial terminology, which infested the poetry of his contemporaries.

The principal object, then, proposed in Preface to the Lyrical Ballads is to choose incidents and situations from the common life, and to relate them, as far as possible, in the

selection of language really used by men, and, at the same time, to throw over them a certain colouring of imagination. Humble and rustic life was generally chosen, because in that situation, the essential passions of the heart find a better soil in which they can attain their maturity.

Wordsworth, in his writing a defence for the new kind of poetry, was attempting, he is rather aggressive and destructive in his criticism at times. He seems to be more intent in demolishing the existing opinions, than in seeing whether his own opinions are clearly formulated and expressed, and his criticism seems to lack the sense of balance. In a way, he is not a critic in real sense of terms, in spite of the fact that his prefaces and essays constitute a 'manifesto of the Romantic Movement.'

All said and done, Wordsworth occupies a prominent place in the history of English Romantic criticism. Although he has glaring shortcomings as a critic, but his boldness and originality as a critic cannot be disputed as says Rene Wellek "he inherited from neo-classicism a theory of

imitation of nature to which he gives, however, a specific social twist."²

Indeed, Wordsworth's claims to eminence as a critic is not due to any systematic, sustained and positive critical efforts, but due to the suggestive and controversial remarks that he makes as Herbert Read rightly puts it as : Wordsworth went back for a model to the incomparable skill of Milton; avoided Milton's artificialities so as to include something of Shakespeare's freedom, something of Spencer's felicity, and something of Chaucer's commonality.³ He is not as brilliant a critic as S.T. Coleridge , but, he does, however, occupies an important and prominent place in the history of English literature in general, and Romantic literature in particular.

References:

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