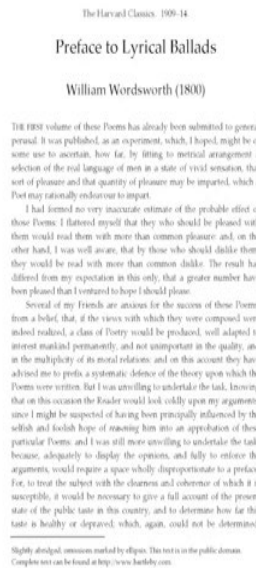


Literary Criticism (From Plato to Leavis)
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Wordsworth's Preface to Lyrical Ballads

(Refer Slide Time: 00:16)



Good morning, my name is Rashi Shrivastava, and today we will be talking about Literary Criticism. Within the major aspect of literary criticism, let us talk about Romantic criticism that majorly involves two main writers, Wordsworth and Coleridge. Let us begin with a brief introduction about the Romantic age. As students of literature, we need to understand, where do we place Romanticism in the timeline of literary history.

So we generally start studying literature from the age of Chaucer, and then we eventually move on to say Middle Ages, then Renaissance, then Restoration, Neoclassical, and then we move to Romanticism. So in the period of history, Romanticism comes roughly between the 1770s to the 1850s. However, we can narrow down this date to 1798 to 1837. We know that Ages often overlap with each other.

Why do we mark 1798 as the start of Romanticism? It is because 1798 was the date when Wordsworth published *Lyrical Ballads* for the first time. Before we move to Wordsworth and his works and literary criticism, let us talk about Romanticism in a general sense, so that we get an understanding of the kind of criticism that it produced. There were two major events that shaped the Romantic age or Romantic criticism, Industrial Revolution and the French

Revolution. Industrial Revolution that took place over a span of time from the 1760s to 1840, French Revolution that also took place over a span of time from 1789 to 1799.

Besides these two major events, preceding age to Romanticism is also important in shaping the ideals of Romanticism. That is the Augustan age, also known as the neoclassical age. Why? Because Romanticism developed as a reaction to whatever was the strategy of writing in the Augustan age. In the Augustan age, the focus was mainly on rationality. It was mechanical, impersonal and artificial. As opposed to that, Romanticism developed as a spontaneous movement where emphasis was on spontaneity and originality.

Now, let us move to the major writer of the day, William Wordsworth, born 1770 and who died in 1850. Today, we will be discussing his work of literary criticism, the *Preface to Lyrical Ballads*, published in 1800. But before that, just let us take a quick view at the works of Wordsworth.

So, beginning with *Lyrical Ballads* that was published in 1798, which was also co-authored by Coleridge where he contributed four poems to this collection and one of those poems is very famous, “The Rime of the Ancient Mariner”. Besides that Wordsworth has also written a number of poems like “The Solitary Reaper”, “Daffodils”, “Intimations of Immortality”, “A Few Lines Composed upon Westminster Bridge”, and also “London”.

On a side note, we must remember “London” as a poem was also written by two other writers, Samuel Johnson and William Blake. “The Prelude” is one magnum opus of Wordsworth, where he talks about his life and it is in 14 books. Now why is “The Prelude” important and how is it related to the preface of *Lyrical Ballads*, that is a relation that we will draw towards the end of this essay.

(Refer Slide Time: 4:11)



compositions; and I acknowledge that this defect, where it exists, is more dishonourable to the Writer's own character than false refinement or arbitrary association, though I should contend at the same time, that it is far less pernicious in the main of its consequences. From such verses the Poems in these volumes will be found distinguished at least by one mark of difference, that each of them has a worthy purpose. Not that I always began to write with a distinct purpose formerly conceived, but habits of meditation have, I trust, so prompted and regulated my feelings, that my descriptions of such objects as strongly excite these feelings, will be found to carry along with them a purpose. If this opinion be erroneous, I can have little right to the name of a Poet. For all good poetry is the spontaneous overflow of powerful feelings; and 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 reflexion 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 art, 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 these habits, we shall describe objects, and utter sentiments, of such a nature, and in such connection with each other, that the understanding of the Reader must necessarily be in some degree enlightened, and his affections strengthened and purified.

