

WORDSWORTH'S THEORY OF POETRY IN THE *LYRICAL BALLADS*

The high priest of Nature, William Wordsworth was the harbinger of Romanticism in the eighteenth century. He along with Samuel Taylor Coleridge initiated the Romantic Revival. The publication of the *Lyrical Ballads*, a joint venture by Wordsworth and Coleridge is a milestone in the history of literature. It was published in the year 1798 under the title, 'Lyrical Ballads, with a Few Other Poems.' This first edition was published anonymously. Coleridge's contributions included the well- acclaimed *The Rime of Ancient Mariner* and three minor poems *The Foster-Mother's Tale*, *The Nightingale* and *The Dungeon*. Wordsworth in fact contributed nineteen poems and '*Tintern Abbey*' was one among them.

The first edition failed to arrest any serious degree of interest. A second edition appeared in 1800, under Wordsworth's name alone, with one additional poem by Coleridge- *Love*. It was this edition in which Wordsworth incorporated the famous *Preface*. A third edition appeared in 1802 and it was followed by a fourth and final edition in 1805.

This *Preface* is considered a central work of Romantic literary theory and is one of the masterpieces in English criticism. However, Wordsworth was primarily a poet and not a critic. In the *Advertisement to Lyrical Ballads* he informed the readers that the *Lyrical Ballads* was an experiment. In the *Preface* he explained in detail what his theories about new poetry were and what was to be looked for in his own poems. The Prefaces, when analysed, resolve into certain declarations about the objectives of poetry, others concerning the methods by which these objectives are to be attained, and certain effects dependent on these axioms. Throughout the Preface, he is concerned with to state the facts of poetic creation than to attempt to explain them.

The overall intention of Wordsworth is two-fold, that is, to relate poetry as closely as possible to common life, by removing it in the first place from the realm of fantasy, and in the

second by changing it from the polite or over-sophisticated amusement to a serious art. He speaks about the main subject of poetry. He says that poetry should choose incidents and situations from common life and it must be related in ‘a selection of language really used by men.’ With the help of imagination, ordinary things should be presented in an extraordinary way. Ultimately these methods should reflect the primary laws of nature.

Wordsworth has an exalted conception of poetry. According to him “poetry is the breath and finer spirit of all knowledge; it is impassioned expression which is in the countenance of all science”. He not only defines poetry; but also explains the process involved in the production of poetry. His theory of poetry is comprehensive in the sense that it tells us the qualification of the poet, the function of poetry and recommends the language of poetry.

In Wordsworth’s opinion poetry should have a purpose. It must achieve something positive. What he defines as its purpose is not something ethical but rather psychological. The purpose is ‘to illustrate the manner in which our feelings and ideas are associated in a state of excitement...’ Accordingly, deep emotion is the fundamental condition of poetry. It is the feeling that matters. Wordsworth discards Aristotelian doctrine that the plot or the situation is the first and most important thing. For Wordsworth the first thing is feeling. It is objected that Wordsworth emphasizes feeling and ignores thoughts, but it is not true. It is true that he attaches great significance to feeling, yet he maintains that valuable poems can only be produced by a man who has thought long deeply. And he adds that the feeling developed in a poem gives importance to the action and situation, and not the action and situation to the feeling.

Hence the purpose of poetry is to proceed from the simple ideas inherent in the incidents and situations of common life to the exhibition of affection. In short, the purpose is to develop

feeling out of the ideas surviving from the sensations of daily life. The main object hence is 'to make the incidents of common life interesting. This is evident from his poems like 'The Two April Mornings', 'We walked along, while bright and red / Uprose the morning sun.'

This purpose in fact can be carried out efficiently only with the use of a proper diction. The gaudiness and inane phraseology of eighteenth century diction were rejected in favour of a 'selection' of the real language of men in a state of vivid sensation. To this general intention, he makes two qualifications- language is to be removed from every suggestion of triviality; furthermore only a selection of that language is to be adopted. It should be purified of its vulgarities and heightened so as to appeal to the imagination. The language of poetry must be real, a true and not a false language. Wordsworth breaks with the orthodox convention of his day and returns to the natural diction of normal men.