It has been said that each of these poems has a purpose. Another circumstance must be mentioned which distinguishes these Poems from the popular Poetry of the day; it is this, that the feeling therein developed gives importance to the action and situation, and not the action and situation to the feeling.

A sense of false modesty shall not prevent me from asserting, that the Reader's attention is pointed to this mark of distinction, far less for the sake of these particular Poems than from the general importance of the subject. The subject is indeed important! For the human mind is capable of being excited without the application of gross and violent stimulents, and he must have a very false perception of its beauty and dignity who does not know this, and who does not further know, that one being is elevated above another, in proportion as he possesses this capability. It has therefore appeared to me, that to endeavour to produce



Let us move to the main essay *Preface to Lyrical Ballads*, published in 1800. This essay is important because it served as a manifesto to the Romantic Movement. It was a revolutionary statement to free poetry from the clutches of the Augustan age, where the artificial style of writing was making poetry very restrictive and Wordsworth wanted poetry to come closer to life.

It was published three times; 1798 with a simple foreword and a collection of poems, 1800, is when he wrote the *Preface to Lyrical Ballads*, explaining his theories, explaining his beliefs about *Lyrical Ballads*, and 1802, where he added two new definitions to the preface.

So overall, we can divide this essay into four major questions. First, what is poetry? Second, what are the defining characteristics of a poet? Third, what is the value of poetry? And fourth, what is poetic diction?

We will look at each of these questions individually. And through the course of looking at them, we will be able to decode this essay *Preface to Lyrical Ballads*. Let us begin with the first question, what is poetry? According to Wordsworth, and I quote, “All good poetry is the spontaneous overflow of powerful feelings”. This definition of poetry has acquired a lot of popularity. He emphasizes on the role of a rational mind where the emotions that a poet goes through are thought over repeatedly and continuously and they are delivered only when they are ripe enough to be delivered.

(Refer Slide Time: 06:00)



13

ignorance, and that pleasure which arises from hearing what we do not understand, the Poet must descend from this supposed height, and, in order to excite rational sympathy, he must express himself as other men express themselves.

I have said that poetry is the spontaneous overflow of powerful feelings; it takes its origin from emotion recollected in tranquillity: the emotion is contemplated till, by a species of reaction, the tranquillity gradually disappears, and an emotion, kindred to that which was before the subject of contemplation, is gradually produced, and does itself actually exist in the mind. In this mood successful composition generally begins, and a mood similar to that it is carried on, but the emotion, of whatever kind, and in whatever degree, from various causes, is qualified by various pleasures, so that in describing any passion whatsoever, which are voluntarily described, the mind will, upon the whole, be in a state of enjoyment. If Nature be then cautious to preserve in a state of enjoyment a being so employed, the Poet ought to profit by the lesson held forth to him, and ought especially to take care that whatever passions he communicates to his Reader, those passions, if his Reader's mind be sound and vigorous, should always be accompanied with an overbalance of pleasure. Now the music of harmonious metrical language, the sense of difficulty overcome, and the bliss of association of pleasure which has been previously received from works of rhyme or metre of the same or similar construction, an indirect perception perpetually renewed of language closely resembling that of real life, and yet, in the circumstance of metre, differing from it so widely—all these imperceptibly make up a complex feeling of delight, which is of the most important use in tempering the painful feeling always found intermingled with powerful descriptions of the deeper passions. This effect is always produced in pathetic and impassioned poetry; while, in lighter compositions, the ease and gracefulness with which the Poet manages his numbers are themselves continually a principal source of the gratification of the Reader. All that it is necessary to say, however, upon this subject, may be effected by affirming, what few persons will deny, that, of two descriptions, either of passions, manners, or characters, each of them equally well executed, the one in prose and the other in verse, the verse will be read a hundred times where the prose is read once.

Nothing would, I think, have so effectually contributed to further the end which I have in view, as to have shown of what kind the pleasure is, and how that pleasure is produced, which is continually produced by



The idea is not to release raw emotions out to the world. The idea is to and I quote, “recollect emotions in tranquillity.” So we can see what Wordsworth is doing here, is that he is incorporating the rationality of the Augustan age, and he is also simultaneously taking the originality of the Romantic age, and he is clubbing them together by saying that a perfect combination of poetry is one that has emotions thought over radically and rationally, over a period of time, and then produced in tranquillity, or rather reproduced in tranquillity.

(Refer Slide Time: 06:47)



5

or enlarge this capability is one of the best services in which, at any period, a Writer can be engaged; but this service, excellent at all times, is especially so at the present day. 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, uniting it for all voluntary exertion, to reduce it to a state of almost savage torpor. The most effective of these causes are the great national events which are daily taking place, and the increasing accumulation of men in cities, where the uniformity of their occupations produces a craving for extraordinary incident, which the rapid communication of intelligence hourly gratifies. To this tendency of life and manners the literature and theatrical exhibitions of the country have conformed themselves. The invaluable works of our elder writers, I had almost said the works of Shakespeare and Milton, are driven into neglect by frantic novels, sickly and stupid German Tragedies, and deluges of idle and extravagant stories in verse. When I think upon this degrading thirst after outrageous stimulation, I am almost ashamed to have spoken of the feeble endeavour made in these volumes to counteract it, and, reflecting upon the magnitude of the general evil, I should be oppressed with no dissimulable melancholy, had I not a deep impression of certain inherent and indestructible qualities of the human mind, and likewise of certain powers in the great and permanent objects that act upon it, which are equally inherent and indestructible; and were there not added to this impression a belief, that the time is approaching when the evil will be systematically opposed, by men of greater powers, and with far more distinguished success.

Having dwelt thus long on the subjects and aim of these Poems, I shall request the Reader's permission to apprise him of a few circumstances relating to their **style**, in order, among other reasons, that he may not censure me for not having performed what I never attempted. The Reader will find that personifications of abstract ideas rarely occur in these volumes, and are utterly rejected, as an ordinary device to elevate the style, and raise it above prose. My purpose was to imitate, and, as far as possible, to adopt the very language of men, and, accordingly such personifications do not make any material or regular part of that language. They are, indeed, a figure of speech occasionally prompted by passion, and I have made use of them as such; but have endeavoured utterly to reject them as a mechanical device of style, or as a family language which Writers in metre seem to lay claim to. In prose, I have wished to keep the Reader in the company of his own and blood, persuaded that by so doing I shall interest him.



Another important point that he mentions is that poetry is not about craftsmanship or artistry, it is about genuine and sincere feelings. This point is important because it adds to his idea of

moving away from the Augustan age, because in the Augustan age, the focus was on the elevated language, on how to beautify the language of poetry to make it stand out above the rest. But here he says that even if poetry is written in simple language, it should express genuine and sincere feelings, and that is what will make good poetry.

(Refer Slide Time: 07:19)



Poetry sheds no tears (such as Angels weep) but natural and human tears she can boast of no oriental choir that distinguishes her vital pulses from those of prose; the same human blood circulates through the veins of them both.

Taking up the subject then, upon general grounds, let me ask, 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, if a true, endued 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 enjoys 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 entering 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 to those immediate external excitement.

But whatever portion of this faculty we may suppose even the greatest Poet to possess, there cannot be a doubt that the language which it will suggest to him, must often, in brilliancy and truth, fall short of that which is uttered by men in real life, under the actual pressure of those passions, certain shades of which the Poet thus produces, or feels to be produced, in himself.

However exalted a notion we would wish to cherish of the character of a Poet, it is obvious, that while he describes and imitates passions, his employment is in some degree mechanical, compared with the freedom and power of real and substantial action and suffering; so that it will be

As a substitute to harmony of numbers, and the power of producing it, an accurate similitude upon the feelings above specified, nothing has been said of those passages.