Wordsworth also asserts that the language of poetry differs in no way from that of prose, with the single exception of meter. He says, 'there neither is nor can be any essential difference between the language of prose and that of poetry.' The Preface is, in fact, quite as much a defence of the employment of meter in poetry as a protest against the use of 'poetic diction.' Whereas 'poetic diction' is lawless, meter does at least obey definite laws. Then also, a certain charm is acknowledged to exist in metrical language. It is the function of meter, to 'temper and restrain the passion' of which poetry is an effect.

According to him, there is nothing 'special' about poetry that requires the use of a special language. In the same way, poetry does not require specifically 'poetic subjects'; it does not deal with the grand or the dignified or the sensational, but with the permanent, enduring interests of the human heart. This theory is founded on Wordsworth's disgust at eighteenth century poetic

artificiality. However many of Wordsworth's later works, as well as that of other poets proves clearly that there is an essential difference between the language of prose and that of poetry.

Low and rustic life is to be preferred for the purpose of poetry because in that condition of life the essential passions and elementary feelings of men existed in a state of freer association. There are many poems which triumphantly indicate it. *Lucy Gray*, *The Solitary Reaper*, and *Michael* are typical examples.

About the nature and process of poetry Wordsworth says:

...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 reactions the tranquility disappears, and an emotion kindred to that which was before the subject of contemplation, is gradually produced, and does itself actually exit in the mind. In this mood successful composition begins and in a mood similar to this it is carried on.

These famous lines of Wordsworth describe the process, which leads to the production of poetry. First, there is the emotion set up by an experience. Then there is an interval of time, during which the non-essential elements in the experience are purged off. In the second stage, memory plays the important role. It controls what is to be retained and shapes into beautiful forms what it retains.

This idea of an interval between experience or observation and composition is an important part of Wordsworth's theory of poetry. The third stage is recollection, when the experience thus purged is recalled. At the fourth stage, the emotion is gradually set up in the mind again. The last stage is composition. Thus these stages are Sensation, Recollection

Contemplation and Recreation. The poem *Daffodils* is an exemplar for a poem ‘recollected in tranquility’:

For oft, when on my couch I lie
In vacant or in pensive mood,
They flash upon that inward eye
Which is the bliss of solitude;
And then my heart with pleasure fills,
And dances with the daffodils.

Wordsworth’s aim was to show the poet as a man appealing to the normal interests of mankind, not as a peculiar being appealing to a specialized taste. Wordsworth considers poet a seer. He is ‘a man speaking to men’, and is different from others in the degree of certain qualities. He is endowed with more lively sensibility, more enthusiasm and tenderness, more lively knowledge of human nature, more fertile imagination than common people.

‘The poet’ he says, ‘thinks and feels in the spirit of human passions. How then can his language differ from that of all other men who feel vividly and see clearly?’ The poet is to be the guide and leader of his fellow men in their search for a mode of experience that would transform the world without falsifying it. It is imagination that enables man to enter into and give life and significance to the world. A poet must unite the two qualities of thought and feeling. He would seem to say that the poet first resolves to use the language of real life because it is more powerful than any other. This is evident in many of his poems like ‘To the Cuckoo’:

The same whom in my schoolboy days
I listened to, that Cry

Which made me look a thousand ways

In bush, and tree, and sky.

It was his dissatisfaction with the prevailing order of society and the concentration of his aspirations and hopes on another order that led him to question the prevailing forms of poetry and cast about for a form bearing some sympathetic relation to his political ideals. Those political ideals were an affirmation of the rights of the common people- not only of their rights, but of their representative humanity.

In brief the main ideas which Wordsworth lists in the *Preface* are the following: The subject matter of poetry is whatever that interests the human mind. The Lyrical Ballads are written as experiments, to try out the use of the language of conversation of real people in poetry. They are new and unusual, and will not suit the taste of most readers. Nevertheless the readers are asked to try them with an open mind, and not to put off at first sight without giving them fair trial.

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