Moving to the second question of this essay, what are the defining characteristics of a poet? Wordsworth gives three characteristics that define a perfect poet. And we will also see how some of his ideas are borrowed from Philip Sidney's *Apology for Poetry* or *Defence of Poetry*, where he is talking about poetry and the role of a poet.

Coming back to Wordsworth and the three major characteristics of a poet, first that he says is that, a poet should be exceptionally sensitive in the sense not only to what happens to him, but also to what happens around him. He feels not only what he is suffering, but he also feels what others are suffering. Second, he is a man speaking to men. Let me put this in quotes, “he is a man speaking to men”.

And this again reiterates Sidney's idea where he talks about a poet as a great man who can take care of society. His poetry is not of self-indulgence, but has a social responsibility to teach and correct men's feelings. If this sounds similar, to teach and correct men's feelings, brings us back to Sidney again, where he defines poetry as a medium to teach and delight.

The third characteristic of a poet is that he should have an extraordinarily strong imagination so that he is affected by things even if they are not present around him. Even if there is something that is happening away from him, he should have a strong imagination so that he

can imagine the suffering, the pain or the happiness of those people, and as a result of which he can produce affective poetry.

(Refer Slide Time: 09:22)



accidental ornaments, and endeavour to excite admiration of himself by art, the manner of which must essentially depend upon the assumed manner of his subject.

What has been thus far said applies to Poetry in general, but especially to those parts of composition where the Poet speaks through the mouths of his characters, and upon this point it appears to authorize the conclusion that there are few persons of good sense, who would not allow that the dramatic parts of composition are defective, in proportion as they deviate from the real language of nature, and are coloured by a diction of the Poet's own, either peculiar to him as an individual Poet or belonging simply to Poets in general, to a body of men who, from the circumstance of their composition being in metre, it is expected will employ a particular language.

It is not, then, in the dramatic parts of composition that we look for this distinction of language, but still it may be proper and necessary where the Poet speaks to us in his own person and character. To this I answer by referring the Reader to the description before given of a Poet, having the qualities there enumerated as principally conducing to form a Poet, is implied nothing differing in kind from other men, but only in degree. The sum of what was said is, that the Poet is chiefly distinguished from other men by a greater propensity to think and feel without immediate external excitement, and a greater power in expressing such thoughts and feelings as are produced in him in that manner; but these passions and thoughts and feelings are the general passions and thoughts and feelings of men, and with what are they connected? Undoubtedly with our moral sentiments and animal sensations, and with the causes which excite these; with the operations of the elements, and the appearances of the visible universe; with storm and sunshine, with the revolutions of the seasons, with cold and heat, with loss of friends and kindred, with misery and torment, with gratitude and hope, with fear and sorrow. These, and the like, are the sensations and objects which the Poet describes, as they are the sensations of other men, and the objects which interest them. The Poet thinks and feels in the spirit of human passions. How, then, can his language differ in any material degree from that of all other men who feel vividly and see clearly? It might be proved that it is impossible. But supposing that this were not the case, the Poet might then be allowed to use a peculiar language when expressing his feelings for his own gratification, or that of men like himself. **But Poets do not write for Poets alone, but for men.** Unless therefore we are advocates for that alienation which subjects upon



Moving to the third question that is talked about in this essay, what is the value of poetry? And I would like to quote from the essay, “The end of poetry is to produce excitement, in coexistence with an overbalance of pleasure.” The objective of poetry, according to Wordsworth, is accurate reflection. He brings focus to the language of poetry, because it adds to the universal function of poetry. Even though, Industrial Revolution was happening around all this time, Wordsworth is not limiting the importance of poetry. He says that science and poetry should go hand in hand in order for society to maintain a balance.

(Refer Slide Time: 10:10)



7

at the head of those who, by their meanings, have attempted to widen the space of separation between Prose and Metrical composition, and was more than any other man curiously elaborate in the structure of his own poetic diction.

In vain to me the smiling mornings shine,
And reddening Phoebus lifts his golden fire:
The birds in vain their amorous descant pipe,
Or cheerful fields resume their green attire;
These ears, alas! for other notes require:
A different object these eyes require:
My lonely English mule no least but mine;
And in my breast the imperfect joys expire.
Yet morning smiles the busy race to cheer,
And new-born pleasure brings to happier men:
The fields to all their loves tribute bear,
To warm their little loves the birds complain,
I fruitless search to him that cannot hear,
And creep the more because I creep in vain.

It will easily be perceived, that the only part of this Sonnet which is of any value is the line printed in Italics; it is equally obvious, that, except in the rhyme, and in the use of the single word 'mule' for fruitless, which is so far a defect, the language of these lines does in no respect differ from that of prose.

By the foregoing quotation it has been shown that the language of Prose may yet be well adapted to Poetry; and it was previously asserted, that a large portion of the language of every good poem can in no respect differ from that of good Prose. We will go further. It may be safely affirmed, that there neither is, nor can be, any essential difference between the language of prose and metrical composition. We are fond of tracing the resemblance between Poetry and Painting, and, accordingly, we call them Sisters; but where shall we find bonds of connexion sufficiently strict to typify the affinity between metrical and prose composition? They both speak by and to the same organs, the bodies in which both of them are clothed may be said to be of the same substance, their affections are indeed, and almost identical, not necessarily differing even in degree.



Moving to the fourth and most important question of this essay, the idea of poetic diction, or what is often referred to as the theory of poetic diction given forward by Wordsworth, where he says a very simple thing. One, poetic style needs to be organic, it should not be prescriptive, such that there exists a correlation between language and form.

Again, we see that his basic idea is again hinting back to the Augustan age, where perhaps there was a major drift between the form of poetry and the content and the language, whether, what the poetry was talking about did not match with the kind of elevated language that the poets used.

Something that was violated by his predecessors the Augustans, because they stuck to stylistic devices and figures of speech. Most of their focus was on making their poetry sound better, rather than become better. Secondly, Wordsworth rejects the stagnant poetic diction, both in theory and in practice. He stresses on the use of real language of men. And in the words of Wordsworth, the real language of men can also be termed as rustic language. Language that is most natural and not artificial.

Elevated language to Wordsworth was the language of the kings and aristocrats that he rejected. So, we need to understand the kind of power relations that were also at work in this essay and during that time. So if poetry was written generally in elevated language, that was

the language of kings and aristocrats, then obviously, the common man who did not have access to such elevated language was not able to connect to poetry.

Wordsworth's idea behind using language of the men to produce poetry, was basically to limit or to constrict this gap between the common man and poetry. Another important thing that kind of becomes ironic here is that he considered meter to be a superficial addition to poetry. And according to him meter did not conform to the organic style of poetry. Metrical composition worked like a charm only to beautify poetry.

But why is this ironic? Because Wordsworth's magnum opus, "The Prelude", his autobiographical work that he has published in 14 books and that basically talks about his life is published in, is written in blank verse. Now, what is blank verse? Blank verse is a kind of meter that does not have any rhyme, but uses iambic pentameter essentially because it is English poetry, so most of the meter is iambic pentameter.

So on one hand Wordsworth is asking us or asking the readers to do away with metrical composition, but on the other hand, his magnum opus comprises of the use of meter. Coming to the final point, selection was an important term in Wordsworth's essay. Why selection? Because, according to him, we could not use every word that was used in the language of men, we had to be selective and choose the words that would add to the beauty of our poetry. He emphasizes on the need to select certain qualifiers, while advocating the use of real language of men. That is where we end with this essay.

Now, before we move to the second essay in the next session, let us just take an idea about Samuel Taylor Coleridge, and what was his idea and where does he stand in Romantic criticism? Samuel Taylor Coleridge also wrote a work of literary criticism called *Biographia Literaria* that focuses on major points of Romantic poetry. However, there is this interesting connection between Coleridge and Wordsworth.

What Wordsworth proposed as the theory of poetic diction was something that did not go down well with Coleridge, because he felt that what Wordsworth was practicing was something that he was not preaching. We will talk about this and also Coleridge's *Biographia Literaria* in the next session. Thank you.